

# Getting the Deal You Want

## Reflections from a Coaching Perspective

by Karen Staib Duffy

I was sitting with a friend, Sandra, who was in the middle of a difficult situation. A man, whom she loved dearly, wanted to make a major life change, retiring and moving away from the city in which they were living. She did not want to make the move, but she also wanted to be with him. Sandra was just not ready to retire and she was upset by the impending loss of her current social life, full of family and friends. She was reluctant to go off to an island so far away, beautiful though it might be. I looked at her and suggested: “Negotiate the deal you want.” My friend was surprised by this statement. She is successful in business. Yet it had not occurred to her to apply her professional skills in a personal situation.

We think of negotiation as something that occurs around a conference room table with high intensity and drama. It is, in fact, a constantly occurring part of our day-to-day lives.

In negotiating the deal you want from an ontological perspective (based on the Newfield Network approach), we have conversational dances with each other. We take actions in language to get what we want, although often with little forethought or recognition of how we do what we do. Requests, offers, and promises are the means by which we coordinate our activities with each other. It is how we negotiate our business and social interactions. Our ability to make and fulfill promises is critical to our satisfaction and effectiveness in business and in life. Promises are the glue of society.

### The Building Blocks of Negotiation

Promises are created by requests and offers, the building blocks of negotiation. Every request, offer or promise is a speech act (an action in language) and must contain the following: a Speaker, a Listener, an Action to be carried out, the Time for Fulfillment, Conditions of Satisfaction, a Background of Shared Obviousness, Trust and Sincerity, and Competence. Some of these may seem rather obvious, but let’s look at each one separately.

- *Who is the Speaker?* Do you speak up when you need to or do you stay silent? Often, we quietly expect others to guess or know what we would like to

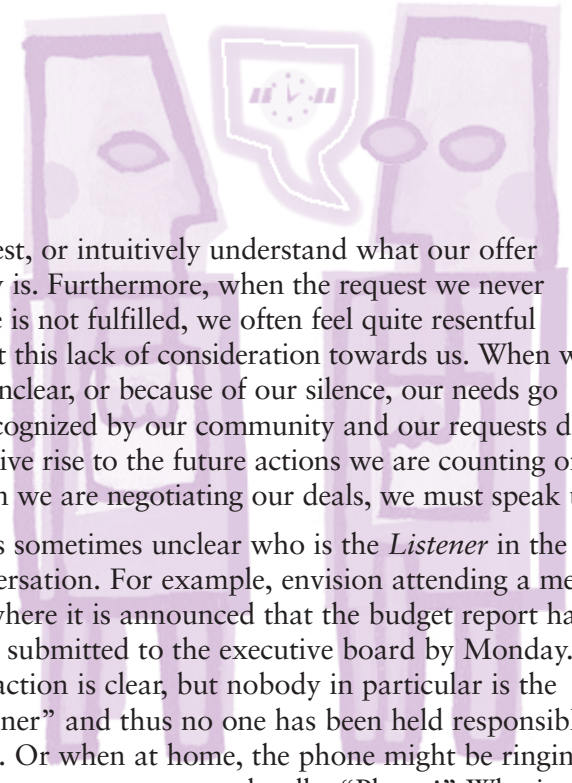
request, or intuitively understand what our offer really is. Furthermore, when the request we never made is not fulfilled, we often feel quite resentful about this lack of consideration towards us. When we are unclear, or because of our silence, our needs go unrecognized by our community and our requests do not give rise to the future actions we are counting on. When we are negotiating our deals, we must speak up!

- It is sometimes unclear who is the *Listener* in the conversation. For example, envision attending a meeting where it is announced that the budget report has to be submitted to the executive board by Monday. The action is clear, but nobody in particular is the “listener” and thus no one has been held responsible for it. Or when at home, the phone might be ringing and someone announces loudly: “Phone!” Who is listening? Who takes responsibility for responding?

