

Project management for researchers and evaluators



Negotiation skills

A “win-win” negotiation approach can help researchers and partners develop strong relationships that support high-quality projects

As researchers and evaluators, negotiation is integral to our work. Some negotiations are formal, such as agreeing to contract terms. Other negotiations are informal, and inherent in managing ongoing research projects, such as navigating team interests or roles. Negotiation may take place at the beginning of the project, as you and your clients or partners create a mutually-agreeable project scope, timeline, or budget. The need for negotiation may also emerge later, as you resolve challenges that have emerged in the study, modify the project plan, or receive feedback on reports or other deliverables.

Negotiation takes place any time that we have strategic discussions with a goal of reaching a shared agreement. Depending on the project, you may find yourself negotiating with colleagues, collaborators, clients, contractors, community partners, or others. Being thoughtful and intentional about your negotiation approach will help ensure that your projects are feasible, high-quality, mutually beneficial, and aligned with your values.

Benefits of negotiation

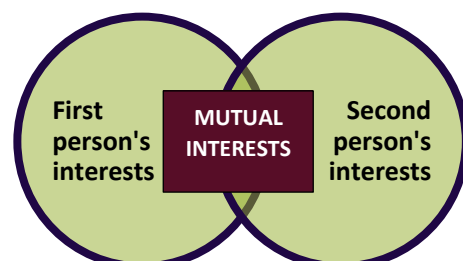
Negotiation is not just a task to complete when planning a research or evaluation project or establishing a contract. When done well, negotiation can help:



- Build collaborative partnerships
- Strengthen shared values and agreements
- Resolve conflicts
- Reduce project risks and challenges
- Promote feasible project work plans that can be completed on time and on budget
- Increase stakeholder satisfaction

Win-win approach

There are many models and frameworks for negotiation online and in books. Some recommend an adversarial or aggressive stance, with a goal of “winning whatever points or positions you can. In “negotiation speak,” this approach is referred to as “distributive negotiation.”



“The most important trip you may take in life is meeting people half way.”

- Henry Boyle

While an aggressive approach may work for some people in some situations, an adversarial approach generally does **not** work well when we are building partnerships or collaborating with community agencies. While we do not want to be too aggressive, we also should not agree to project terms or roles that do not work for us, such as budgets that are too low to cover the work, timelines that are unreasonable, or work plans that do not align with our personal or organizational values.

Instead, the goal of negotiation should be to develop agreements in which both parties are satisfied. Rather than approaching negotiation as a win/lose situation, consider whether there are options in which neither party needs to feel as though they lost. This approach is referred to as “integrative negotiation.”

Building successful negotiations



Tip: Consider pathways to mutually positive outcomes

Most negotiations do not need to be framed as a “win-lose” situation. Often, we can reach mutually beneficial resolutions that meet the needs of all stakeholders. While you need to protect your own interests, it can be helpful to intentionally look for the mutually beneficial alternatives. Consider asking yourself the following questions:

- How can I make sure the other person gets what they want?
- How can I satisfy their needs or interests at minimal cost to myself?
- Is there a way for me ‘sweeten the deal’ to make it better for the other party?
- Is there more that I could do at minimal cost?
- Would I be satisfied with the deal they are receiving?
- Where do our values align, and how can we build a shared commitment to these values?

Finding mutually acceptable approaches requires some understanding of what the other person wants or needs, and thinking creatively about how to satisfy

their interests. For instance, in addition to preparing a research report, maybe you could also offer to present findings to community partners. A presentation may be an added benefit to partners, without requiring significant extra time or cost to you.



Tip: Understand your position before you start

Before negotiating, you need a clear understanding of your own position. Take some time to identify your interests in the negotiation. Are there outcomes that you **need** to achieve in the negotiation? What are the extra benefits that would be “nice to have” but not critical? What would be a deal breaker for you in the negotiation?

Spend time clarifying the real priorities, by yourself or with the project team as appropriate. You must know what you want, before you can advocate effectively for yourself in a negotiation. Considerations may address specific project terms, as well as less tangible issues such as values and relationship-building.

Project scope, timeline, and budget. How much time or funding would need to complete a project? How much time or funding would feel appropriate? What would make a research project desirable for you to take on? What would you want to get out of the project?

When determining whether project terms are appropriate, know the value of your work. “Value” may not correspond to the precise cost of doing the work. Instead, the value of the research or evaluation relates to benefit that your work will have for the client agency or community partners. There is not space in this tip sheet to address the nuances of “value-based pricing” for consultants, though there a lot of information available online. For now, it’s important to simply consider not only the project’s actual cost but also what it is worth to your partners or community.

Values alignment. It is also important to think about your ability to align projects with your values. Does the work that a potential client wants you to take on align with your personal or organizational values in areas such as equity or impact? If not, are there opportunities to build a shared commitment to these values with the potential client? Is there flexibility to modify the project to align with your values? If not,

will you decide to not move forward with the project or partnership?



Tip: Be aware of cultural differences

Relationship-building. Negotiation is inherently grounded in relationships. As you determine how to approach a negotiation process, reflect on the importance of each specific relationship. How important is it to you to establish and maintain a positive relationship with each potential or actual client or collaborator? Would you be willing to compromise on some project terms or strategies for the sake of the relationship? If so, how much and under what conditions? How can you center the importance of the relationship, while still ensuring that you receive what you need from the negotiation?

