

### **Self-Serving Perceptions and Biases**

It is a natural tendency for us to take in information and interpret it in a manner that will best serve our personal wants and needs. We do not always do this consciously. What's more, the converse is also true in that we often pass over information that is critical to understanding the other side, particularly when the other side is in conflict with us. We naturally enhance our own position while vilifying the opposition's. The result is that perceptions and beliefs are based on information that is highly inaccurate and exaggerated. Especially striking examples of this oppositional bias are seen in the Israelis and Palestinians or the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

A famous Harvard study involved giving some executives insider information about one company's plans to acquire another. The executives were randomly assigned to role play the part of either the buyer or the seller. Unbeknownst to them, the information given to each side was identical. After analyzing the information, the executives each had to give their private assessment of the company's fair value (as opposed to how they might present that value in negotiations). Not surprisingly, the executives playing the part of "seller" gave values that were more than double those offered by those who were playing the role of "buyers." Interestingly, the results were driven by what would best serve the party in her/his randomly assigned role.

It is to be expected that each negotiating side will bring its own biases to the table. Simply knowing that these biases exist will help those involved in negotiation to not be caught off guard. Put yourself in the other side's shoes and think of what their most powerful case could be. This empathizing tactic always sheds light on new thoughts and ideas that you might not have thought of otherwise. Lastly, it will never hurt you to seek the input of an uninvolved third party.

### **Explaining Exactly What You Want**

It is natural when you're negotiating with a person you don't know very well for her/him to regard you with some suspicion. In a negotiation setting, it will be the other party's instinct to assume the worst about your motives. There could be a million legitimate

reasons why we have to hold out on an offer, but instead of considering what any of those reasons might be, people are much more inclined to draw negative conclusions. For example, if you cannot agree to his terms, your negotiation partner may automatically “decide” that you’re greedy, demanding or unreasonable without even stopping to consider what other factors might be at work in your inability to agree to his terms. Because of these suspicious tendencies, it is imperative that you reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings in your negotiation efforts by clearly stating what you need. It would be horrible to lose out on a deal altogether just because someone misunderstood you and deduced that you were untrustworthy. Conversely, if you can give clear reasons why your stance is what it is, your negotiation counterpart has the opportunity to process this information and respond more favorably. In this way, you enhance understanding, open communication and trust.

### **Negotiation and Trust**

Try to think of the negotiation process as more of a discussion or an exchange of ideas than a competition or fight. One of the best ways to get your negotiations on the right track is to make sure you cultivate a relationship of trust right from the start. Even the initial small talk that takes place before the actual meeting starts will help your prospects feel comfortable with, and more trusting of, you. When your prospects trust you, they will be more willing to take the necessary risks to help both parties move in a direction that will most greatly benefit everyone involved. If prospects don’t trust you, on the other hand, all the evidence, reasoning, facts or figures in the world won’t get them to budge. Be sure you listen attentively and carefully to your prospects concerns. Respectfulness will go a long way toward a successful outcome. One of the advantages of face-to-face meetings is that your prospects will be able to see and experience your sincerity firsthand.