

Hurtwaite International's research has shown that skilled negotiators ask significantly more questions than average negotiators do. By asking questions to gain insight on expectations, project managers can vastly improve their ability to communicate and obtain buy-in from the other party, Mr. Jensen says.

Listen

A project manager must discern the other side's true priorities, says Daisy Ruiz Diaz Lovera, PMP, service manager at Pixeon, a diagnostic imaging company in Florissant, Santa Catarina, Brazil. Know what they value so you can use that information to move negotiations forward. Is staying on budget more important to the sponsor than meeting deadlines? If you need more time to implement the project, knowing that the client values budget more may be your bargaining chip to win the additional time.

"It is difficult to negotiate without having established good communication," Ms. Ruiz Diaz Lovera says. "Especially in a long-term project, it is important to invest in the relationship. Even in virtual projects the ideal is to have some face-to-face meetings with the team to be able to build the basis of a relationship and future negotiations. It is more difficult to establish trust from a distance."

When meeting with the project sponsor, talk less and listen more to learn as much as possible about the project goals, she adds. Once you're familiar with what the other party deems important, you can rank the tasks and start to plan your negotiation strategy.

TIP

Don't argue, says Keld Jensen, MarketWatch Centre for Negotiation, Copenhagen, Denmark. "Most negotiators are confused about negotiation and think it's an argumentation game. On the contrary: The more information you argue, the less information you gain from the counterpart. Information is king."

Explain Your Dilemma

The other side needs to understand where you're coming from, and one of the best ways to accomplish this is to state exactly what the consequences of denying your request would be. "The biggest mistake project managers make is not selling the problem before they make a request," Dr. Brown says. For example, if you need to purchase a material to develop a new product, don't just tell your project sponsor, "I need this material."

Instead, provide details about the situation. Something along the lines of, "We've encountered some problems in our preliminary tests. It looks like the material we initially chose isn't going to work. The project is going to fail unless we find an alternative material."

This approach should leave stakeholders eager to hear a potential solution.

Do Your Homework—and Recruit Powerful Allies

"There's an alarmingly high percentage of people who enter a negotiation without a strategy—and don't even know the importance of one," says Keld Jensen, chairman of the Centre for Negotiation at the Copenhagen Business School and CEO of the MarketWatch Centre for Negotiation, a consultancy in Copenhagen, Denmark. "Project managers should use their time before the negotiation wisely to make the actual process go smoothly. They should always know their starting point, targets, overall objectives, and threshold of pain going into the negotiation meeting."

"It never pays to be spontaneous in negotiations," Ms. Villivalliam says. "It's necessary to have all the facts and a good understanding of the other side's objectives."

Do some research. Know the original scope, timelines, budget, goals, and how your proposed changes will positively impact the project. "If you are getting squeezed on deadlines, it can be a good opportunity to ask and obtain approval to procure higher-skilled resources," Ms. Villivalliam says.

A good project negotiator should also target key players, especially those in a position to make final decisions. You want some of these people on your side—the sooner the better. Keep them involved throughout the project life cycle in various ways, such as weekly status reports and updated financial forecasts. You can also invite them to sit in on at least one project status call with the customer or key end-users. This way, if things go poorly during negotiations, these decision see p. 165 makers are more likely to help.

"By engaging stakeholders this way, you've kept your project in front of them, and they remember both you and the project," says Brad Egeland, an independent IT project manager in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. "You've become the squeaky wheel that gets the grease without ever having to be the annoying squeaky wheel. When the time comes that you need help negotiating something with the end-user, they're already familiar with the project and with you, and feel some unwritten responsibility to assist."

Ask Questions

"The more you can find out about the other party's position, the more likely you'll be able to frame your offer in a way that takes account of it," Mr. Freedman says. "You can only do that if you ask a lot of questions."

For instance, Mr. Egeland managed a team that was developing a website for his client to log in and check on the status of repairs to jet and aircraft parts. To deal with scope creep that impacted the original timeline, he needed to determine which functionalities were critical. He accomplished this by asking the client which phase of implementation was most urgent. "I negotiated the timeline and provided them with a phased implementation on the new requirements, meaning the most important functionality was provided as quickly as possible, and the remaining functionality was implemented with the next scheduled phase of the project," Mr. Egeland says.