



Negotiations

We Often Overlook Opportunities to Negotiate

by Suzanne de Janasz

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During a workshop for mid- to senior-level career women, I posed the following scenario:

While in your favorite department store, you spot a very attractive pair of “professional” shoes. You happen to know that starting tomorrow, all ladies’ shoes will be 30% off. What would you do?

Anne raised her hand confidently and responded, “I’d come back tomorrow.” Pivoting quickly, I asked, “What if you’re leaving tomorrow

morning for a week-long business trip?” She then responded with “Um... maybe I’d see if I could order them online tomorrow at the sale price?”

It’s true, not everyone is motivated by a sale price. Similar low-stakes negotiations — like asking your cable company for a better rate or asking for a discount when offering to pay cash — may sometimes not seem worth the effort. However, what if the discomfort you feel around asking for a discount is just the tip of the iceberg? What if the fear of rejection — of the request itself or of you personally — is keeping you from negotiating for anything in the first place? And what if ignoring or avoiding most low-stakes negotiation opportunities is keeping you from feeling confident and competent when approaching more high-stakes negotiations?

If fear is keeping you from negotiating, it’s time to start using everyday encounters to practice, so you can build your confidence and competence for higher-stakes negotiations.

Recognizing Opportunities to Negotiate

Most books and articles about negotiation focus on how to prepare for a negotiation, or offer strategies for engaging effectively. What these guides fail to address is whether individuals recognize negotiation opportunities in the first place. The ability to recognize an opportunity depends on your perspective and your experience, as well as your culture, role models, and goals. When shopping in a department store, most U.S. consumers see prices as fixed — not open for bargaining. That’s less the case when shopping in a flea market, where many items don’t have price tags and sellers expect that some shoppers will attempt to haggle for a better price. Beyond commercial opportunities (since not all negotiations involve money/services/goods), what exactly *is* a negotiation opportunity? It can range anywhere from a disagreement with a neighbor, to the allocation of household chores, to your eligibility for a bonus at work. Consider asking yourself the following questions about situations you encounter in your everyday life:

- Is this situation fair? Are others being offered better compensation, or do they benefit from fewer responsibilities, more resources, a bonus, or a better (cheaper, faster) deal?
- Do I deserve a better or more fair outcome than I have been offered? If someone were to offer this to me now, would I hesitate to accept it?
- Am I feeling uneasy or hesitant about the situation or offer? Would a more confident version of me make a request to get a better or more fair outcome?

Tactical advice about negotiating isn't useful if you fail to recognize or engage in negotiation opportunities. To make matters worse, women negotiate only about 25% as often as men do, and about 20% of all women never negotiate at all. While some women worry about being perceived as aggressive, others might ignore an opportunity to negotiate due to the stress associated with a potential conflict. Many are simply too conflict-avoidant, and others lack confidence in their ability to influence the outcome.

Evaluating Whether to Engage in a Negotiation

Keep in mind that not all opportunities are worth engaging in. The costs versus benefits calculus (relative to both the situation and the relationship) simply might not add up. Going back to the shoe example: if the shoes are \$100, with the potential for a \$30 savings, you might think, “Hmmm, I can come back tomorrow and save \$30, or I can pay the \$100 now, and not have to ask the salesperson an uncomfortable question (such as, “Excuse me, but is there a way you can give me the 30% discount today? I’m heading out of town tomorrow, and it would be great to get these shoes for the price that others will pay for them in less than 24 hours.”) In this evaluation, avoiding the discomfort — and the time such a conversation might take — might be worth \$30 for some people. But note that in this example, one is considering the negotiation and making a *choice* about it, as opposed to avoiding the situation altogether.

Evaluating non-monetary issues can be a bit more complicated. Imagine that you share an apartment with a close friend, and from the beginning, you gravitated toward doing most of the cleaning, cooking, and laundry. When the two of you moved in, you assumed that she would look after herself. She would thank you from time to time, but her perceived laziness has resulted in your growing resentment. You choose not to say anything, afraid of stirring up trouble, but continue doing the majority of the housework. Hints don't work, and the occasional request is met with defensiveness or empty promises to help.

You ask yourself: *Is this fair? Do I deserve to be in a more equitable situation? Is this a negotiation opportunity? Or is this the way things are and I'm going to have to accept this inequitable situation until the lease ends or I move out?* Factoring in individual preferences and comfort levels, one might choose not to negotiate...even when doing so could make a positive difference. Perhaps it's due to a fear of failure or a fear of rejection, but the more you ignore conflictual situations that could be improved with negotiation, the more you give such conflicts power over you. That chore allocation discussion you avoided today might evolve into next week's avoided promotion/raise discussion. The first missed opportunity may result in the degradation of a relationship; the second may result in a serious loss of future earnings. When you consider that a \$7,000 starting salary difference over a 43-year career (ages 22-65) adds up to \$649,000 (assuming a 3% annual increase), I'm guessing you'll conclude that it's *very* worthwhile to negotiate.

By being mindful about recognizing and evaluating potential negotiation opportunities — weighing the financial, emotional, moral, or psychological trade-offs — you not only put yourself in a position to strategically approach how to negotiate for what you deserve (e.g., money, recognition, equitable treatment), but you also open the door to even better outcomes. You'll learn to improve relationships by working through conflicts. And you'll build a stronger “negotiation muscle” that will serve you well in higher-stakes negotiations.

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