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TRAINING IN MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION SKILLS

In form

In Form no. 11

The language of hidden signals

"We will never agree to what you are proposing" is a clear statement of position. But if you add the words *"in its present form"*, you immediately indicate the possibility of a negotiated agreement.

Giving and understanding these kinds of signals are all part of the skill of negotiating. But reading between the lines in this way can be a problem for a second language speaker. What exactly do your native-speaker negotiation partners mean when they say *"We would find it extremely difficult to meet that deadline"*?

Basically it is a question of listening between the lines: Listening for words that make definite statements more tentative and listening for statements that only rule out one of the possible alternatives. *"Extremely difficult"* is not the same as *"impossible"*. And maybe *"that deadline"* could be negotiated too.

Here are some examples:

1. *"We never negotiate on price!"*
This sounds very definite but the hidden signal is that they would happily discuss delivery, quality and quantities.
2. *"These are our standard contract terms."*
The implication is that there are also non-standard terms available.
3. *"We could not produce those quantities in that time-frame."*
But they are prepared to negotiate either the quantities or the times.
4. *"Our price for that quantity is \$40 000."*
Different quantity, different price!
5. *"These are extremely reasonable conditions we propose."*
This is the position they prefer, but it's negotiable.

Here are five more sentences with hidden signals. What is the possibility for negotiation? You can check your answers at the end of the article.

- a. It is not our normal practice to pay within 30 days.
- b. We never give discounts of more than 5%.
- c. We are not prepared to discuss this now.
- d. Our production line is not set up to deal with these requirements.
- e. I am not empowered to negotiate these levels of discount.

There are also hidden signals of another kind. Some cultures prefer to make difficulties and differences of opinion less obvious than they really are. They do this for reasons of politeness and to imply that all problems can be solved.

"We have a bit of a problem with this." This can mean that the problem is a considerable one.

Here are some other examples:

- “*There's a short delay in production.*”
Check the exact timing.
- “*I have some doubts about the project.*”
How many are “some”?
- “*There seems to be a slight misunderstanding.*”
This is often used as a serious warning of difficulties.
- “*We just need a little more time.*”
Try to get your business partners to specify how much more time they need.

Qualifying difficulties is part of many cultures need to keep the business relationship harmonious. It is not usually a deliberate attempt to hide the truth. But be aware that soft words can sometimes hide deep disagreement.

Answers:

a.

So what's normal? It's negotiable.

b.

Never say never! And 1% - 5% are negotiable anyway.

c.

But we are prepared to discuss it later.

d.

So let's negotiate the alternative requirements or the costs of re-setting the production line.

e.

Take me to your boss!

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