Remember that different cultures may approach negotiations in different ways. Be aware of cultural differences and educate yourself on how to negotiate appropriately and effectively. A key element of negotiation is having a clear picture of your negotiation partners. Get to know the culture at the organization with whom you are negotiating, and seek to understand the people with whom you are working. There may be differences in areas such as communication styles or power dynamics to navigate. Doing the research and being open-minded will go a long way to achieving a successful negotiation.

KEY NEGOTIATION TERMS

There are several concepts from the negotiation field that can be helpful to consider when approaching an active negotiation process.

Anchor point – The anchor point is your starting point in a negotiation, usually your first offer to the other party. The anchor point is usually your hoped-for outcome. While you may have flexibility to move away from this desired outcome, the anchor point is important as it sets expectations for the negotiation and generally establishes the high or low ranges for the negotiation. **Example:** You are negotiating a contract for a new evaluation project. You have determined that the actual cost of the project will be \$35,000. You make a starting offer to complete the project for \$50,000. The client does not have that level of funding available, but this starting offer sets some expectations for the negotiation. They counter with an offer of \$40,000 (rather than the \$20,000 they originally hoped for).

Resistance point – Your resistance point is the least desirable outcome that you will still accept, close to the point where you would walk away from a negotiation process. **Example:** Because you know the project will cost you \$35,000, and you want to make some profit, you set a resistance point of \$42,000. You would be willing to come down from your anchor point of \$50,000, but without going under \$42,000. Since they offered \$40,000, this would fall below your resistance point. This does not necessarily mean that the project cannot move forward, just that it cannot move forward as originally designed. If the partner cannot spend more than \$40,000, you can now decide whether to decline the project, or propose an alternate approach that may be feasible for a lower cost.

Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA) – Your BATNA is the course of action that you will take if the current negotiations fail and an agreement cannot be reached. **Example:** If you and the client cannot reach an agreement, what will you do instead? What other project opportunities are you considering? Which one would you select if negotiations on the initial project are not successful? If you do not currently have any other viable project opportunities, you may have limited other alternatives. In this case, you may need to be more flexible in agreeing to less than optimal terms (though not below your resistance point). If, however, you have several other project prospects, you may have the opportunity to be more “choosy,” and to insist on project terms that are more favorable to you. If these more favorable terms for you fall under the resistance point of the other party, the negotiation may fail. However, you have identified your next best alternative and can begin moving forward with another project.

AUTHOR: Cheryl Holm-Hansen, PhD is the founder and principal consultant at Community Research Solutions, LLC. She has more than 30 years of experience conducting community-based research and evaluation projects. A community psychologist by training, she also has a continuing education certificate in project management.

Tips for effective project negotiation

There are numerous books, research studies, and websites devoted to sharing effective negotiation practices. These are just some recommendations for successfully negotiating projects.



Brainstorm and consider multiple options

To increase the chances that everyone in the negotiation will get what they want, be open to brainstorming. Be creative – you might discover some new approaches that would be desirable for all partners.



Focus on relationship-building

Try to build relationships, rather than simply trying to secure the best deal for yourself in the short run. Take time to understand the interests of the other party, and consider their needs and perspectives in the negotiation process. Focusing on win-win resolutions can provide a starting point for long-term partnerships.



Understand power dynamics

Each party carries some influence or power over the other. Pay attention to the ways that power dynamics are impacting the negotiation. Take steps to identify and mitigate power differentials, so that neither party feels coerced into agreeing with unfavorable terms.



Use active listening

Active listening will help you understand the other person's needs, determine where they have flexibility, and develop shared values. Seek understanding and respect their perspectives. Use paraphrasing to demonstrate understanding, and seek clarification when needed.



Stay calm

Most negotiations can be handled without conflict...but if things should become conflictual, try to manage your emotions so that the process can move forward. Stay calm, take a deep breath. If you anticipate conflict, prepare for the negotiation by being clear in advance about your needs and interests, preparing what you will say in advance, and practicing stress-management strategies that work for you.



Develop objective criteria

What are the factors that you would consider in determining whether to agree to project terms during a negotiation process? How would these factors be weighted? Identifying a clear set of criteria in advance for how you will make decisions can be helpful, and can prevent you from making agreements that you later regret.



Negotiate face-to-face if you can

There is value in face-to-face communication during the negotiation process. Not only can face-to-face communication support relationship-building, but it also allows you to observe nonverbal communication signals (such as body language and facial expressions), which can help you better understand what the other person is thinking, and develop mutually-agreeable resolutions.



Be flexible

While it is perfectly appropriate to have project terms that are “deal breakers” for you, maintain as much flexibility as possible. If you are able to bend on some terms that are important to the other person (without compromising what you need), they may be more likely to bend on terms that are important to you.



Document resolutions

Documentation is important in negotiations. Whether you are completing a formal contract negotiation, or collaborating with others to make decisions along the way, take the time to document the process and the resolution. This may be as simple as sending an email to recap a decision that was made. Written documentation of the decision can help to ensure that everyone has the same understanding of the decision, and can prevent misunderstandings from emerging down the road.