



Tropic Negotiation Toolkit

Soft Skills For Successful Negotiations

Building rapport with suppliers is the precursor to long-standing partnerships, so we mapped out the skills needed for successful outcomes.

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Your most valuable skill during negotiation is how you communicate. Building rapport with suppliers is a key part of the process and will serve you well in the long-term. It takes a lot of practice, but these qualities are what separate good negotiators from excellent negotiators.

There's a few soft skills to keep in mind when negotiating, so take a look through this list and identify which areas you feel strong in and more importantly, which you can make improvements in before entering into your next negotiation so you can be successful.

- Go through each of these skills outlined below and rate yourself on a scale of 1-5.
- If you rate yourself a 3 or lower in any of these areas, we recommend practicing those skills in a few mock negotiations with internal stakeholders to help you adequately prepare for supplier negotiations.

Orchestration

Procurement is a team sport. Some companies have an entire team in place, others have a dedicated person who is running the procurement process. In both cases, you need to work cross-functionally with other stakeholders in the organization. Because Procurement is often aiming to reduce costs, the suppliers may try to go around the function, either entirely or at least to glean information that could spoil your leverage. So it's important for Procurement to take the lead and ensure the team is aligned.

It's a best practice to coach your team members and stakeholders who are engaging with a supplier on their communication to ensure you maintain leverage. The easiest way to do so is to ask them to defer any questions related to the purchase or renewal to procurement. At the very least, they should refrain from sharing budget information or which other suppliers you're considering. It can be as simple as saying, "that's a great question. I'm happy to talk about the day to day operation, but anything related to the renewal needs to be discussed with procurement. I know we are looking at a few options."

Active Listening

Active listening is about paying attention to body language and what someone is actually saying - or not saying. It's more than nodding and adding "mhm," but rather, reading between the lines. As you develop your listening skills, you'll be able to better read between the lines to understand exactly what they're trying to say, even if they're not saying it.

How will you know if you're listening actively? You should be able to recall specific details from the conversation & the other person should feel confident that you're taking the conversation seriously and giving them your full attention. Certainly, there is some nodding and affirmation involved in this, but it's easy to feign listening when you focus on doing it right rather than doing it intentionally.

In negotiations, the person who listens more and talks less tends to leave with everything they want. The more you speak, the more you show your cards, so while partnership is imperative, listening more will help you maintain your leverage as well as your poker face.

Non-Verbal Communication

Your words only make up only a small portion of your communication. So even if you say all the right things, that still leaves quite a bit unaccounted for. The pandemic emphasized the importance of non-verbal communication, especially in business. Our body language, tone, facial expressions, gestures, posture, etc. make the vast majority of communication. Make sure to be aware of and practice your non-verbal communication so you can negotiate confidently and effectively.

This also goes both ways. You should be mindful of your own non-verbal communication, but you should also be paying attention to the other person's. Generally, non verbal communication is unconscious, so if you have a gut feeling about a supplier, you should trust that.

Asking the Right Questions

Good questions lead to good answers. Try to ask questions that are open ended questions where it makes sense, and remember that when you ask questions can be just as important as what you ask. Check out the 10 Essential Questions for Negotiation list included in this kit for our suggestions.

Flexibility

Being a flexible partner makes negotiations much easier. Being willing to change your point of view, your strategy, or your expectations will help you get to a win-win. There will be plenty of unexpected things that come up during the negotiation process, so maintaining adaptability and even creativity to come to new and perhaps unexpected solutions will encourage your counterpart to do the same and ensure both parties can come to a mutually beneficial agreement.

Clarity

Often in negotiations, there can be a misunderstanding between what you as the buyer want and what the supplier thinks you want. Make sure to lead with the overall objective you're looking to accomplish, rather than the features, price, or elements you think will get you there. If your supplier is clear on what it is you need, they can help identify the best way to get there that is also beneficial to them.

Confidence

If you seem to lack authority, you leave yourself open to being taken advantage of. Displaying confidence in negotiations is possibly the most important skill to have. As we noted in the pre-negotiation guide, the key to being confident is being prepared. Spend time doing your research, fine tuning your soft skills, and confidence will naturally follow.

Patience

Patience is a virtue, especially in negotiations. Not getting what you want in a negotiation often comes down to rushing the process. Avoid falling into supplier urgency and deadlines and take the time to come to a mutually beneficial agreement. Being patient gives you more control and can even be an advantage. It also ensures neither party wastes time going back and forth on unnecessary items.

Resist the urge to raise your budget or compromise on things that matter to you and your stakeholders. Be comfortable with silence if that's what it takes. Patience comes easiest with time, so engage early and you will naturally have more patience during negotiations.

Positivity

The other important "P". Using positive language and maintaining a good attitude will go a long way in establishing rapport with your counterpart(s). Building trust between you and your supplier makes them more likely to want to provide value for you. This can look like a lower price or different add ons or features that your business needs. Generally, people tend to respond better to those with a positive attitude, so you have nothing to lose by putting your best foot forward.