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ARTICLE **NEGOTIATIONS**

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by Roi Ben-Yehuda and Tania Luna

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TIM FLACH/GETTY IMAGES

When one of us (Roi) was nine years old, he visited the U.S. for the first time for summer camp. He was bullied by kids for how he looked and his poor English. One day, Roi asked the main bully to meet him behind a building.

Away from the crowd, Roi said, “Look, I don’t like being made fun of, so either we’re going to fight here and now — or you can shake my hand and we’ll be friends.”

Roi extended his hand. The bully, taken aback by the gesture, became a friend.

At the heart of this brief negotiation lies the power of surprise: a request to meet alone; the courage to fight; the possibility of friendship; and the outstretched hand. All unexpected. The result? A new opening between antagonists.

In most writing on negotiation, surprise is treated as a negative tactic. By adding new partners, changing deadlines, taking back a promise, or creating ultimatums, you can throw your opponent off their game and cause them to make poor decisions.

Negative surprise can indeed be effective. But negotiators can also use surprise in more positive ways: to signal collaboration, generate creativity, destabilize negative patterns, and earn a positive reputation. To leverage surprise constructively, we have to start with an understanding of what surprise is.

Although surprise is fleeting, it is cognitively complex. In *Surprise*, a book one of us (Tania) coauthored with Dr. LeeAnn Renninger, we point out that surprise isn't just a single state but a series of states. We call it the Surprise Sequence: Freeze, Find, Shift, Share.

When something unexpected happens, we *freeze*. A P300 brainwave [mutes all other cognitive processes](#) and forces us to focus on the discrepancy. Next, our brains attempt to *find* an explanation. Once we reach a conclusion, we experience a cognitive and emotional *shift*. We also shift our perspective (i.e., I used to think X. Now I realize Y). And according to neuroscientist Wolfram Schultz, surprise intensifies emotions by about 400%. Last, to make sense of the surprise and reduce its cognitive burden, we *share* it with others. In psychology, we call this process “sense making.”

Now, consider how the Surprise Sequence can play out in a negotiation. Let's say you get a lowball offer. You expected a market pay salary but get an offer that won't even cover your rent. First you *freeze* (like a computer stuck in loading mode). Then you wrack your brain to *find* an explanation (“Is it me?” “Is it them?”). You *shift* your thinking and decide it's definitely them, get angry (400% angrier than you would have been had you known the salary), then go *share* a scathing review on Glassdoor. A positive surprise, on the other hand, like an unexpected signing bonus, would leave you feeling like you walked away with the best deal in the world (whether or not you did).

Given how destabilizing surprise can be, it is best to assume it will strike. Though pre-negotiation planning is valuable, it is impossible to prepare for every outcome. But expecting the unexpected can reduce the disorienting effect of surprise and even let us spot opportunities to use it for good. In particular, the following skills are most effective in helping negotiators harness the power of positive surprise.

1. Q-step

As we found in our work at LifeLabs Learning, the best negotiators notice when something unexpected happens, and they *stay in the surprise*. Rather than allowing themselves to jump (*shift*) to

a conclusion, they suspend judgement and step into question-asking mode. We call this skill “q-stepping.”

Research by the Huthwaite Group found that expert negotiators ask twice as many questions as their average counterparts. They spend roughly 21.3% of their communication making sure they’re asking the right questions and ask more questions when uncertainty increases.

Our research at LifeLabs Learning revealed a similar pattern. In one case, a manager we worked with faced a difficult conversation with an employee who unexpectedly demanded a raise by saying, “I’ve been undervalued for too long.” Rather than the typical (average manager) reply: “It’s not in the budget,” or “Your pay is more than fair,” this manager stepped into questions mode: “Can you walk me through your thinking? What would getting a raise mean to you personally?” As a result of the q-step, the employee’s real need became apparent: to be seen as an important contributor. The two were able to effectively negotiate an adjustment in the employee’s visibility, saving money and retaining an important member of the team.

Before, during, and even after the negotiation, get to a state of curiosity. Say: “I wonder what led them to that thought.” Then q-step: make sure the first step you take is to ask at least one question.

2. Say “yes, if”

One of the classic tenets of improv is “Yes, and.” How do you keep a totally unscripted scene dynamic and interesting? Say “yes” to any suggestion your scene partner throws out, then say “and” by building on the scene with your ideas. So, if your partner says “we are on the moon.” You say, “Yes, and it’s made of vegan cheese.” The more scene partners build on each other’s ideas, the more surprising and enjoyable the performance becomes.

Just as in improv, an unexpected suggestion during a negotiation can lead to a better and more creative outcome than either partner anticipated. Yet most of us quickly shut down surprise since it threatens our plans. In a competitive negotiation, “Yes, and” is seldom realistic, but “Yes, if” can create a win-win scenario. For example:

- “I want to pay less than the asking price for this house.” “*Yes, if you move all our furniture.*”
- “I need a 10% raise.” “*Yes, if you can cut costs by 10%.*”
- “I want higher royalties on this book.” “*Yes, if you sell 1,000 copies.*”
- “I’d like to work from a different city.” “*Yes, if you’re okay with a lower salary*” or “*Yes, if you can secure a client in this city.*”

We love this surprise skill because it pushes negotiators to generate more ideas and seek novel solutions rather than getting stuck in an unproductive tug-of-war between two fixed positions.

3. Engineer surprise

In addition to handling surprise well, we can also *leverage* it to spark cooperation and creativity. For example, imagine if instead of a typical, formal kickoff to a negotiation, you started by saying, “Look, I’m feeling a little nervous, but I want this to go well for both of us. Can we agree we won’t settle until we are both happy?” This kind of positive, unexpected move can set the stage for greater satisfaction with the process *and* outcome of a negotiation.

For example, Roi had to negotiate with a neighbor who was angry about noise (piano playing) coming from his apartment. When the neighbor arrived at his house, he was ready for a confrontation. But instead, Roi asked him about his favorite classical composer. Taken aback, the neighbor cautiously said, “Chopin.” What happened next? Roi invited him and his family to a private Chopin recital (played by Roi’s wife). The invitation shifted the tenor of the negotiation and led to a much friendlier relationship.

An even more unconventional example comes from a warehouse supervisor we interviewed whose approach was so effective it continued as a tradition even after he left the company. Whenever his team reached deadlock in conflict or negotiation, he played his favorite Elvis album (loudly) and invited everyone to dance. This surprising break drained the tension from the room and increased people’s willingness to collaborate. Despite initial skepticism, his staff began to compete over who would get to play their favorite music.

A surprise of any scale can have a rapid impact on the mood, process, and outcome of the negotiation and the relationship of the parties. Here is a list of surprises you can engineer to trigger a virtuous cycle of more trust, more creative problem-solving, and more collaboration:

- Offer a compliment or an apology
- Offer more options
- Use “I” and “we” pronouns
- Offer to extend a deadline
- Sit on the same side
- Publicly praise
- Use self-deprecating humor
- Make yourself vulnerable

And here are some unpleasant surprises that lead to a vicious cycle of distrust, animosity, defensiveness, and deadlock:

- Saying an insult
- Being critical of the other party
- Reducing the choices on the table
- Using “you” pronouns
- Shortening the deadline

- Using an uncomfortable room
- Showing up late
- Publicly blaming
- Being sarcastic

The unexpected should always be expected in negotiation. The best negotiators know how to reduce its negative impact and amplify the positive. So, whether you are dealing with playground bullies or adult ones (and especially if you have been the bully yourself), we challenge you to apply one of the tools in this article in your next negotiation. The result might surprise you.

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