

Kids are great negotiators, learn from them!

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Ever notice how effective kids are at getting what they want? We've compiled a list of the top five negotiating skills we've all observed in everyday kids' behaviour which they share with effective negotiators (and no, we don't mean throwing their toys out of the pram...)

In our training and consulting work with clients, people often express amazement at how effectively kids seem to get what they want. They are actually pretty effective natural negotiators, and it's a wonderful illustration of how simple negotiating can be when it is done well.

We tend to overcomplicate things as adults, and to develop habits which are actually counterproductive – remember the story of the Emperor's New Clothes? We've compiled a selection of simple characteristics that we feel kids share with effective negotiators, and some tips to help you revisit your youth.

1. Kids ask lots of questions

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

No I'm not talking about that question, (although sometimes in a negotiation you might feel like asking it), but kids generally feel free to ask questions whenever they don't know something. As adults, we tend to feel that if we ask questions it might be a sign to the other side that we aren't across our brief, or that we don't know our job. For example, have you observed people hear an unfamiliar business term or an acronym from the other side of the table, and nod sagely without having the faintest idea what the other party means? Why not just ask them?

Ask more questions. Prepare questions to ask before you meet the other parties.

2. Kids know what they want and are prepared to ask for it

Think about it – if a kid wants an ice cream, what will he or she ask for? If your child wants to go to the park, what will you hear?

This seems so simple, but it's actually uncommon sense for most adult negotiators. We hide, we obfuscate, we sneak up on telling the other side what we are after like a thief. Sometimes this comes from over-analysis, sometimes from the fear of rejection and sometimes people think that if they wait for the other side, they'll somehow guess what we were after.

If you don't ask, you'll rarely get. Be courageous, be realistic, be open and be honest, and ask for what you're after. That's so simple even a 6 year old could do it!

3. Kids don't take no for an answer

If you have young kids, try this for a week: Count the number of times that you say no to your darling child, (no to ice cream before dinner, no to playing with razor blades, whatever) and record the number of times they consider that first NO the end of the matter, and move on. If your success rate is more than 10% then please give me a call and let me know what your secret is, then write a book on managing children and retire to the Bahamas while the royalty cheques roll in!

Kids seem to treat "no" as the start of the negotiation, not the end of it.

4. Kids are persistent

They're persistent with questions – if it isn't answered to their complete satisfaction, they'll ask it again. If it is answered, they'll often follow up with "Why?"

Kids are persistent with proposals – they'll ask "Why Not" and generally listen carefully to the answer.

Make sure you get answers to your questions, and think about ways to repackage what you are offering to make sure your proposals work as well as they can.

5. Kids understand sanctions

It's amazing how good kids are at training their parents to respond to sanctions. How often have you seen a harassed parent cave in to a tantrum?

We're not suggesting that the next time you don't get what you want, that you throw yourself on the floor, wave your arms and legs about, and yell (although we have occasionally seen that work!) We're also not suggesting you enter the room swinging a cricket bat.

However, in commercial deals, we commonly observe a clear reluctance to consider sanctions. Most people are happier to play the carrot than the stick.

Kids are also pretty good at working out when a parent's sanctions are all bluff – "If you do that one more time, we're going home". If a threat is regularly played but never followed through, it loses its power, and you lose your credibility.

Be prepared to explore sanctions. But be careful – they should be played with care and after considerations of consequence, and not unless you are prepared to follow through.

Ok so now what?

Many of the ineffective behaviours we develop as adults are learnt and developed over many years, and can't be changed overnight.

To execute good deals requires the development of skills, not just understanding of theory. I read lots of golfing books, but my skills don't change successfully - I still consider myself a weekend hacker.

Skills development, whether it's negotiating more effectively or improving your golf swing, requires an investment of your time, regular practice and constructive feedback from an effective coach - you can't build skills from a book.

Negotiate in teams when you can, and coach each other in post-deal reviews on what worked and what didn't.

Happy negotiating, and remember – no-one likes a cry baby!

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