

EPISODE 145

Negotiate the Role, Not Just the Price

You walk out of a meeting with exactly what you asked for — and realise you still cannot do the job. Ruth asked for an extra team and got the project with no people, no budget, and the same deadline. Michael Ovitz won a magnificent deal at Disney and lost the job in fourteen months. This episode borrows Chris Voss's listening moves — label, mirror, ask, summarise — so you negotiate the role you will live in, not just the price.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. The Yes That Makes the Work Harder

You walk out of a meeting with exactly what you asked for — and realise you still cannot do the job. Picture a director named Ruth. She asks for an extra team to carry a new project, and her boss says yes to the project, no to the people, no to the budget, and the deadline stays exactly where it was. Ruth got the yes. She also inherited the impossible. That is the trap: we celebrate winning the point, and we ignore what winning costs us.

2. Won the Deal, Lost the Job

After Disney's president, Frank Wells, died, the chairman, Michael Eisner, turned to his friend Michael Ovitz, the founder of the Hollywood talent agency CAA, to be his number two. Ovitz negotiated about twenty-four million dollars a year, the title of president, and an exit clause that would pay out if he were dismissed without cause. On paper, it was a magnificent deal. After fourteen months, Eisner dismissed him. Ovitz walked away with about thirty-eight million dollars in cash and roughly a hundred million dollars in stock options. The money was real. The job was already over. Ovitz thought like a dealmaker pricing a contract: maximise the price, protect the downside with an exit clause. He did not think like a leader negotiating a role: who decides what, whose support he needed, what president would mean to the people already there. In one telling of this story, Ovitz expected to share the leadership with Eisner, while Eisner, backed by the executives already around him, held full control. They negotiated the position brilliantly, and they never negotiated the role.

3. Tactical Empathy

Chris Voss was the FBI's lead international kidnapping negotiator, and his book, Never Split the Difference, is built from that work. But listen to the join, because it matters: in a hostage case, the negotiation ends when the door opens. In your world, the negotiation never really ends, because tomorrow morning you work with the same boss and the same peers again. Listening carries across. Voss calls his approach tactical empathy — understanding the feelings and mindset of another in the moment — and listening as a martial art. His line, as he confirms it in interview, is that listening is the cheapest and most effective concession you can make. What does not carry across is just as plain: threats do not transfer, trying to bend your boss's reality does not transfer, and treating the role, the scope, or the decision rights as a price to haggle does not transfer. Those are not numbers, and haggling

them costs you the relationship the role depends on.

4. Four Moves, All Ears

Four moves, and they all start with your ears. Label it: name what they are feeling before you argue against it — 'It sounds like the date is the thing that cannot move.' Say it, and then stop. A label is not agreement, and it is not sympathy. It is proof you heard the constraint before you proposed a trade. Mirror it: repeat the last three words, or the critical one to three words, of what someone has just said — 'tomorrow?' — then silence, at least four seconds, and they tell you why tomorrow matters, which is the information you actually needed. Use it once, on the load-bearing phrase. Ask: a calibrated question, beginning with How or What — never Why, because Why sounds like an accusation. 'How do you see us delivering this safely in that timeframe?' One calibrated question per hard moment, then a proposal. Summarise: their world back to them, from their point of view only, until you hear 'that is right.' Voss tells it this way: if you can get somebody to say that is right, you are an enormously talented negotiator. In your world, that is right does not close the deal. It opens the door to the real negotiation.

5. Two Levels Up

Ruth opens by naming the objection herself — Voss calls it an accusation audit: 'You are probably thinking I am asking for people we do not have, and that the date cannot move.' Then she labels it, mirrors it, asks her calibrated question, and closes on the role: 'If I take this, I own the staffing decisions, and you back me when the date slips.' She is not asking for more. She is asking for a job she can actually do. The same thinking holds for your own promotion — especially then. A promotion negotiation is not the title and the pay alone: ask which decisions come with the role, what resources come with those decisions, and whose agreement you will need. And when a number is finally on the table, do not split it down the middle. That is the title of Voss's book for a reason. A split leaves both sides unhappy, and the role, the scope, and the decision rights were never a price in the first place. And when they go quiet on you, ask a question that is easy to say no to: 'Have you given up on this project?' A no that reopens the conversation is worth more than a cornered yes that collapses later.

The picture: A director named Ruth asks for an extra team to carry a new project. Her boss says yes to the project, no to the people, no to the budget — and the deadline stays exactly where it was. Ruth got the yes. She also inherited the impossible.



SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 145 · WORKSHEET

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

☐ **Step one — label it.** Label what they are feeling, before you argue against it. Voss says labelling is a way of validating someone's emotion by acknowledging it. 'It sounds like the date is the thing that cannot move.' Say it, and then stop.

The feeling I will label before I argue:

☐ **Step two — mirror it.** Repeat the last three words, or the critical one to three words, of what someone has just said. Your boss says, and the steering group needs it tomorrow. You say, tomorrow? Then silence, at least four seconds, and they tell you why tomorrow matters. Use it once, on the load-bearing phrase — used on everything, it sounds like parroting.

The load-bearing phrase I will mirror:

☐ **Step three — ask.** Ask a calibrated question instead of refusing. Calibrated questions begin with How, or What. Never Why, because Why sounds like an accusation. 'How do you see us delivering this safely in that timeframe?' You are not arguing about the date. You are handing the problem back and asking them to solve it with you. One calibrated question per hard moment, then a proposal.

My calibrated question for the hard moment:

☐ **Step four — summarise until you hear that is right.** Summarise their world back to them, from their point of view only, until you hear that is right. Take the case where kidnappers were demanding ten million dollars, and a summary of their world, told strictly from their point of view, made the demand go away. That is right does not close the deal. It opens the door to the real negotiation.

Their world, in their words — my summary:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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