Harvard Business Review

MANAGING YOURSELF

Be Your Own Best Advocate

by Deborah M. Kolb

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Most seasoned managers know how to handle formal negotiations at work—with clients over contracts, with bosses over budgets, with employers over compensation. But what about all the opportunities for informal negotiations that arise? Do you know how to recognize and seize chances to move into a better role, change an untenable situation, or ensure that you get credit for extra work?

In the 35 years I've been studying negotiation and coaching executives, I've found that many people don't. Consider the following examples:

Charlotte, a sales manager, learned through the grapevine that a regional role was opening up and wanted to be considered for it. But she'd also heard that another candidate, whom the division president knew well, was a front-runner for the job. She wondered how to put herself in contention.

Kevin, a communications director, pitched in to help another division save a major client, to great acclaim. Soon colleagues in that division kept asking him to contribute. He wasn't sure how to say no.

Marina, the CFO of a $4 billion division in a large industrial manufacturing firm, had been promoted to her job two years earlier. She'd relocated to headquarters—a requirement for taking the position—and brought her husband and children with her, but they were unhappy and wanted to move back "home." She felt she had to choose between her job and her family.

FURTHER READING

Breakthrough Bargaining

INFLUENCE MAGAZINE ARTICLE by Deborah M. Kolb and Judith Williams

Sometimes the hardest part of an informal negotiation is persuading the other side to deal with the issues. Understanding the dynamics of the "shadow negotiation" can help get things rolling.

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All three of these professionals (whose names have been changed) were understandably stymied. Negotiating on your own behalf can feel much less comfortable than negotiating as an agent for your company, especially when it happens outside the typical structure of a hiring or review process. More emotions are in play; it's often difficult to figure out exactly what you want or how to get the conversation started; and failure carries a higher cost. In some organizations, advocating for yourself may be seen as being demanding or not a "team player." This can be especially true for

women, who are sometimes hit by what researchers call “the social cost of asking.” And in some cases, the very issues you want to negotiate may challenge established ways of doing work.

But executives hurt themselves if they ignore everyday opportunities to push for better assignments, goals, or performance measures; more resources or flexibility; or higher compensation. I’ve found that these types of negotiations, which I call “lowercase n” negotiations, matter just as much as formal, “N” negotiations. They can drive career success and fulfillment and also have the potential to spark positive organizational change.

So we all need a strategy for everyday negotiations that will allow us to come away not only successful but also still held in high regard by bosses and colleagues. I counsel those with whom I work to focus on four steps: *recognize, prepare, initiate,* and *navigate.*

Recognize

Negotiation opportunities aren’t always obvious, especially if you’ve never thought to ask for anything in the past. But some routine situations cry out for bargaining. For example, if you say yes to a special assignment or a request for help when you want to say no, that’s an opportunity to negotiate for something in return. When you’re asked to take on a new initiative, with its attendant risks, that’s an opportunity to negotiate for support. If your workload expands beyond what’s reasonable and cuts into your family time, that’s an opportunity to negotiate for more resources or to change the scope of your role. You must pick your battles, though. The issue should be important to you, but your desired outcome should not only benefit you personally but also benefit your organization, as a result of your increased productivity and commitment and new cultural norms that allow colleagues to achieve the same. The decision to negotiate should be made with a sense of the end in mind.

Initially, Marina didn’t even consider talking to her boss, Robert, the company’s CFO, about an arrangement that would allow her to both keep her job and live with her family. She focused on all the obstacles—lack of precedent, presumed resistance—and never imagined an ideal scenario. She conceded the negotiation without even starting it.

Kevin at first thought he needed to respond yes or no to the other division's continued requests for help, rather than contrive a "yes-and" solution: *Yes,* he would do the work, *and* in order to do it well he would need his boss to officially broaden his role to include the new responsibilities.

Prepare

Preparation is critical to any negotiation. But how can you prepare for an informal one that your counterpart isn't expecting?

First, gather good information.

The more you know about what others have asked for and been granted at work, the more comfortable you'll feel crafting your own negotiation. Marina didn't think her company had ever allowed anyone to do a "headquarters job" out of another office, but she decided to check. She learned that one executive had indeed been given permission to work remotely for six weeks while he was helping to manage a family illness. When Charlotte asked around, she learned that her organization was in the early stages of considering who might fill the regional role; the other candidate didn't yet have a lock on the job.

> Some routine situations cry out for bargaining.

