In Order to Negotiate Better, I Had to Unlearn 'L.A. Law'

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Once upon a time, I was conditioned to believe that negotiating was a bitter conversation between two or more parties over a valuable possession. I learned this lesson after watching countless hours of the hit '80s drama, *L.A. Law*, where everyone appeared to be negotiating over everything with such emotion and anger.

When I entered into the workplace, I quickly learned the difference between my expectation and the reality of self-advocacy. After accepting a job in a mid-sized boutique law firm in New York City, while grossly underpaid, I thought that if I worked hard for the first year, "someone" would notice my contribution to the firm and increase my salary — and I was wrong. Essentially, I was afraid of commencing a difficult conversation, which I thought would be contentious, so I continued to suffer under the mounting pressure of last hired, least paid and most qualified.

As the pressure mounted, it finally came to an abrupt boil when I was asked to work on weekends without pay as a "team effort" to get ready for a trial. In an impulse move, upon request, I quickly said no. When I was asked "… and why not?" It was the foundation I needed to take a breath and start the difficult conversation about my value, which I was avoiding since the beginning of my tenure.

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Has Mastered

It all comes down to communication

There are numerous books, articles and podcasts on negotiating, but nothing shapes the outcome of the transaction itself quite like clear and effective communication, which is non-emotional and factual. It is a difficult skill to achieve and requires consistent repetition and less rehearsal. The most important factor to remember is learning how to articulate your own value is how you become an asset, rather than a liability.

Here are three communication strategies that will help you win at the negotiating table

1. Present your facts .

I refer to this as your unique value position. It frames the basis of the conversation and allows you to articulate the factors that make you an asset to the company/promotion/opportunity.

For example:

- “During my tenue, I have increased sales by 35 percent and closed more than $9 million in new business.”
- “I have direct access to a vast network of influential world leaders who I can count on to pledge and market our company as well.”
- “Over the course of six years with this company, I have assisted in onboarding more than 50 new administrative staff members, and decreased turnover by 82 percent by implementing new team-support initiatives and upward-mobility programs to ensure we hire from within our diverse talent pool.”

You should prepare at least three extremely specific points,

each of which highlights the proven value you have added, as well as how it has increased performance, revenue, sales, momentum, etc. Presenting your unique value up front will steer the conversation away from focusing on the budget and allow the other party to consider the potential lost revenue absent your contribution to the company/firm.

Remember, highlight yourself as an asset.

2. Don’t react. Respond.

No negotiation is complete without some pushback, most commonly concerning compensation. It is always a convienent time for an employer to start the sob story about how “tight” things appear to be at the moment, or that your contributions are not good enough.

- *“But you were late to the Zoom call last week.”*
- *“The sales goal was $9.5 million, so you missed the mark last quarter with $9 million.”*
- *“We have lost three recent hires in the accounting department.”*

Don’t react. A reaction is an emotional tale that focuses on the attributes of the person, instead of the value of your contributions. Decision makers use your emotional response to justify their budget excuse by directing the conversation toward your actions, instead of your leadership accomplishments.

Take a deep breath, and focus on your facts. Continue to highlight the future losses that are on the table if your request for an increase in salary/shares/equity et al are not considered. Rather than reacting to minimal critique, maximize the conversation by rebutting with the potential loss of value.

3. Set your intentions high .

When communicating your request, never ask for exactly what you need. Rather, go higher and negotiate your way into middle ground. Throughout my years of discussing the impact of communication, I have witnessed reluctance to simply ask for more. In fact, many communicate according to their comfort level, hence they ask for what they know will not be rejected, rather than facing hard conversations.

For example, if you are seeking a 15 percent pay increase, then you should ask for 20-25 percent to monetize your talking points and open fair dialogue. However, if you start at 15 percent, you may be paying Russian roulette with your compensation/equity request.

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Remember, you can only win at the negotiation table (or Zoom meeting) if you can clearly articulate your value. Always present your facts up front in a clear manner to ensure that any rebuttal is based on personality, not performance.

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