

Saying 'no' graciously

How to reject an offer without causing rancor

Question:

I am having a difficult time rejecting the offer of the other party in a negotiation without causing rancor. What are some techniques I can use to be more effective?

Answer:

Rejecting an offer can be a delicate balancing act. While most customers are forthright in communicating that an offer is unacceptable, there are situations where such an approach would be inappropriate. I find that to be especially true when negotiating with co-workers and supervisors. That arena is more politically charged and the consequences can be painful.

How you say "no" is critical to the response you are going to receive. You must be prepared. Not only must you have the right words, but you must also practice how you are going to deliver it. This is not the time to test how well you think on your feet.

A defensive attitude will trigger resistance. Anything that may come across as personal in your communication will be interpreted as a personal attack. There are no shortcuts. You must prepare. You must practice your delivery. And you must control your emotions or your outcomes will be compromised.

Here are six ideas that may help you in saying "no" gracefully:

1. Align and redirect. Give the appearance of agreeing, and then ask the other party if he or she has considered an alternative

option that you think is a better solution. For example: "I hear what you are saying about the turbo-cylinder; have you considered the output potential of attaching a max-2B unit?" If the person says "yes" and walks you through the discovered results, then follow by asking a question that addresses your concern about the turbo-cylinder unit. That might sound like: "What was the impact to the turbo-cylinder when the override mechanism hesitated?" That will help you to create doubt in the solution without saying "no." You are merely asking neutral questions.

2. Create common ground by addressing the higher intent. When it feels like conflict is brewing and you need to release some of that negative energy, it's always helpful to bring the conversation to a higher level of purpose that you all agree to. For instance, when people are on the verge or have already engaged in heated discussion, it's helpful to say, for example: "We all agree that meeting the customer's deadline is the most important outcome and in fact is non-negotiable. Is that correct? Then our effort is best invested by focusing on cost-effective solutions. We all agree that time is of the essence."

3. Be positive. Acknowledge the other person's good intention even though you didn't like the outcome. It's like gracefully accepting a birthday present that you think is hideous. It's the thought that counts. You might say something like: "I appreciate your offer. In other circumstances, I can see how this would work very well. I see several situations where it's not a strategic fit. I do want you to know that I appreciate your time and effort."

4. Present an alternative and incorporate the other person's idea if possible. When you turn something down, if possible present an alternative idea that incorporates some aspect from the original offer even if it's just an acknowledgement about what the other person tried to accomplish. This sounds like: "Joe, I think you are

on to something regarding taking X and adding it to Y to get Z. While that formula wouldn't solve this situation, it leads me to think about another option."

5. Don't refuse everything. If tempers are rising and it looks like a resolution is not going to happen, you might want to make a concession to show your desire to work with the other party. Most times showing some degree of flexibility and willingness to work with the other party can be a deal maker. Select something insignificant to you but possibly an ego-booster to the other party.

6. Offer a conditional "no." Couch your objection in the form of a conditional "no" rather than an outright rejection. In this case, you agree to accept the other party's offer if he/she in turn accepts your proposal or counter-offer. You would say: "Jerry, I would be delighted to move forward with this project if you get Bill's approval and signature."

Saying "no" is tough stuff. It's difficult predicting how the other party will respond unless you have experience negotiating with that person. People take their ideas and solutions seriously. Some people take personal offense when other people take a different position than they anticipated.

When negotiating, you always want to build bridges with the other party, even if you disagree on the issue/solution. People can be disappointed and even angry you didn't like their solution, but if they respect you and know you have integrity, you have an open door to continue building that relationship.

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