



Meeting Management



How to Handle an Emotionally Charged Negotiation

A tool to help leaders bring hidden issues to the table.
by Greg McKeown

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Conflict resolution in the workplace is a necessary, but often uncomfortable, part of being a leader. While the type of conflict can range from day-to-day workload squabbles to high-stakes business negotiations, these situations consistently require a leader to navigate layers of emotion, dig deep to surface hidden issues, and think fast in the face of curveballs. These are valuable skills that can take years, if not an entire career, to learn.

If you can demonstrate an ability to comfortably negotiate tricky situations with patience, tact, and grace, then you can promote collaboration, empathy, and productivity in your teams. In unpublished research I conducted at the University of Cambridge, in collaboration with TruScore (a leadership assessment company headquartered in Denver), we analyzed data from 4,000 executives. We found that the item most strongly correlated with making a positive impact on an entire organization is a leader's ability to be a trusted negotiator in business conflict situations.

In this article, I'll share a simple process I followed when negotiating a valuable and vulnerable business conflict of my own.

A Three-Step Negotiation Guide

I once faced a stalemate in a negotiation regarding the ownership of [my podcast](#). The production company that owned one-third of the show had approached me about selling their share. I said I'd love to buy them out and asked them to give me a number. That's where the negotiation stalled, for months. I did not understand. It seemed like a simple win-win. In a final effort to initiate direct talks, I sent an email with the following question:

"Are you willing to have a phone call together to see if we can find a solution that is better than what either party wants right now? No compromises, both sides have to really win."

We scheduled a meeting. Here are the steps I followed.

1. Prepare to have an empathetic and productive conversation.

Before the meeting, I used a tool that I call "The Can't Lose Matrix" to draw out the issues I believed were hidden below the surface.

To use the matrix, you need to first ask yourself four questions:

- What is my counterpart's desired win?
- What can't they lose?
- What is my desired win?
- What can't I lose?

In this case, I knew that the production company's desired win was to stop producing the show so they could focus their resources elsewhere. I also knew they didn't want to lose their partial ownership in the first 100 episodes they had invested in creating, although I didn't know why. This was the unresolved bottleneck.

My desired win was to keep my subscriber list because it would take so long to rebuild it. I also knew that I didn't want to lose my ability to create content independently and without oversight. This was in jeopardy because if the production company continued to have partial ownership, then they would continue to have a say in the show's content direction.

The Can't Lose Matrix

The Can't Lose Matrix focuses on reducing risk aversion to improve collaboration. By taking the time to thoughtfully consider each party's potential risks and rewards, you're preparing yourself for a conversation that can be direct, empathetic, and productive.

	You	Them
Desired win	To keep the subscriber list	To stop producing the show so they can focus their resources elsewhere
Can't lose	The ability to create content independently (i.e., without oversight)	Their partial ownership in the first 100 episodes created

Source: Greg McKeown

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This matrix draws upon a compelling body of research that establishes one of the strongest findings in the social sciences: that, as social psychologist Roy F. Baumeister and his coauthors put it, bad is stronger than good. Put simply, people are often more interested in avoiding loss than in potential gains (a phenomenon ably explored by organizational psychologist Robert I. Sutton in his article “Bad is Stronger Than Good: Evidence-Based Advice For Bosses,” which builds on Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky’s seminal work in “Prospect Theory”). As a leader, you can use this concept in practice by asking questions to fully understand what each party fears losing in any given conflict.

2. Engage in the conversation with a desire to understand.

I began the meeting by expressing my desire to fully understand what they wanted to win and what they couldn't lose. I listened to them closely and restated their position. They confirmed the win that really mattered to them: to stop producing the show. Then I said, "Help me understand why you won't sell your portion of the show to me."

They explained it this way: They would be willing to sell it to me but only for a fee far above its market value. Keeping this asset was disproportionately valuable to their portfolio as a company. This was the missing piece of information that needed to be drawn out to resolve the bottleneck.

3. Formulate a direct negotiation question.

The next and final step was using what I identified in "The Can't Lose Matrix" to create the following question at the negotiating table:

Is there a way that we can [your counterpart's desired win] and avoid [your counterpart's can't lose] while also [your desired win] and avoiding [your can't lose]?

In my case, the question we needed to negotiate was:

Is there a way that the production company could stop producing this show while still having access to the first 100 shows, while I maintain access to the subscriber list and the ability to create content independently from this point forward?

After voicing that one question, we were playing on the same field. We worked together to come up with creative solutions that helped us to win without threatening the things we could not lose. What had been stalled for months via unanswered emails was solved in a 45-minute

face-to-face meeting using three simple steps. It was a success story for all involved.

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I once heard a story about a group of children who attended school next to a busy highway. At recess, they stayed huddled close to the school because of their fear of the roads. Then, someone put up fences at the school and the children were able to play on the entire playground and fields, right up to the edge of the school property.

Similarly, when parties fear losing something in a business conflict, they often retreat to a place where they feel safe. By answering the four “Can’t Lose Matrix” questions, you are building a fence where safe “boundaries” are understood, creating a conversation playground where people can openly and creatively collaborate with each other.

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Greg McKeown is the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers [Effortless: Make It Easier to Do What Matters](#) and [Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less](#) and the host of the popular podcast *What’s Essential*. He is the Founder of The Essentialism Academy. Greg did his graduate work at Stanford. Connect [@GregoryMcKeown](#).