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Emotions in negotiation

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"You negotiate with people as they are, not as they should be"

In the heat of conflict, emotions cannot be ignored any more than thoughts can be suppressed. Absolute rationality is unattainable given human nature. Negotiation literature has long viewed emotion as an obstacle, a source of unwanted interference in the search for sound and fruitful agreements. However, this view has been challenged by a reality: Emotion is not the enemy of negotiation, but an inseparable part of it.[1]

Emotional intelligence—the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate both our own emotions and those of others—has proven to be a more decisive factor in achieving success in high-pressure situations than IQ. Contrary to what many believe, however, emotional intelligence is not an innate gift, but a skill that can be cultivated through introspection, practice, and self-observation.

Those who dare to master their inner world will not only make more effective agreements, but will also gain a deeper knowledge of themselves.

1. The biology of emotions in negotiations

Decision-making is not a purely logical exercise, but a dynamic influenced by neural structures whose function is to process emotions, evaluate risks, and anticipate consequences. In the field of high-stakes negotiations, understanding these mechanisms is essential to optimize decision-making and achieve more effective and balanced results:

[1] The authors wish to acknowledge Laurent Combalbert's valuable contribution to this topic in the field of negotiation.

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1.1. **The amygdala.** In crisis situations, the human mind reverts to a primitive state in which reasoning is weakened and instinctive response prevails. This response is triggered by physical threats—such as a hostage-taking or a suicide attempt—and also occurs in the business environment, where high-pressure situations can trigger similar survival mechanisms.

Under these circumstances, the amygdala—a small subcortical structure in the brain that serves as the main control center for emotions and feelings—plays a central role in activating defense mechanisms such as fight, flight, freeze, or fawn, a phenomenon known in psychiatry as *amygdala hijacking* or *emotional hijacking.* Therefore, a negotiator's priority should be to reduce the emotional intensity of the situation in order to mitigate the amygdala response of their interlocutor and restore their capacity for rational analysis.

1.2. **The illusion of control and the inevitable role of the subconscious.** Multiple studies have shown that the brain makes decisions before the conscious mind becomes aware of them. One of the most well-known studies in this field was conducted by Benjamin Libet in the 1980s. Libet analyzed the brain activity of a group of volunteers as they performed simple movements, such as pressing a button. His measurements revealed a phenomenon known as *readiness potential*—an electrical signal in the brain that occurs up to 500 milliseconds before a person becomes aware of their intention to move. This finding suggests that the decision to act begins at an unconscious neural level and only later reaches conscious awareness.

1.3. **The ventromedial prefrontal vortex (VMPFC).** As Antonio Damasio explained in *Descartes' Error,* studies of patients with damage to the VMPFC have shown that while these individuals retain their reasoning abilities, they struggle to make decisions because they cannot assign emotional value to different options.

This brain region plays a crucial role in evaluating alternatives by connecting past experiences to future options. According to the **somatic marker hypothesis,** emotions act as filters that attribute significance to each alternative, thereby facilitating decision-making. For example, a hostage-taker may make an explicit demand, but to resolve the conflict a negotiator needs to identify the **underlying interest** driving their actions—a need that may be conscious or unconscious. However, if the negotiation fails to align the concession with the dominant emotion, an agreement will remain out of reach.

In face-to-face negotiations, the VMPFC plays a key role in interpreting **microexpressions**—brief, involuntary facial reactions that reveal genuine emotional states. **These expressions cannot be faked and last only about one twenty-fifth of a second.** A negotiator who presents multiple options can assess their counterpart's visceral reaction to each one.

1.4. **The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC).** The DLPFC is responsible for evaluating options in a rational and deliberate manner; it cannot make decisions independently and relies on emotional input from the VMPFC. The primary function of the DLPFC is to justify decisions that the brain has already processed at an unconscious level.

For example, a buyer may make an impulsive decision to purchase a product, but later justify that decision by arguing that value for money was the deciding factor. Similarly, a barricaded individual may surrender based on an intuitive sense that continued resistance will have serious consequences, but rationalize their decision with statements such as, "After all, I'm a better person than my hostage, and it's not worth it."

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1.5. The nucleus accumbens. This brain region is linked to the anticipation of pleasure in decision-making. It plays a key role in biases such as loss aversion and impulsivity in financial decision-making.

In a ransom negotiation, a kidnapper may initially demand €3 million—an amount that could take months to obtain and carries the inherent risk of being tracked down by authorities. However, when presented with the opportunity to receive €500,000 immediately, the kidnapper's nucleus accumbens drives them to accept the more tangible and immediate offer.

2. Self-knowledge

Mastery is built on a deep understanding of our own nature. A true competitive advantage, both in negotiations and in life, is the ability to regulate our emotions, make sense of our internal impulses, and accurately analyze the cognitive patterns that drive our actions. A truly exceptional negotiator is distinguished not only by analytical acumen or the ability to read others but also by mastery in managing their own emotional responses—especially in high-pressure situations.

We live in a time where our ability to exercise self-control is constantly tested. The immediacy of technology, the dominance of individualism, and excessive exposure to shifting ideologies have created a context in which emotion often trumps reason and undermines sound judgment. However, it is not the environment that limits us, but rather how we relate to it.

A negotiator must recognize that emotions are an inherent part of the human condition; however, this does not mean they should exert absolute control over our decisions. Neuroscience has shown that while certain stimuli can automatically trigger emotions, the brain has the ability to rewire itself through neuroplasticity. This means that individuals can develop the ability to respond in a more balanced way, neutralizing impulses that might otherwise cloud their judgment in critical situations.

In high-stakes negotiations, where the margin for error is minimal, emotional detachment is an invaluable asset. The goal is not to suppress or deny emotions but to acknowledge them and manage their influence with prudence and timeliness. Balance is maintained by consciously separating emotions from the surrounding chaos.

There are several tools that can help transform negotiations from a purely transactional exchange to a collaborative dialogue in which mental clarity and strategy take precedence over impulsiveness. The most important are outlined below.

2.1. Identifying emotional triggers. Psychological research has shown that each individual has emotional "buttons" that are activated by past experiences or deeply ingrained beliefs. These triggers can provoke disproportionate reactions to certain situations. Reflecting on past episodes where our reaction was disproportionate can help identify the root of these impulses and progressively diminish their impact.

2.2. Metamorphosis map. Creating a timeline of significant events provides a clear visualization of our personal evolution. This self-reflection tool helps us identify lessons learned over time and set milestones for future growth, strengthening both our identity and our decision-making confidence.

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