



Where to Sit at the Negotiating Table

And other psychogeographical strategies

by Nancy Neal Yeend

Successful negotiations are the result of many factors, not the least of which is awareness of your surroundings and the impact that the environment has on your ability to negotiate effectively. If you are aware of the psychological impact of the site, room, table, and even chairs, then you are more likely to achieve your nego-

tiation goals. If you want a competitive edge in your next negotiation, then you need to understand *psychogeography*—how the characteristics of the place, and where you sit, affect what you get.

The Place

Look at any major league sports team's statistics, and you will notice that they win more

games at home than on the road. That is called "home field advantage." When you negotiate in familiar surroundings, you are more confident. When you negotiate in unfamiliar surroundings, your anxiety level mounts, and remaining focused is more challenging. When you go to someone else's office to negotiate, they have the home field advantage.



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Being familiar with the territory—how to get there, parking availability, where phones and restrooms and supplies are located, and office routine—helps you to negotiate confidently.

Strategy #1: Offer to host the negotiations or suggest a neutral site with which you are familiar. If you have to negotiate in the offices of the other side, you can mitigate this disadvantage by the mere fact that you recognize that it *is* a disadvantage.

The Room

More important than the site is the negotiation room. The ability to concentrate during a negotiation is influenced by several factors, three of which are light, temperature, and décor.

Light. Windows provide natural light and maybe engaging views. Windows can frequently make the difference in how well you negotiate. If you sit at a negotiation table with the other party on the opposite side with a window at their back, you will be disadvantaged. Trying to negotiate with someone who has a light source behind them creates what is termed psychological noise. This means that you either (a) become distracted by the view or

(b) have a hard time seeing your opponents' faces because the lenses in your eyes narrow in response to the daylight (like a camera with automatic aperture setting, shooting a backlit subject). Within a relatively short period you are no longer able to actively listen effectively.

Strategy #2: Never sit facing a strong light source. For the best negotiations, close all blinds and curtains or have all participants refrain from sitting with their backs to a window.

Temperature. The old labor union story goes, "To ensure short negotiations, just put everyone in a small room, turn up the heat, and lock the door." People respond to heat and cold physiologically by sweating and shivering, respectively—they also respond to temperature extremes psychologically. When you are too hot or too cold, your brain registers the impact of temperature and starts a mental dialogue with you: "I wish that I had brought a jacket," or "Why can't they fix the air conditioner?" When this distraction occurs, you lose concentration. While you are distracted by how you feel, you may miss a key point presented by the person with whom you are negotiating, you may react irritably, or you might make too many concessions or "leave something on the table" just to get out of the uncomfortable room as fast as possible.

Many people only register consciously that they are uncomfortable, and they do not make the connection that the physical discomfort is limiting their negotiating skills. They do not assert themselves and stop the negotia-

tions. It all boils down to awareness and swift reaction. Once you are aware that you are uncomfortable, you can change the circumstances.

Strategy #3: Select a room with appropriate climate controls. If the other side is turning up the heat or freezing you out of the negotiation room, reschedule the session in a more comfortable setting.

Décor. You don't have to be an interior designer to appreciate that décor has a significant impact on negotiations. Bright, bold colors such as red, orange, yellow, and chartreuse can stimulate or even excite people. Vibrant, abstract designs may energize or agitate people. If you want to concentrate and focus during your negotiations, décor must be considered. Colors like blues and greens calm, and colors like mauve and brown tend to provide warmth to the setting.

If your purpose in the negotiation is to find a mutually satisfying solution to a problem, be aware of colors and decorations. Pictures with ships being tossed about in raging seas and shark fins appearing through the whitecaps may not only be a distraction, but also an omen of the negotiation's outcome!

Strategy #4: Select a room with soft, soothing colors and traditional or classical art. Avoid rooms with vivid or clashing colors and bold or abstract art.

The Table

You may remember the lengthy discussions that transpired before the Paris Peace Talks at the conclusion of the

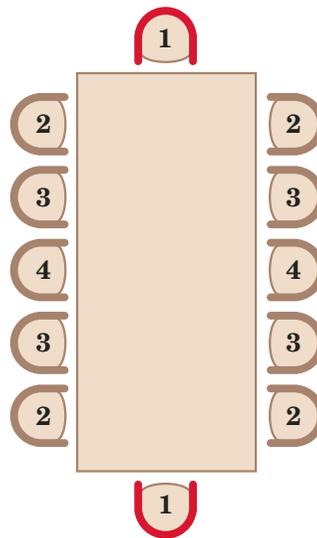
Viet Nam War, where months were spent debating the size and shape of the negotiation table. That's because, depending on the size and shape of the table, as well as the cultural backgrounds of the people involved, some positions at the table are considered more powerful than others.

