



Negotiating Life:

*Practice Active Listening as a Way
to Manage Stress*

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This is the first in a monthly series of reflections from the front line of negotiations. The purpose of the reflections is to take a moment to synthesize experiences that are intense in the moment but from which important lessons can be drawn.

This month, I have been involved in a number of intense negotiations. The negotiations are high stakes for all of the people involved and there are a lot of people involved. Not surprisingly—given the high stakes and number of people involved—there are a lot of different opinions among team members about how to proceed. There can be a lot of frustration from time-to-time when certain perspectives are not embraced by others.

Now while this sort of situation may seem unremarkable to you, it has grabbed my attention for one reason: the higher the stakes and greater the stress on team members, the more likely that team members fall into old (and bad) habits. What do I mean by “old” or “bad” habits? They are the sorts of habits that do not move the team toward optimal results. We are talking about habits like allowing interpersonal conflict to interfere with team meetings, or taking extreme and unreasonable positions simply to avoid difficult decisions, or refusing to participate in discussions on the grounds that the situation is hopeless.

This is not the first time I have encountered these bad habits. They come and go, depending on the times, the organization, the people involved. But I have noticed a trend recently among numerous organizations. And that trend is that as people feel more and more stress—for whatever reason—they are more likely to fall into the bad habits.

Does this mean that we have to tolerate bad habits whenever stress arises? Not necessarily. Such a fatalistic approach can actually increase stress when we feel powerless to change our situation. So if we do not want to accept bad habits that seem to proliferate when stress increases, what can we do?

Here is the good news and the bad. First, the good news: the key to avoiding bad habits—particularly in times of stress—is practice. Now for the bad news: the time to practice is before, not during stressful experiences. Once you or other team members feel intense stress relating to an important negotiation or decision, you have precious little time to figure out the right solutions, much less take time for practice.

So what kind of practice are we talking about? We are talking about modeling the very behavior you need when the pressure is on. Let’s take a couple examples from the world of sports and entertainment. If you are a soccer player called upon to take a key penalty kick in a championship game, you do not want this to be the first time you are taking a penalty kick (i.e., when the pressure is on); you want to have practiced penalty kicks over and over again for years, so that when you step up to take a big penalty kick under pressure, it is second nature to you how to take a penalty kick. Similarly, if you have an eight-foot putt to win a game of golf, you want to have practiced your putting over and over under less pressure-packed conditions. Or if you are playing the piano in a concert setting, you had better have practiced your piece over and over.

Okay, if this all seems obvious, how does it relate to negotiations and key decisions that cause us stress? Great question. Here’s how.

The foremost bad habit most people fall into when they are under stress is they become obsessed with getting their own needs satisfied. Why is this a bad habit? Put another way, isn't stress often caused by our inability to get our needs met? Yes, it is.

But the bad habit is the more we focus on getting our own needs met in a key negotiation or decision, the more difficult it can become to persuade others to meet our needs! This may sound harsh. Let's see why it is the case.

First, the people you are dealing with often grow uncomfortable when you push too hard to get your own needs met. (Remember, the other people are concerned with getting their needs met, not necessarily with helping you meet your needs.) Second, when people sense you are overly focused on getting your needs met, they may interpret that as desperation on your part; this can encourage others to hold out on you and try to exploit your distress. Third, when people perceive you as overly focused on meeting your own needs, they may feel you are selfish and unwilling to meet their needs. Fourth, and perhaps most important, when you are overly focused on your own needs, you often miss opportunities to build a collaborative, problem-solving relationship with others that can hold the very key to incentivizing others to help you meet your needs.

Here is an example of what can happen when you focus too much on your own needs in times of stress. Let's say you are a sales professional and you are having a hard time making your numbers. Perhaps you need to close a deal immediately. So you push with your accounts. But your contacts sense your anxiety. They are not sure why you are unusually tense. Is it the overall economy? Is something wrong in your personal life? Is your company struggling? Do you have a new boss or new pressures? When others suspect something has changed for the worse, they can become cautious. At best, they will be reluctant to make a major new commitment to you when they are unsure why you are under stress; at worst, they may want to take advantage of your stress.

So how does practice help you avoid the bad habits that often come with stress? To start with, practice helps you be more aware of the danger of falling into the bad habits when stress arises. Remember, the core bad habit is focusing too much on your own needs when you have to persuade others to do something to help you satisfy your needs.

Okay, if you are aware of the bad habit, what specific practice can help you avoid it? Now we are talking! There is one simple skill you can practice: active listening. How do you practice active listening? Yes, you listen. But you listen for something specific. You listen to understand the interests, or needs, of the other person. That's what makes it active listening.

The idea of active listening sounds easy. In practice, it is not easy, especially when you are feeling stress, when you are focused on your own needs. Why is this so? Because the more you focus on your own needs in a conversation, the less you generally hear the other person's needs. A great way to overcome this challenge through practice is to write down what the other person's needs are either during or immediately after the conversation; this requires you to listen actively for those needs. You can accomplish much the same thing by confirming orally during the conversation your understanding of what the other person's needs are; this provides an immediate feedback loop both for you and for the other person.

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So how does practicing active listening help you manage stress? First, it helps you avoid the bad habit of focusing excessively on your own needs when you are under stress. Second, it leads you to engage in the sort of collaborative conversations and build the sort of problem-solving relationships that you can leverage when you are most under pressure to deliver specific results and satisfy your own needs. You can find new and innovative ways to satisfy the identified, confirmed needs of the other person so that the other person will cooperate with you to satisfy your needs.

The next time you feel stress mounting about an important negotiation or decision, take a moment to listen actively for the needs of others. Then you can explore options for satisfying those needs that will lead to your own needs being satisfied. And better yet, before you feel that stress mounting, take a moment to practice the skill of active listening so that it becomes part of your daily practice. You will then be able to draw upon that skill in a pinch to resolve difficult negotiations and decisions.

Contact me at jshulman@alignor.com to share your successes or to share ideas about how you can become the go-to person in your organization for overcoming challenges and solving problems.

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