



***NEGOTIATING LIFE:  
HOW TO TURN STICKS INTO CARROTS***

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## NEGOTIATING LIFE: How to Turn Sticks into Carrots

I have been thinking a lot about conflict lately. Maybe that's because some of the negotiations I am hired to work on are pretty contentious. Maybe it's because a lot of the sales professionals and business negotiators I work with are nervous about conflict. They don't like to think about what may happen if they cannot get a deal.

Well, this month's reflection from the front lines of negotiation is about just that – what happens when we don't get a deal. Actually, it's about why you should think about not getting a deal before it happens.

Why?

Here are three reasons you should understand what I call “fighting alternatives” – what people *may* do to satisfy their interests unilaterally (or to impose consequences on others) in the absence of a deal:

- 1) You must understand “fighting alternatives” in order to set your own bottom line (i.e., your walk away point) for negotiations.
- 2) If “fighting alternatives” are a real possibility, then you should develop contingency planning and risk mitigation strategies before you are immersed in conflict.
- 3) If you understand “fighting alternatives,” then you can communicate internally with your team members or externally to others, if appropriate, how their interests will be satisfied or harmed by not coming to agreement. That is, you can educate others about the consequences of not coming to agreement.

The first two points above are pretty straightforward, even obvious. The third point is not. In fact, the idea of talking about “fighting alternatives,” or sticks, often scares people.

“You're not suggesting I *threaten* them?” is a question I often receive when I recommend we consider communicating “fighting alternatives.”

“No,” I typically respond. “I don’t think we should threaten. I think we should educate.”

So what is the difference between “threatening” and “educating?”

A lot!

We are talking about the difference between a jerk and a friend.

We are talking about the difference between sticks and carrots.

We are talking about the difference between a blow hard and a hard blow averted.

How so?

Let’s take a closer look. When we talk about “fighting alternatives,” which sounds provocative, we are talking about what people may do if they do not come to agreement. So we are not talking about mere threats. We are talking about real possibilities.

For example, let’s say you’re dealing with a very difficult customer who wants more than you can give. It looks like you will not get a deal your organization can live with. So what do you do?

Maybe you consider going to your boss or others in your organization to see if you can get at least some of what the demanding customer wants in order not to lose the deal altogether. It may not be a good deal; but at least it’s a deal.

Or maybe you say to yourself, “Forget it.” It’s take it or leave it, and you do not intend to be bullied by anyone, including this customer. Life is too short for that.

Or maybe you keep trying to convince the difficult customer to take less. You explain that what you are offering is the best you can do. The customer should understand you are in a tough spot and cannot just cave in to an unreasonable demand.

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Let's face it, all three of those options are viable. In fact, in my experience I would have to say most negotiators choose one of the three options based on their personality or their perception of their leverage in a given situation. They decide how much they need the deal and then proceed accordingly – giving in, taking a hard line or begging.

But before you go down one of those paths, there is another approach you can try first. It is not giving in. It does not draw a line in the sand. And it is not begging. It is *talking about "sticks."*

How do you talk about sticks? And why should you talk about sticks when what you really want are carrots?

Great questions! Let's look at each in turn.

First, let's be clear about something. When we say "sticks," we are referring to "fighting alternatives," or what people *may* do to satisfy their interests, or impose consequences, in the absence of a deal. And yes, "fighting alternatives" can sound a lot like threats, particularly if they are communicated emotionally or loudly or in a provocative manner. So you must keep emotional control when you communicate "fighting alternatives." If possible, keep your voice soft. You can sound almost apologetic when you talk about sticks: "I really don't like to talk about this, but..." "Something that concerns me if we don't do this deal is..."

Do you get the idea?

So far, so good. Of course, we haven't yet communicated anything of substance.

So what exactly should you say in this soft, almost apologetic, unemotional tone?

You should talk about things that are reasonably likely to happen if there is no agreement, *focusing on those things that will harm the critical interests of the person to whom you are talking.* Now, if this sounds like a threat, it is not. Why not? Because you are talking about *real things* that *might* happen, and you are doing so not to threaten but to educate the other person. You are helping the other person understand how a decision not to do a deal may harm that person's interests.

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I have done this many times. A few times the person to whom I communicated this information became angry or defensive. But even then, they usually were angry about what might happen, not that I communicated that information. Much more often, the other person has received this information thoughtfully and appreciated that I have given the thought and taken the care to share such information in order to preserve and even strengthen the relationship. I have been thanked for communicating “fighting alternatives!” One person told me, “Thanks for explaining this. It’s exactly what I needed to get my people to stop pushing for more.”

And that brings us to the answer to the key question, *“Why should we talk about sticks if we really want carrots?”*

The answer is that sometimes when a deal is stuck and we cannot get the other side to say “Yes,” we can help everyone involved make better decisions by talking honestly and unemotionally about the true cost of not coming to agreement. We talk about sticks not because we want them to happen but because we do not!

And in my experience on the frontlines of negotiation, it is often those who do not talk about sticks who end up using them.

So when you really want those carrots but cannot seem to get to agreement, consider talking about sticks. You may just get those carrots, after all.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts and experiences with talking about sticks. You can reach me at [jshulman@alignor.com](mailto:jshulman@alignor.com).