



AIA Best Practices: Keeping your cool with aggressive negotiators

Contributed by Michael Strogoff, FAIA

Summary

Dealing with an aggressive negotiator is a challenge: How do you keep your composure and achieve your objectives in the face of combative tactics? These six steps will help you come through the negotiation successfully.

Introduction

A basic principle of negotiating is to attack the problem, not the person. But not everyone knows how to negotiate this way. Without the knowledge or skills to negotiate collaboratively, some people resort to aggressive tactics. Others deliberately employ tactics that most people consider off limits. Examples of aggressive tactics include:

- bullying
- using threats and ultimatums
- playing good cop/bad cop
- using misleading information
- withholding key information
- insulting the other person
- presenting take-it-or-leave-it offers
- presenting unreasonable offers
- employing emotional outbursts
- negotiating in bad faith

How does one maintain composure when facing a person who uses aggressive negotiating tactics? When is it appropriate to fight fire with fire?

Is this negotiation worth the challenge?

As a general rule, do not respond in kind unless the other party proves to be so unreasonable, unethical, or dysfunctional that hardball responses are the only way of achieving your objectives. But beware: How people behave during a negotiation usually indicates how they will act throughout a relationship. Do you really want to do business with someone so unreasonable that, to protect your interests, you need to stoop to their level? Unless the project or issue at hand is of vital importance, you may be better off not reaching an agreement.

For design professionals, effective negotiation can mean the difference between profitability and jeopardizing one's livelihood, between accepting reasonable versus onerous terms, and between establishing a productive relationship or an adversarial one.

Six strategies for success

When negotiating with an aggressive person, try the following:

- **Recognize the game.** Once you understand that your opponent's behavior is simply a tactic, you can respond coolly and effectively, rather than reactively and emotionally.
- **Detach yourself.** Even if the other party insults you or attacks your integrity, don't take it personally. Maintain your composure. Keep telling yourself that their behavior is a reflection on them, not you.
- **Ignore the tactics.** When tactics don't bring desired results, people eventually change their behavior. Only respond when their behavior is acceptable. Otherwise, move on to the next topic. Spend your energy crafting solutions that satisfy all parties.
- **Befriend the aggressive person.** Emphasize what you have in common. Agree with them whenever possible. Compliment them on what they have achieved to date during the negotiation.
- **Discuss the negotiating process.** Point out that the larger goal of reaching agreement is at stake. Suggest that the negotiations resume based on trust and respect. Consider bringing in other people to help the process get back on track.
- **Concede on an item.** It may be necessary to appease someone now and then. Choose an issue that has little significance to your firm but is of great importance to the other side. See if the concession leads to a spirit of cooperation.

About the contributor

Michael Strogoff, FAIA, is a past chair of AIA's Practice Management Knowledge Community (PMKC) Advisory Group. After managing a 40-person architecture practice, Strogoff formed a consulting firm to guide design professionals in ownership transitions, mergers and acquisitions, practice management, strategic planning, and leadership training. His firm, [Strogoff Consulting, Inc.](#) is located in Mill Valley, Calif.

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