

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Negotiating skills are learned early

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The old debate about whether good negotiators are born or made is one that can be easily settled.

Negotiation skills are learned, usually by trial and error or by example. We start negotiating as babies. My newborn son was a “blank slate” whose sole negotiation tactic was The Cry. And very effective it was too, but crying loses its leverage after a while. My little tabula rasa experimented until discovering that a winning smile can be traded for almost anything a baby desires. But as those desires expand, the smile will also lose effectiveness, so he must keep learning more sophisticated negotiation methods for ever-changing contexts.

It’s not surprising people assume deal-making cannot be taught. Most of us negotiate in precisely the same manner throughout our professional lives, rarely adopting a new style or new strategies. Around us we see people who have learned a negotiation technique at some point, deemed it sufficient, and have denied themselves opportunities to continue to improve their skills. When it’s assumed that the ability to negotiate is inherent, the suggestion that you need to change your style can be seen as an accusation that there is something wrong with your core self. The opportunity cost of this approach is high, but we don’t track what we cannot identify, so we will never know that cost.

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People may find particular methods naturally easier to learn, but this does not mean they are natural negotiators in every context. One style does not fit all. My clients start out being good at some types of negotiation and not others. The tough bargainer who enjoys

confrontation was naturally adept when in a position of power, but had great difficulty closing long-term deals when customers had alternative options and could walk away from his pressure tactics. Meanwhile, the empathetic client able to steer complex deals to long-term, win-win outcomes balked at the push-and-shove of buying a car.

An average professional engages in many different types of negotiations every day, and is constantly making deals, whether these are traditional deals on supplier price, salary or contract terms; or less acknowledged deals such as defining the scope of a role within a project, setting a deadline, securing assistance from a colleague, or even merging into traffic in the commute home. In all these negotiations, researchers find no significant influence of personality on the negotiation outcomes. It is the skills you deploy, not the coincidence of your genetics, that determine the deals you make.

And negotiation skills can be taught. There is an entire field of research investigating which skills work best. Self-awareness, planning and strategic communication have been found to be the central skills required for negotiation success. These skills can be learned, with life-changing results.

But not all teaching methods were created equal. Listening to a lecture or reading a book on negotiation strategies probably will not make a lasting impact. We have known since 1885, when Hermann Ebbinghaus studied information retention and plotted the “forgetting curve”, that learning without repetition is not effective. A better way to master negotiation skills is through experiential learning methods: learn and practise new techniques, then follow the practical experience with guided reflection and feedback to target ongoing improvement.

We are not born with negotiation skills; we acquire them incrementally until we decide we have learnt enough. Deal-making suffers when negotiators approach it ill-equipped. It is a science and an art: there are evidence-based methods of negotiation, and there are also elements of creativity and style that come with expertise and reflection. Skill development opportunities are available to those who seek them. My baby will not continue to rely on a mere smile to get him by in life, and nor should you settle for skills that were sufficient in the past.

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