- There must also be an understanding of the desired *Action* to be taken. In order to get what we want, we must first know what we want. Do we want to go to the park on Sunday or the beach? Do we want more responsibility at work or extra time with the family? How often have we left a business meeting unsure of the next action steps? We must be clear about the action sought as a result of the conversation. This includes clarity about our own needs and wants as well as those of the other party. We often assume what the other person wants or needs without discussing it with them. How can we craft a workable deal if we do not know what the other party is looking for or what we want?

- As for *Time*, there is no actionable item without it. If someone says: “Let’s do lunch” and there is no time attached to it, there is no real commitment. If one says that the report is due tomorrow, does that mean 8:00 am or 5:00 pm or midnight? If you request help with something, does that mean right now or will anytime in the next five hours be fine?

The next two aspects are Conditions of Satisfaction and Background of Shared Obviousness. Neglect these at your peril! Conditions of Satisfaction specify the desired outcome while the Background of Shared Obviousness is the context within which we have the conversation.



- *Conditions of Satisfaction* are often embedded in the assumptions we make but do not communicate. The question to ask is what exactly constitutes a successful outcome. Even something as simple as bringing someone a glass of water can be more complicated than one would think. Would you like flat or sparkling water? Do you want cold water, warm water or hot water? If cold, do you want ice cubes with it? Would you care for a lemon or lime with your water? How much water would you like? Etc.

In a business setting, if I ask for a report, do I expect the report to contain a specific format and precisely defined information, or is the template more free flowing? The problem here lies in the different ways the various parties involved understand the conditions required for the proper fulfillment of an established promise. These differences are usually due to conditions for a successful outcome not being clearly specified when the request or offer is made. Conditions of Satisfaction, or lack thereof, are important contributors to the misunderstandings, conflicts, and lack of coordination in our organizations.

- *Background of Shared Obviousness* is important because all conversations take place within a broad context of shared meanings. This background allows us important economies of effort while stating our requests, offers, and promises. Problems can arise, however, when individuals or organizations have a different context. For example, a direct request in one culture may be fine, but unacceptable in another culture. The time of 5:00 pm for a party to start may mean precisely 5:00 pm in one family or culture, but may mean between 5:00 pm and 5:30 pm or even as late as 6:30 pm in another. The XYZ report or other company jargon may be well known to everyone in the division, but could be a big mystery to a brand new person. Many of us have tripped over unwritten rules in large organizations.

- We also need to consider if there is *Trust and Sincerity* in the interaction. There is a social contract in speaking. Trust is in the background. Do we believe that the other person sincerely wants to do what they are offering or promising? Are they really requesting what they need? Are we?

- Finally, we must assess *Competence*, whether the person has the necessary resources to fulfill what has been requested or offered. A colleague may offer to take on part of our workload during a crunch. While we appreciate the sincere offer, given their own heavy workload, we may question whether they will actually be able to do it. Or a favorite, but frequently tardy, person may say they will meet you at 7:00 pm, but you

question whether they are truly capable of being there on time.

Obviously, if we have to stop and specify all eight aspects of every single request, offer or promise, we would never get anything done.

We need to make some assumptions to move effectively through the day. These habits, however, can leave us with blind spots that result in missed opportunities and inefficiency in our actions. If you find yourself engaged in a frustrating dialogue with another person, where you just don't seem to be on the same page and often seem at odds with each other, or if you need to negotiate a deal to a more satisfactory conclusion, step back and review your actions from the perspective of requesting, offering, and making promises.

### More on Promises

Just why are promises so important anyway? Getting the deal you want involves making and receiving promises that are agreed to by each party and ideally, that are mutually beneficial. Every promise gives rise to a complex, continuing dance of commitments, actions, offers and requests. The non-fulfillment of promises and our inability to establish effective commitments generates an enormous lack of coordination and high dissatisfaction, wasting time, energy, and resources.

