

Face Off with a Negotiation Master

By Karel Murray

Seated at my kitchen table, I have initiated the “who will blink first” exercise with my black cat, Jette. She is settled at her favorite place by the table leg, one small paw lifted to chest height and her face, emblazoned with a beseeching look, turned up towards me. Her breath is shallow and her green eyed gaze is completely focused on the fork in my hand. Beginning to feel pity for her, I’m actually considering giving her a tidbit.

Jette is a master in her own right. The Yoda of negotiation. Without a word, she has conveyed her need and waits patiently until I relent and give her what she wants.

I’m toast.

Being humbled by a cat is humiliating. Intellectually, I know that I’m just being a kind human friend to this food pest. She, however, understands how to exploit the relationship to her fullest advantage. Compromise is never an issue with her. She knows that in absence of my responding to her silent plea, she will begin the yowling stage...locating the one spot in the house where her cry will echo. Repeating the bleat of despair, the noise will reverberate throughout the house until I give her what she wants. And I always do.

Am I a push over? No. I study her so I can learn some of the simple truths related to negotiation. I wonder how far she will actually go to obtain her goal. It amuses me.

Give and take (or barter), takes place in almost all aspects of our lives. Whenever anyone wants something that you have, you’ve begun the negotiation process. Usually the exchange occurs quickly and efficiently. Sometimes, it turns into an issue so polarizing, that it can shake the foundation of a relationship. That fact alone is reason enough for everyone to learn how to be as effective as possible when trying to fulfill a need or goal.

The negotiation process is simple...it is an exchange of value. It isn't something you do to someone; it's something you do for and with someone. The most skilled negotiators understand, however, that developing trust and establishing some sort of rapport with the other person must take place before any negotiation begins. It's letting your character shine through so the other side can relate to you and feel that a connection of value is taking place.

Therefore, often, relentless pressure exerted by you to make others give into your demands will often result in a stalemate. The value of the exchange has been subjugated to a power struggle.

Negotiation is about resolving a problem (getting what I want when I want it) when the other party actually wants to help me work out that problem. There is a distinct pattern to the process that is universal according to the negotiation experts:

Preparation – understand what you want and what you will do to solve the problem. Be as specific as possible in defining your goals. Jette positions herself by the table each meal, knowing that is where food will magically appear. She identifies the person who is the most likely to give up the treat.

Information Exchange – ask questions, seek answers regarding the problem so complete understanding of what is about to take place occurs. Jette holds up a dainty paw in a supplicating manner showing me that she is in dire need of substance... her patience and begging look is her effort to broadcast her extreme need and only I can save her from certain starvation.

Bargaining – once you know what you want, then you can actually begin the

process of communicating with the other party in order to reach agreement. The cat follows the fork up and down as I eat. A soft quivering mew escapes her lips. Frozen in position, she waits for my response. If that fails, she resorts to howling in the echo chamber. By this time, I'm totally amused. Once she realizes that I refuse to give up the piece of cheese she so desperately needs, Jette returns to her original position and gives the master stroke. She places a paw on my foot, moves forward and licks my ankle. Her eyes never leave the fork.

Commitment – this occurs when both individuals have achieved some sort of satisfaction regarding the arrangement and are willing to move forward to complete the deal. Jette wins hands down. I can't help it. She gets the treat and life is good.

Everyone can become proficient in negotiation. Take time daily to recognize when you are in the process of obtaining what you want. Be aware of the environment around you, the other person's attitude towards you and concentrate on leaving the relationship better than when it started.

Don't fear negotiating... you are already an informal expert. Step up to the challenge the next time you buy something. Be logical in what you want, have integrity for the process, respect the other party and learn to ask for concessions.

Just pray they don't look like Jette. Then all bets are off.