Negotiation Strategy and Tactics: Basic Principles Before You Begin

By Alaina G. Levine

Everyday, you negotiate. It may be to secure more space on the metro, more whipped cream on a venti mochaccino, or more time to complete a project. You negotiate with your family, friends, co-workers, boss, and strangers, for seemingly miniscule things, important issues, and life-changing opportunities.

Many of the most important negotiations that will impact your professional advancement (and therefore your personal life as well) involve your employment and salary. Did you know that your first salary determines the salaries you will have for the rest of your life? Getting a head start on sharpening your skills in negotiation will make all the difference in this realm.

The first point you should realize is that negotiation is hardly ever a one-time transaction. It is a process that begins from the first impression you make when you meet a new contact and continues to the moment that both parties sign off on a deal. It involves give and take, for both parties, and the goal should be to forge a win-win agreement for you and your colleague. Don’t think of the other person as an opponent – you are not trying to “one-up” them. Instead, you are seeking to create an exchange of value whereby each party gains something that they consider valuable for their efforts.

Before you enter any negotiation, clarify (to yourself) your needs, wants and limits. Each of these might be different, and crystallizing them in your mind will allow you to negotiate with great skill. It will inherently give you flexibility, as well as a border at which you may need to stop the negotiation. For example, for your next job, you may want a salary of $50,000, but you may have already done the math, and know that you need a salary of $45,000 to support yourself in the city in which the position is located. So if during the negotiations, you are offered a salary of $30,000, you know that you won’t be able to live on this level of compensation. It is below your limit, and therefore, the position may be out of reach for you.

Many elements of an employment package, even for postdoc positions, are negotiable (even if you are not specifically told this), and you can seek to take advantage of this. Employment components that are negotiable, beyond salary, include “hard” benefits (such as health insurance), “soft” benefits (such as a flexible schedule and professional training opportunities), special tools (such as a cell phone or laptop), and one-time perks (such as moving expenses). As you negotiate your total compensation package, think about what you will need and want to not only do the job effectively, but also to advance as a scientist or engineer. This is particularly essential for early-career professionals. For example, for many postdoc positions, the salary is predetermined – you won’t be able to negotiate that. But, you should negotiate for benefits such as a travel budget to attend and present at conferences, an indispensable aspect of any early-career position in the sciences.

I recently spoke with a scientist who negotiated his first job beyond his PhD with excellent skill. His strategy involved being completely honest concerning his needs, having another offer already in place, and “backing them against the wall of time”. These tactics are often taught to help people become better negotiators, but in this person’s case, he didn’t even realize he was negotiating because he was being honest and practicing good ethics. And this is probably the most critical action you can take in any negotiation – be ethical. By demonstrating superior ethical behavior in every transaction in which you are involved as a professional, including negotiations, you will enhance your reputation and cement your brand (your promise of value) within your community. And this will pave the way for your next negotiation to bring you even greater value than before.

Alaina G. Levine is an internationally-known science career consultant, President of Quantum Success Solutions, and a science writer. She can be reached through www.alainalevine.com.

Copyright, 2011, Alaina G. Levine.