You also need intelligence on the parties with whom you'll be negotiating. How do they like to receive news or special requests? Do they want a lot of advance notice? Do they want you to present a solution or to develop one with you?

Robert hadn't hired Marina; in fact, they'd worked together for less than a year. But she knew that he tended to resist unconventional ideas and practices; he liked the usual way of doing things. So she understood that she'd have to enter her negotiation slowly and be ready for pushback. Charlotte, too, realized early on that she had an uphill climb because Michael, the

division president, already had a favorite in mind, but she learned as much as she could both about the job requirements and the qualities Michael valued most in his employees and about his decision-making style.

Second, position yourself.

Interdependence gives people a reason to negotiate. So look at how your work enables your counterpart and others to succeed; that will help you discern what he or she values in you and assess yourself in a currency that matters. Marina knew that Robert appreciated the work she'd done in her divisional role. She'd achieved significant profit growth, managed a difficult labor negotiation, overseen an important acquisition, and aggressively pursued cost reductions. Since Robert was new to the company, she was also his "lifeline" to the leaders in her large division. All this gave her leverage.

Another way to think about your value proposition and your relative bargaining position is to consider your—and your partner's—"best alternative to a negotiated agreement," or BATNA (as Roger Fisher and William Ury call it in *Getting to Yes*). Kevin's BATNA was to stop putting in extra time for the other division and return to his "day job"; his colleagues and boss had weaker BATNAs, because they had nobody as well suited as Kevin to do the relevant work. Marina's BATNAs weren't very appealing: She didn't want to live apart from her family, and she wasn't confident that she could find a job as good as her current one in her previous hometown. But her boss's BATNA wasn't good either. There were no obvious candidates who could take on her role and be as successful as she'd been.

Third, anchor with options.

Negotiations require creativity. When you present many ideas, you're framing the negotiation in a way that encourages the other party to join. You shouldn't fixate on a single solution that works for you. Instead consider what matters to your counterpart and find multiple ways to satisfy both of you.

In developing options, it helps to think what good reasons your counterpart might have for saying no to an arrangement you propose. These are on the hidden agenda of any negotiation.

FURTHER READING

15 Rules for Negotiating a Job Offer

NEGOTIATIONS FEATURE by Deepak Malhotra

The author, a professor of negotiation at Harvard Business School, offers 15 specific pieces of advice for job candidates.

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Charlotte knew from her information gathering that Michael would probably balk at her youth and inexperience in comparison with his favored candidate and suggest that she needed more seasoning in her current role before taking on a new one. So she broadened her proposals to include volunteering to perform the role in an "acting" capacity for a limited period of time, with clear performance benchmarks, or taking another developmental opportunity that would put her more firmly on a leadership track.

Marina was sure that Robert would be concerned about breaking from precedent, the incremental expense of a flexible arrangement, and losing touch with her and her division. So she rejected ideas that would heighten those concerns—such as working from home and coming in to headquarters only for meetings—and focused on ones that would assuage them, such as splitting her time between her old divisional office and HQ. She also pulled together a spreadsheet of estimated expenses. These preparations not only boosted her confidence but also helped her appreciate Robert's point of view and put her in the right mindset to work on a joint solution.

Initiate

Any two people typically feel asymmetrical desires to engage in everyday negotiations. One has a problem or sees an opportunity; the other probably doesn't and therefore expects business as usual. How can you shift a normal interaction into a collaborative rather than combative negotiation?

Start by making your value visible. When Marina decided to approach Robert about her work-family conflict, she didn't begin the conversation with it. She first reviewed her results since their previous meeting and updated him on a recent acquisition. Only then did she mention her problem and begin to talk about ideas for solving it.

If the other party stonewalls, you can consider various tactics. One is to round up allies who will vouch for your value and encourage the person to negotiate with you. Because Charlotte didn't know Michael very well, she enlisted another leader in the division to extol her virtues and the contributions she was making to the company.

Another approach is to acknowledge and address one or more of your counterpart's good reasons for saying no to prove that you've thought about his or her perspective. Often the response will be "Right, this is my concern," which opens the door to a conversation about the issue. Marina chose this path. Her boss's most legitimate fear was that he would lose his connection to the division. So she gave him a chance to discuss it by saying, "I can see why you might be concerned about this. That's why one of the options I thought about was dual offices."

