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## Why Gen Z Needs to Learn How to Negotiate

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By Suzanne de Janasz

**The sooner you begin honing this lifelong skill, the better you'll become at handling conflict and the more successful you'll be in your life and career.**

- Young women and young men alike are negatively influenced by pervasive gender biases that hinder their ability to negotiate and resolve conflicts effectively.
- Once you learn how to negotiate, you will view disagreements not as pain points to be avoided but as problems to be solved, helping you achieve greater success.
- You can practice this essential skill by applying an iterative framework with four steps: *Choose, Prepare, Engage, and Reflect*.

In October of last year, I tried something new. After teaching negotiations to undergrads, graduate students, and executives for the last 25 years, I conducted a negotiations workshop for high school girls in McLean, Virginia. I offered this workshop because, as I wrote [in an article](#) last year, the societal bias against women who assert their agency is all-pervasive. If we want to have any hope of combating this bias, we must start training young women in negotiations as early as possible.

The workshop opened my eyes to the fact that, if anything, I had underestimated the depth of the problem. In perhaps the most vivid example, I asked the 100 or so girls who attended what they would do if they discovered they were being underpaid for a babysitting job. One participant responded that, just a few days before, she was not paid for babysitting—the hiring couple apparently simply forgot. “I’m afraid to ask them for the money because then they might not like me, and not call me again,” the girl said.

Her reticence would probably not be shared by a boy of the same age. However, I have discovered through my teaching that while young men may assert themselves more than young women, the outcomes can be similarly unfavorable, albeit for different reasons. Men are influenced by pervasive gender biases, such as the toxically masculine idea that the loudest and most aggressive voice prevails in disagreements. Therefore, while they might get what they want initially, they can damage valuable relationships in the process.

Given these realities, I’ve become increasingly convinced that all young people—especially, but not exclusively, young women—should learn negotiations as part of their transitions to adulthood. This has perhaps been always true, but it’s particularly true in our current era.

## Negotiation as a Life Skill

You might think you’ll need to use negotiation skills **only** in limited situations, such as when discussing your salary with an employer. But knowing how to negotiate **well** will help you achieve better outcomes in many other scenarios.

In [a 2021 article](#) in *Harvard Business Review*, I cite a range of examples, such as questioning “fixed” prices in department stores, divvying up housework with a spouse, and managing disputes between neighbors. In short, any time you can resolve a disagreement through a civil interaction with at least one other party with the power to make things right, you have an opportunity for negotiation.

**Think of negotiation not only as a tool for getting what you want, but also as an essential problem-solving skill.**

Extending that logic, you can think of negotiation not only as a tool for getting what you want, but also as an essential problem-solving skill. Whereas unaddressed unfairness tends to engender lingering resentments, proactive and rational negotiation can open up entirely new possibilities for personal and professional success. This important skill trains us to approach disagreements not as pain points to be avoided or worked around, but as problems to be solved.

I’ve seen my students at George Mason University School of Business in Fairfax, Virginia, use their negotiation skills to achieve very positive outcomes. For example, a senior in one of my negotiations classes wanted to delay his graduate degree to pursue a two-year unpaid internship, but he feared his parents would not provide the financial support he would need. By using the techniques he learned in class, he persuaded his parents to give him a monthly allowance that was just enough to place his preferred postgraduate path within reach.

## A Generation of Changemakers

If you are a member of Generation Z, you might be wondering why you should start learning how to negotiate now. First, this style of negotiating—of finding creative, civil ways to work out our differences—does not come naturally, especially considering the gender biases mentioned above. Retraining your negotiation instincts is akin to learning a new language. It’s best to start as young as possible.

Second, today’s high school students and undergraduates are more likely than previous generations to have been raised by highly involved “helicopter parents” who sought to remove any obstacles their children might encounter. This parenting style has its benefits, but it provides fewer opportunities for their children to learn how to resolve conflict productively.

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many people’s struggles with mental health, leading them to further avoid social interactions and conflict. For some, these circumstances have led to a feeling of disempowerment, a condition that

could be remedied through stronger negotiation skills.

Finally, the members of Gen Z are frequently described as changemakers. If millennials were the first truly “digital native” generation, Gen Zers were the first to have grown up with social media—that hotbed of instantaneous community activism. They have low tolerance for forms of unfairness and inequality that their elders were told to accept as given.

