

On Negotiation

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Negotiation skills are important at every stage of your career. However, this is often obscured by the inability to recognize the opportunity. For instance, are you being assigned a new task or responsibility? Is your division chief asking you to attend another week or two on service? How does this fit in with your current salary or administrative support? Or perhaps you need a key piece of equipment. How about negotiating an exchange for helping out?

Many people dismiss negotiating as a lowly skill that, like networking, is an unnecessary form of self-promotion. But you cannot assume that just because you are “junior” that you know less than your chief about what is needed for success, or that your chief will give you what is needed just because you are a hard-working team-player. Your chief must juggle the overall needs of a busy division or department and may very well give up resources to buy the time or cooperation of someone who is less accommodating than you!

Furthermore, most young faculty are used to a chain of command that rewards obedience, given that they have trained in a hierarchy whose rigidity rivals that of the military. This is particularly a problem for women and minorities who, because of cultural, gender, and societal issues not only have different expectations during the negotiation process but also must deal with being perceived differently and held to different standards of behavior.

Negotiations are also fear-inducing. We are afraid of being rejected, of being taken advantage of, or of looking stupid (greedy, aggressive, not cooperative). In other words, we are afraid of dealing with someone who is either more powerful or more informed than we are, or both. Fear doesn't have to be negative, however. You can use fear as an incentive to be diligent, methodical, and determined in equalizing the balance of power and information. Yes, it takes work. But think of it as time and effort that you are investing in building your career infrastructure.

There are several excellent guides written about negotiations listed on the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) website. My own top ten list of negotiating tips follows:

1. Be Prepared: Power and information are closely linked. For women, in particular, being prepared often correlates with confidence. So, do your homework. You need to know the priorities of your chief, division, and department. Academic medical centers are complex bureaucracies and you may feel like just a cog. The best way to counteract this is to understand the quality of your performance and the value of what you bring to helping the division and the institution achieve its goal. Then, you can objectively assess your assets (skills, resources) and needs (geographic location, job for spouse, QPCR machine) that either strengthen or weaken your bargaining position.

This will not be easy. It helps to understand your institutional culture—another disadvantage for women and minorities not already savvy with the unspoken rules of behavior that govern every hierarchy. Obviously, having a mentor can be immensely helpful in navigating all of this. But don't forget your peers, senior faculty in and outside of your division, even colleagues at other institutions. Don't be afraid to ask! Many things, such as division and department finances, are typically viewed as "insider" information. But you may be surprised at the amount of information you can accrue just by asking or looking on the Internet. For instance, the AAMC publishes salary ranges for faculty. Or, ask your division's administrator what the salary range is for faculty of your rank and step.

2. Be Patient: The initial phases of negotiation may seem excruciating! The counterparty may try to pressure you into making an untimely decision or turn it into a "take-it-or-leave-it" situation. Don't take the bait! Stay focused on the common goal. Ask for or offer an alternative for consideration.

3. Arguing ≠ Negotiating: Know the difference. This is not a winner-take-all situation. Realize that part of what you are doing is building consensus in achieving a mutually advantageous goal. Stay calm and avoid personalizing the issues. There is a fine and not always recognizable line between being assertive and aggressive, and between sounding strident

versus forceful. Sometimes, it helps to practice with someone. Just like public speaking, actually saying your presentation out loud can improve your delivery and thus, confidence.

4. Be Flexible: Be data-driven, but realize that there are at least two points of view involved—yours and that of the person sitting across the table from you. While there will be issues that you cannot compromise on, be careful of boxing yourself or the other party in by delivering ultimatums or reducing negotiations to a single issue. All issues stay on the table until negotiations are concluded since they may need to be re-addressed if some new obstacle arises.

5. See the Big Picture: Do you have a 1-year plan? A 5-year plan? How does the current situation fit in with and help you achieve your goals? For instance, one common mistake that junior people make when starting out is to focus on salary. Salary is only one of the “Big 3,” the other two being space and time. Most would argue that the latter two are far more critical for success. Be prepared to deal with “what-if’s.” For instance, giving up some salary support may be well-worth a half or fulltime technician or administrative assistant.

6. Be Positive: When emphasizing how you bring (or will bring) value to the organization, be respectful of the other party’s needs.

7. Listen: What are they telling you? What are they **not** telling you? It’s sometimes helpful to have a checklist of questions you need answered, e.g., the program’s success rate in getting K08 awards, their junior faculty tenured or transitioned to R01’s, etc.

Listening also forces you to pay attention to the person sitting across the table from you. What is his/her style? How does it compare with your own? For instance, are you someone who tends to be accommodating? a problem solver who will go out of your way to resolve conflict but neglect your own needs? Are you dealing with someone who, in contrast, is competitive, argumentative, and likes to be in control? Recognizing these differences can enable you to proactively develop negotiation tactics that will increase your confidence and success.

8. Be Honest: Successful negotiations depend on a certain amount of trust and sincerity. **But** this doesn't mean that you should let it all hang out. You are not trying to be friends.

9. Get It In Writing: Verbal assurances are not enough. This is not an issue about trust. No one's memory is perfect. Take notes, write letters or emails reviewing recent conversations or important details. While having a letter is not the same as a legal contract, it may provide you with some protection in case of leadership changes.

10. Know When to Walk: This, perhaps, is the hardest of all. Don't be so intent on "winning" that last 10 or 20% that you jeopardize your hard-won gains and good will. Even if things don't work out, you may need to negotiate with this person again.

You need to know when to walk away not only from the negotiating table but also from your career track or even institution. No one wants to be or feel like a failure. Ultimately, your career success is theirs as well. But does their vision of your success coincide with your own? The surest way to bitterness is to find yourself a victim of someone else's decision making that forces you into a job or lifestyle that you don't want.

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