

# Negotiation tip: Gain sympathy and gain the advantage

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Is sympathy considered a sign of weakness or is there a place for sympathy in negotiations?

Research by Laura Kray, a professor in the Haas Management of Organizations Group at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business, suggests that when one party conveys information with emotional reasons behind it, the other party is more likely to develop sympathy, be more willing to compromise, and find creative solutions.

"Sympathy is an emotion that corresponds with good will," says Prof. Kray. "In negotiations, it can translate into a willingness to problem solve in ways that might not otherwise occur."

Kray's research, "Is There a Place for Sympathy in Negotiation? Finding Strength in Weakness," is forthcoming in the journal, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. The paper is co-authored by Aiwa Shirako, Berkeley-Haas PhD 11, and People Analyst at Google, and Gavin Kilduff, Berkeley-Haas PhD 10, and an assistant professor at New York University's Stern School of Business.

The researchers also found that being transparent about one's misfortune is more effective when initiated by a "low power" negotiator or someone in the weaker position. Negotiators in the stronger position who tried to gain sympathy were seen as manipulative.

The study involved 106 MBA students (30% female) and the

negotiations took place as part of one of their classes. Participants were randomly assigned to negotiating teams to play out various scenarios.

One scenario involved a dispute between a general building contractor and a real estate developer over payment. The study focused on whether feeling sympathy helped the negotiations.

Before going on a trip, the developer told the contractor that quality counts. In an effort to improve workmanship, the contractor upgraded the type of wood used and the developer's assistant approved the change. However, the developer decided to sell the property and therefore didn't feel any upgrades were personally beneficial and didn't want to pay for the more expensive materials. The contractor also owed the developer money for a previous loan. The contractor explained that he could be forced into bankruptcy if the developer called the loan and he reminded the developer of his good intentions.

While the researchers did not measure the reasons behind the developer's response, the outcome suggests that the contractor's statements may have triggered sympathy. In the end, both parties were more poised to work out an amicable agreement to split the additional cost of the wood than they were prior to those pleas.

In another study, the Haas research team measured the use of sympathy-eliciting appeals and also compared the effectiveness of those appeals to rational arguments and to sharing information that benefits both parties. When the weaker party appealed to the stronger party, shared vulnerabilities, and proposed a solution that would also benefit the stronger party, the latter felt sympathy and was more motivated to help.

A person tasked with negotiating an outcome may not always want to appear weak but the study shows that sharing one's vulnerability in a genuine way can be beneficial.

Prof. Kray says the results are encouraging and give negotiators more tools to work out compassionate solutions.

"Our findings reveal an optimistic message. Even when people are in powerful positions, situations in which cold-hearted, rational actors might be expected to behave opportunistically, we are finding instead that their feelings of [sympathy](#) motivate them to help the disadvantaged," says Kray.

Laura Kray is the Warren E. and Carol Spieker Chair in Leadership at Berkeley-Haas.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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