



The Mindful Negotiator

The importance of showing empathy

BY SHELLIE RABAGO

I'm always excited to get a new project. Although I realize it means that I will be crazy busy for the next few months, it also means I have the opportunity to meet an eclectic group of people I wouldn't typically get the chance to encounter. Over the past several years I have worked with many large corporations, families and even a few famous people. Convincing owners to sell their property to a condemning agency, even if it's a partial amount of it, is not an easy task – especially if they have occupied the property for decades or raised their children there and every square foot embraces a special memory.

For larger corporations, it's pretty much always about the amount of the offer. There's no emotional connection to the property – it's a business deal just like any other. It's a different situation for the elderly couple who has lived in their home for over 50 years. They have an emotional connection to their property and as a negotiator, I have to be understanding of the situation and show empathy. Essentially, I have to be mindful.

I have been in situations where landowners have gotten angry with me and other situations where landowners have done nothing but cry. Whether the emotion is that of anger or tears, as a mindful negotiator it is important that I remember to have understanding for the tears and that I do not become reactive to the anger.

Saying I am a “mindful negotiator” isn't just a way to make my job sound flashier than it is. Mindfulness is an important component of being good at my job. Every aspect of negotiating can be improved by being more mindful.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the rudimentary human ability to be fully present, aware of where you are and what is going on around you, and not being overly reactive or overwhelmed by it. Or as Jon Kabat-Zinn put it, “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

In practice, it means being grounded in the moment instead of in our thoughts. It means seeing what is happening right now for what it really is as opposed to our stories of what we think it is. It means letting go of preconceived notions.

Key Factors of a Mindful Negotiator

I often meet people who tell me they would love to do my job or that it must be a great job. While I must agree that it is a great job, not everyone who can communicate and speak well can become a mindful negotiator. Yes, excellent communication skills are an essential trait for a negotiator, but there are a lot of factors that come together to make a negotiator mindful.

Be Present

Being present sounds easy, right? But how many of us are really in the moment when we are meeting with a landowner? Are we not thinking about our next meeting and the status report that is already overdue? Are we not trying to remember everything that needs to be asked and what's the next thing we need to say? Do we have a desire to check our phone?

Being present means putting that phone away and focusing solely on the meeting with your landowner. You cannot just be there in the situation and half-heartedly involved because you are distracted. When you feel your mind wandering someplace else, make it a point to bring your attention back. Look into the eyes of the person you are talking to. Try to pick up on more detail. For instance, how do they present themselves or what kind of movements are they making? Staying curious will help you stay present.

Listen to What is Being Said

Effective communication begins with the fundamental skill of listening. The majority of good speakers are not reliable listeners. One great way to be more mindful of others is to listen well and not with the intention of merely replying. It is a natural response for humans to be automatically thinking



about what we want to say next when someone else is speaking. While it is natural, it's not something we should be led by. If you notice yourself doing this, it is a good idea to slow down, take a breath, and redirect your thoughts and attention back to what the speaker is saying. This then communicates to your landowner that not only do you hear what is being said, but that you are genuinely interested.

Often, when people are talking to us we feel that it is necessary to offer advice. However, most of the time people just want to be heard and are not actually looking for advice or solutions. By offering advice we often, without even realizing it, make the conversation about us and the speaker can end up feeling unheard. Try asking questions of your landowner when they are upset instead of offering advice or talking about your own experiences.

Have Empathy

We live in a self-dominated world with self-promotion made easier by various social media outlets. It's no surprise then that we tend to view life through our own experiences and belief systems. Having empathy means that you can understand a situation from another person's point of view.

To better understand the people I work with, I often remind myself how much I love my home and how I would feel if someone approached me about an involuntary acquisition, and how I may react. Empathy is one of the most important factors that make an agent

a mindful negotiator. You have to be willing to understand that the landowner may want to share the stories about the life of their property and this will also help them to unwind their emotional attachment to the property.

If you take the time to really think about these things, you can really make a difference. Humans tend to gravitate towards those who they feel understand them. It's impossible to understand someone else if you make everything about you.

Don't Take Yourself So Seriously

One of the most important parts of being mindful is not just being aware of what is going on, but also accepting it in a non-judgmental manner. This applies not just to the empathy we extend others, but also ourselves.

A big part of this means understanding that we're not so different from anyone else. Whether it's the powerful CEO or the elderly couple who need extra time and help from other family members to decipher what is going on. We are all just doing the best we can, and all of us have our own stories going on in our heads.

That means that if your landowner is late for a meeting or keeps changing their mind about what they want or gets angry at you because they blame you for their predicament, the first

thing to do is to remember to take a breath and smile. Better still, think of something funny that really makes you laugh. While we might already feel the anger bubbling up inside us, it's important not to react too quickly and remember that laughter is often times the best medicine for this.

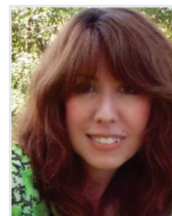
We must remember not to take ourselves too seriously, and often times other people's reactions to us are more about other things that are maybe going on in their lives and not necessarily about us personally. In doing so, our actions are thought out, rather than reactionary.

Meditation Really Works

One of the most popular ways of practicing mindfulness is through sitting meditation. A common practice is to sit still for a set amount of time—say, 10 minutes—and use an anchor to focus on (typically the breath). The goal is to notice when our mind is wandering and to bring it back to the anchor time and time again. Sitting meditation is just one form of mindfulness practice. The goal of these practices is to bring mindfulness into our daily lives—whether we are working or spending time with friends or family.

In Summary

I feel that practicing these elements of mindfulness has made me better at my job. While these tips seem simple, it might take some practice to make them a habit. As with anything else, the more you practice, the more natural it will become. 🌟



Originally from the South Coast of England, Shellie is currently working towards a master's degree in psychology at Capella University. She has worked for Universal Field Services for over five years and is currently Lead Negotiator and Condemnation Coordinator of the Dallas, TX Office. When not working or studying, Shellie likes to travel and learn about different cultures and traditions.