When there are four or fewer negotiating parties, a square table is ideal. Since all sides are equal, the perception is that all parties are equal. Likewise, round tables confer equality on the parties assuming they are evenly spaced around the table. (King Arthur selected a round table so his knights would be considered equals.)

There are two different cultural assumptions associated with rectangular tables. One assumption is that the narrow ends of the table are the seats of power, and so we identify them as the "heads" of the table. In this context, power diminishes the farther you are from the head of the table. Examples of this cultural context would be a board meeting with the chairperson at the head of the table, or a family dinner with the parents or oldest family members at the heads. (See Figure 1.)

Mediated negotiations can be anomalous. The mediator will sit at one end of the table (position 1 in Figure 1), and typically seats the opposing parties closest to him or her on either side (position 2). The attorneys, who in other situations might be the most powerful people because of their knowledge of the facts and the law, negotiating expertise, and professional status, are seated far-

Figure 1

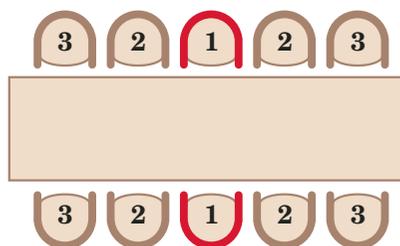


At a rectangular table, people who sit at the ends are perceived as the "heads" of the table. Those farthest from the ends are least powerful. (1 = most powerful; 4 = least powerful.)

ther from the mediator in somewhat less powerful positions (position 3). Experts are farther still from the mediator (position 4).

A second cultural assumption presumes that the center seat on the long side of the table is the most powerful, and power diminishes as the distance from the center increases. This is often the assumption when very long conference tables are used. An example of this cultural context is during international negotiations. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2



Strategy #5: Select a table of appropriate size and shape to accommodate all negotiators comfortably. You or your primary negotiator should arrange to sit in a power location.

Negotiations are most effective when people of similar rank or status (counterparts) are seated opposite one another. For example, if you are negotiating a business transaction, the presidents or CEOs sit opposite one another and the financial officers sit opposite one another.

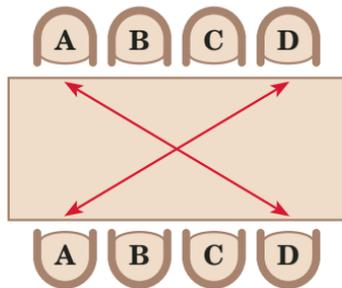
A person of higher rank or position within an organization seated opposite a person of lesser rank, gains the psychological advantage through intimidation. If you are in such a position of disadvantage, at least your awareness of the potential power imbalance will help you be less apprehensive so that you can better focus on the negotiations.

Strategy #6: Seat counterparts opposite each other if possible, for maximum effectiveness.

One other important factor to understand about seating arrangements is that greater distance between negotiators can magnify conflict. Although arguments may occur in any negotiation, disagreements are often intensified when the parties are seated a significant distance from one another. Being mindful of this table dynamic will help you refrain from participating in unproductive squabbles.

In Figure 3, the argument between D on one side and A on the other side is more likely to be magnified, because of the greater distance between them.

Figure 3



The Chair

Yes, even chairs confer power. Chairs with arms and high backs confer more power than chairs with no arms and low backs. This perception stems from the image of the throne, which has both arms and high back.

When watching the evening news, have you noticed that all the anchor persons appear to be the same height? This is no accident. If some newscasters sit higher in their chairs than others, the viewers would perceive that the taller announcers are more knowledgeable, or that the news they are reporting is more important. How tall you appear in your chair can increase or decrease the other party's perception of your importance and your negotiation strength.

Strategy #7: Select a chair with arms, high back and adjustable seat to insure that you are comfortable and you project an image of authority.

Strategy Summary

As you prepare for your next negotiation, certainly you will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your position, develop criteria that you will use to evaluate any proposals the other side makes, and plan your various strategies.* But do not forget the power of psychogeography! Paying attention to details—where the negotiation is held, the various characteristics of the room, the size and shape of the table, and the features of the chairs—will help you negotiate more effectively for longer periods of time, and will allow you to remain attentive, focused, and effective. **VE**

* For more on negotiation strategies, see “Mediation 101: Understanding the Magic,” *The Value Examiner*, May/June 2005, page 5.