

Inside Your Business Continuity Management Toolbox: Negotiation

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When teams are involved, conflict is likely to occur. Yet, not all conflict is bad, and may, in fact, strengthen your business continuity program and teams.

Negotiation is a conflict resolution process in which people seek a mutually acceptable outcome to a set of differing of opinions. Although we all negotiate every day, with our spouses, our children, our bosses, or even ourselves, we may not be ready to handle team conflict in an effective manner. That's where negotiation skills come in to play. But, becoming a skilled negotiator takes time and practice.

Business Continuity professionals are responsible for working with a wide range of people who have a diverse range of objectives. It is necessary to negotiate carefully with all of the diverging interests in order to effectively complete the project at hand.

Good negotiations aren't about winning or losing. They are about both sides feeling good about the outcome, or as good as they both can feel about the outcome. This is considered a "Win-Win" mentality. If one side feels they have compromised too much, or if one side feels they have clearly "won," it has been an unsuccessful negotiation.

There are many models which can be used to facilitate a negotiation. However, it is imperative that you select the correct model for the type of negotiation you are facing. There is no "one size fits all" answer to negotiating.

Begin by determining what your overall objectives are, as well as consider what the other party wants to achieve. Based on this, you can determine what type of negotiation you're walking into.

- Are you faced with amorphous ideas from a variety of sources that need to be ferreted out in terms of what needs to be done, who needs to do what, and when things need to be completed? This type of negotiation is more like a brainstorming session, with very little adversity.
- Do you have a team of people who want to work cooperatively to determine the goals, roles and strategy? This is a team approach to negotiating, where there is low adversity, but more so than with brainstorming.

- Has everyone already agreed on the outcome of the situation, however the path to take to get to the agreed upon outcome is still being discussed? This is a non-adversarial approach to negotiating, whereby everyone at the table already has the same goals. Some adversity may arise with differing opinions on strategies.
- Or, do you have polarized opinions about the overall outcome where everyone is armed and ready for a fight? This is the stereotypical negotiation, where there is a great deal of adversity.

Once you know what negotiation situation you are in, gather information about what the other party is looking for. This takes careful listening skills. Clarify and re-clarify this information, until you are sure you understand where the other party is coming from and what the other party's objective is. Throughout the negotiation process you will need to be listening, clarifying and checking-in with the other side to make sure you continue to understand their needs, as well as your own. Open-ended questions are a great way to handle this.

It is important to understand your own bargaining position. Likely, you are not only representing your own ideas. As a business continuity professional, you are likely balancing the needs of many others. Talk to those people and departments you are representing and make sure you understand them. Again, listen, clarify and check-in to make sure you are best representing their objectives. However, be prepared to negotiate with them, as well as the other party.

Aim for remaining flexible during the negotiation process. This is important because you never know when the other party may change directions or motivations. In particular, watch for change of business continuity program scope. It takes a great deal of preparation to be able to remain flexible to the other party's needs while knowing your own limitations.

Attitude is important throughout the negotiation process. You want to be confident, without being cocky. Attempt to establish or reconnect a link between yourself, the people and departments you are representing, as well as the other party. This can be done by building rapport or otherwise creating a positive atmosphere.

After rapport is built, begin by discussing each unique position. Remember, not all negotiations are adversarial, and you may find yourself in a negotiation that runs more like a brainstorming session. Collect the ideas, objectives, goals and outcomes of each party. Determine how each can be achieved, and who should be responsible for achieving them.

Move carefully toward agreement. However, once there, solidify the agreement and notate what was discussed and the outcomes thereof. Give each party the opportunity to review the notations before formalizing the agreement in whatever form necessary. This is an important step, as it re-clarifies what each party is agreeing to prior to putting it into action.

Finally, formalize the agreement and disseminate to all interested parties. This may be a simple memo, or a fully drafted legal agreement, or any number of things in between. Whatever form it takes, be sure that everyone involved understands their roles and responsibilities. The further away from the actual negotiation you get, the more memory loss there is. It's better to nip any issues in the bud as close to the beginning as possible.

Skilled negotiators are fantastic listeners, question askers, and are adept at finding alternative solutions. Successful negotiations arise when you've taken the time to plan and prepare, keep a win-win mentality, and understand what both sides are bargaining for. Be honest and forthright in your negotiations. It's always better to say you don't know than to find yourself in a questionable position later.

Negotiation is an invaluable skill to have in your business continuity management toolkit. Take the time to learn different negotiation skills and tactics and practice through role-play or other means. You're sure to notice increased effectiveness in all of your communications.

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