You can also introduce a BATNA, but you must do so carefully, so it's not perceived as a threat. You might mention yours and then retract it. For example, Marina could have told Robert that she was getting calls from headhunters (which was true) but then quickly noted that she was committed to staying at the company if he and she could work out a plan. To make your counterpart more aware of his or her own BATNA, ask a question such as "What do you think will happen if we don't have this conversation?"

Navigate

Once you've enticed the other party to engage in a negotiation, you must go into the conversation with an open mind. The proposals you're prepared to offer are just starting points for an agreement. Three types of questions can help the two of you develop a plan that works for everyone.

Hypothesis-testing questions start with "What if" and enable you to introduce ideas, whether broad or specific, and solicit a reaction. For example, Marina asked Robert, "What if we created dual offices? How would that work?" As the discussion progressed, she got more detailed: "What if we had a shared calendar, so you knew exactly where I would be when? What if you had the opportunity to be involved in certain divisional meetings?" Kevin, too,

used this kind of question to great effect in his conversations with colleagues in the other division. When he asked, "What if I couldn't do this work?" he learned that they would be at a complete loss and were therefore willing to support him in negotiations with his boss, Dorothy, about taking formal responsibility over work in their domain.

Moves and Turns

When negotiators don't want to give you what you're asking for, they often launch an offensive **move.** Don't get defensive. Instead, **turn** the conversation to get it back on track.

When he **challenges your ability**—"I don't think you're ready"—**correct his impression:** "I understand why it might appear that way. But here's the experience I have that shows why I'm capable of managing it…"

When she **demeans your ideas** as unreasonable—"That will never work"—**divert her focus** to the solution: "What would be a reasonable arrangement?"

When he **appeals for sympathy**—"It's such a tough time for this group right now"—**dig deeper:** "What really concerns you? What can I do to ease those concerns?"

When she **criticizes your approach**—"This is a really inappropriate request"—**ask for elaboration:** "Can you help me understand why?"

When he **flatters** you—"You're so good in the position you have"—**use a role reversal:** "If you were in my shoes, what would you do?"

Another turn that works against almost any move is to **interrupt the conversation** by sitting silent for a brief period, standing up, or

Reciprocity questions involve if-then scenarios and build the notion of trading into the negotiation: "If I agree to do X, then what will you do?" Marina used this type of question to navigate the issue of costs with her boss: "If we agree to the dual-office arrangement, what else do you need?" Ultimately they decided that she would pay for a reverse relocation, but the company would absorb the ongoing travel expenses. When Kevin approached Dorothy, his if-then scenario was "If I work with the other division on an ongoing basis, here is how it could become part of my new and expanded senior director's role."

Circular questions, which simultaneously introduce and gather information, ensure that the conversation is collaborative, not adversarial. They emphasize the relationship between you and your counterpart and often unearth deeper issues at stake. Charlotte knew that simply asking for the role she wanted would put Michael in an awkward position. So she asked circular questions such as "What are the success criteria for this job?" Michael then considered more deeply what he was looking

moving to get a glass of water. Research shows that when you break the action, people rarely revert to the same negotiating stance, and the pause can lead to breakthroughs.

for, which opened the process up to more candidates. Marina used circular questions such as “What really concerns you?” and “What can I do to ease those concerns?” with Robert. It turned out that he feared the plan would fail because she might find the constant commuting too difficult. “I promised him that if that happened, we would work something out, even if it was an exit strategy,” she says. “He would not be left high and dry.” She also proposed that they agree to a six-month trial of the dual-office arrangement and then jointly assess the results.

All three of these executives were successful in their negotiations. Marina and her family moved back home, but she stayed in her job. The dual-office arrangement worked, so Robert agreed to make it permanent, establishing a precedent for senior executives to be based where they could be most effective and of most value to the company—not necessarily at headquarters. Kevin’s job was restructured to include additional staff so that he could work with the new clients. Charlotte got the regional manager’s job and prompted Michael to be more explicit about the criteria used for promotion in his division.

Everyday negotiations often require you to leave your comfort zone and challenge established practices. But all evidence indicates that they’re worth the effort—for you and for your organization.

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ANDRE' HARRELL 22 days ago

Thanks for the post Deborah! In a world that screams "LOOK AT ME"...the daunting task of setting yourself apart can seem impossible. Advocating for YOU takes understanding your "VALUE" in terms of how you help others, and it also bestows the ability to "Lead By Example". Advocating YOU shouldn't be a selfish act but an "Act of Giving" and understanding your value and how it impacts others...that's the best way of being "Your own Advocate".
Thanks for the post!
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