## Negotiation courses could help you convert your changemaking zeal into impactful conflict resolution skills that you can use to improve workplaces and society.

In one sense, as part of Gen Z, you might be ahead of older generations when it comes to negotiations. Social media has trained you to identify unfairness and root it out. This is true even though online discourse is geared more toward pithy responses and emojis than toward direct, honest dialogue between people with competing ideologies or interests.

If these descriptions resonate with you, negotiation courses could help you convert your changemaking zeal into impactful conflict resolution skills that you can use to improve workplaces and society.

### A Framework for Practicing Negotiation

Before attempting to change the world, you should consider starting small. I encourage you to begin your negotiations journey with “everyday encounters” that are by nature less fear-inducing. This might include calling wireless internet providers to negotiate better rates for services or asking roommates to set limits on when their romantic partners can visit. After some practice in lower-stakes situations, you’ll eventually feel more competent and less overwhelmed by major negotiations.

University life supplies four (or more) years’ worth of negotiation trial runs. Just think of every dispute with your roommate over who cleans the bathroom as a chance to hone your skills for negotiating the salary for your first full-time job.

Most negotiations courses teach a time-tested set of tips and techniques, which include having clear goals for the outcome, gathering pertinent data, and knowing your **BATNA** (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement). In my own courses, I also share with my students a framework they can use to become better negotiators. It is an iterative framework that they can apply to successive negotiations, similar to doing reps of an exercise at the gym.

The framework has four simple steps: *Choose*, *Prepare*, *Engage*, and *Reflect*.

**Choose.** Not every potential negotiation is worth it—even as a learning opportunity. You must measure the expected outcome of every potential negotiation against the effort, time, and stress involved. You should ask yourself, “Taking everything I know into consideration, how sure am I that I’m being unfairly disadvantaged in this situation?”

On a normal week, a roommate’s failure to clean the bathroom might call for a conversation. But if the roommate is having an exceptionally bad week, it might be better to postpone or forget about the issue altogether—and even pick up the mop yourself—for the sake of the friendship.

## Whether you “win” or “lose,” every negotiation is a victory if you learn something valuable from it.

**Prepare.** You should never let anyone pressure you into negotiating before you’re ready. Negotiators too often skip this step, and then regret it later. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with deflecting someone who’s intent on hashing out a problem right there and then by saying something such as, “I’m not free to have this conversation right now. How’s next Tuesday at 10 a.m.?” Proper preparation will help you back up your “ask” with hard facts.

Take, for example, the student mentioned above who wanted his parents to support him during his internship. Before approaching his parents, he researched the cost of expenses such as rent, food, and gasoline. He then presented his parents a detailed estimate of his likely expenditures over the two-year period.

If you are placed on the spot for a negotiation, you enter “flight or fight” mode, which is an immediate handicap. But if you take time to prepare, you can access greater capacity for logic, reasoning, and empathy—all key for successful negotiations.

**Engage.** If you’re well-prepared, you’ll be less likely to make a demand that can be easily shot down, leaving you with nothing. Because you’ll have a good sense of your options, you will be prepared to make minor concessions and counteroffers that will increase your chances of achieving a reasonable compromise. As an example, my student at first asked for enough money to rent an apartment to live by himself. Although his parents did not agree to that, they consented to pay for him to share an apartment with a roommate.

Also, as a fully engaged negotiator, you must ask questions and listen intently to learn more about the other party’s values, interests, and prior assumptions. This will help you not only frame a convincing argument, but also present proposals that benefit everyone involved.

**Reflect.** Whether you “win” or “lose,” every negotiation is a victory if you learn something valuable from it. To kick-start the learning process, you should ask yourself several questions after every negotiation: What went well, and why? What didn’t go so well, and why? What should I focus on next time?

Upon reflection, for example, my student realized that he had not done enough detailed research on the secondary costs of apartment living, such as parking and utilities. He also felt he could have made a stronger argument for the cost of leisure activities to be included in his allowance, since dating and spending time with friends can be essential for mental health.

## An Essential Tool for Life

Even after you learn these techniques, you should not expect to win every negotiation. Nor should you expect to become the ideal negotiator by the time you graduate college.

Using negotiations as a tool to solve problems—whether for yourself or for others—is a lifelong practice. That’s why the earlier you start, the more ahead of the game you’ll be.

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