



The Negotiation Gap

BY CAROL L. BROOKS, SR/WA

"In business, you don't get what you deserve; you get what you negotiate."

-Chester L. Karrass

The word "gap" tends to have a negative connotation. For example, if a message isn't received the way it was intended, a communication gap is likely to result. Something similar can occur during the negotiation process when a property owner misinterprets what's being said.

According to IRWA's Principles of Right of Way textbook, negotiation is defined as the process by which the parties involved in a dispute resolve their differences in order to reach a mutually-acceptable agreement. However, it's these differences that create a gap between what the agent is seeking and what the owner is willing to concede. Closing that gap is the goal of the negotiations process.

With so many dynamics to contend with during a negotiation, it can be challenging for even the most seasoned acquisition agent to remain focused on the primary goal. Through years of trial and error, there are some techniques that have helped me achieve a win-win outcome.

EMPTY YOUR BAGGAGE

Many of us have a tendency to haul our own baggage into meetings with property owners. By baggage, I'm not just referring to our many past experiences. It goes beyond that. It's when we are so focused on our own wants and needs that we unintentionally cause a fissure in our dialog with the owners. By coming to the meeting armed with our own self-interests, we oftentimes create a wedge without knowing it. Instead, our first action should be to take inventory of our baggage. Get rid of anything that may cause a negative reaction or create tension between you and the property owner. Once you lighten the load, there's suddenly space available for the owner's needs, wants and issues.

TUNE IN

Stay alert and focused on what the owner is saying. Much too often we give the impression of listening, but we've actually tuned out. We wait for an opening in the discussion so we can continue talking about our main points. Don't think the owner doesn't notice, because they do. When they perceive that we are inattentive, we not only show a lack of respect, but we can potentially jeopardize the entire negotiation process. By staying alert, you have a better chance of understanding the project from the owners' point of view. And more importantly, the better your chances are that you can close the difference gap.

BE OBSERVANT

In order to be fully engaged, listen carefully for any particular words that the owner uses repeatedly. Try using similar language, as it demonstrates your intent to become congruent with their needs and concerns. Stay attuned to their non-verbal signals, as it's the non-verbal communication that conveys a person's true feelings. In fact, 90 percent of communication is non-verbal, so it's imperative that we concentrate throughout the entire meeting. Tuning out is fine if you're watching television, but when you have something important on the line, a split second break could cause us to miss an important signal. The brain and eyes are wonderful tools that can process so much information when we're not trying to multi-task. Be attentive and really listen.

HOLD THAT THOUGHT

Has anyone ever overloaded you with too much information all at once? Did you feel overwhelmed? There are times when less is more. When you're relaying complex information to a property owner, do it slowly and methodically. Share only what the owner needs to know right now. As the meeting progresses, you can add additional details if they are relevant to the discussion. However, sometimes it's best to put on the brakes. Give the owner time to assimilate your message.

And if you find yourself rushing back to the office feeling anxious and impatient after a meeting, that is probably not the time to send the owner an email with all the points you had wanted to make but didn't. Sleep on it. Give it time. Tomorrow will likely bring a new perspective and change the direction of your next discussion.

It's essential for us to take an inventory every now and then. Think back on your most successful negotiation, one where you really had to work at closing the gap. Identify what worked and try using it again during your next project. Remember, only practice can sharpen your negotiation skills.



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Owner of Cornerstone Management Skills, Carol is an internationally-recognized author and lecturer on conflict management, interpersonal skills and success strategies. She has nearly 20 years experience in the right of way profession and is a Master Facilitator for IRWA courses. ©2011 Carol L. Brooks All Rights Reserved. For more information, visit www.cornerstonemanagementskills.com