Promises generate a world of possible actions that flow from the promise that was made. Example: The house is to be painted on Tuesday. Based on this commitment, we arrange for the carpet to be installed the next day, for the carpenter to put in the bookshelves two days later, and for the family to remove paintings and posters the night before. We might also arrange to take the day off work and withdraw money from the bank to pay for the services. Since a promise always involves a mutual commitment for future action, when a promise goes unfulfilled, our power for future action is reduced. We cannot establish further commitments until we know that the promise will be fulfilled. This is why it is so important to be able to generate effective commitments with each other.

This is also why win/win solutions are so useful. Cynically viewed, you can trust someone to do what is in their best interest. To create a deal that can be

### The Eight Building Blocks to Getting the Deal You Want

- A Speaker
- A Listener
- An Action to be carried out
- The Time for Fulfillment
- Conditions of Satisfaction
- A Background of Shared Obviousness
- Trust and Sincerity
- Competence

maintained without the use of fear and force, it must be in their best interest for the deal to continue as well as yours. When we are negotiating our promises, it is important to remember that “NO” must be an acceptable response to a request or offer. If it is not, then it is neither a request nor an offer. It is a demand. If the listener does not agree to the request or offer, the promise has not been accepted and must be further clarified to reach a satisfactory outcome.

Sometimes, in spite of our best intentions and due to circumstances beyond our control, we may not be able to fulfill a promise made. In these cases, our commitment is to notify the other person as soon as possible and either make amends or offer an alternative solution.

The non-fulfillment of a promise, whether it is simply not carried out or because it failed to comply with specified conditions, can give rise to a legitimate complaint. If you find you have a complaint, first evaluate it against the elements cited above. Is your complaint linked to an actual promise with all aspects clarified, or is it connected to an expectation on your part or an unmade request? If the promise has been made with various parts not fulfilling all the aspects, it is not a legitimate complaint. In this case, you will need to either let it go or renegotiate by making a better request or offer. If you realize that you have been making an illegitimate complaint, perhaps even nagging about it, you may want to issue an apology and then work to clarify your conversation. If you decide your complaint is legitimate, make the complaint and be careful to keep your conversation focused on action steps to resolve the situation.

### Changing How You Negotiate

Negotiation is all about getting the deal you want. The eight building blocks can help us understand precisely what is going off track in our conversations and how we might remedy the outcome. Begin by observing yourself in action. What is the conversation you need to have? When are you asking? How do you ask? Are you expecting without actually asking? Then change the process of how you negotiate. Pick one of the aspects and start to apply it. Observe the results and change again, each time further refining your awareness and capacity to use them effectively.

Sometimes actions that need changing are very subtle. For example, you may notice that you wait to ask for something you need. As a result, you may be quite annoyed or angry by the time you actually ask for it, and nothing less than immediate compliance with your demand is acceptable. In that case, start asking earlier. Plant the seeds of your request with the

other person, before you are angry at their thoughtlessness and before you must have it. This gives the other person time to consider your request and time to do something about it. It also gives you time to make other arrangements, if necessary.

Remember to apply this knowledge both personally and professionally. While we may be good at this in a business setting, we often forget, as Sandra did, to do this in our personal life. Sandra subsequently realized she needed to be clearer about exactly what she wanted and what she did not want. She needed to have a conversation. She needed to find out more about what he wanted and why. She had felt her choices were between options A and B, but she uncovered possibilities C, D, and more. Sandra needed to make requests for what was important to her, extend offers she could live with, and come to a promise that was workable for both. After taking these actions, she is now very happily splitting her time between lovely islands and busy social engagements in the city.

Mastering these skills will enable you to effectively negotiate important aspects of your life and business through clear conversations. It will help you be more effective as a leader and a person. With precise and considered usage of your requests, offers and promises, you will be able to transcend difficult situations, overcome roadblocks, and unravel the perplexing. You will get more of what you want and more of what you need. You will get the deal you want! ■

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