

# HOW THE POWER OF OUR SUBCONSCIOUS MIND CAN GIVE US GREAT ADVANTAGE IN A NEGOTIATION



An Insight Whitepaper

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## HOW THE POWER OF OUR SUBCONSCIOUS MIND CAN GIVE US GREAT ADVANTAGE IN A NEGOTIATION

March 2019

Negotiation

Jonathan O'Brien explores how our subconscious can be our greatest ally in a negotiation but can also be our worst foe if we don't learn to tap into it in the right way. He examines ways to project great power in a negotiation and use our subconscious mind to help us do so.

Thomas Edison insisted that it was the "ninety-nine percent perspiration" that made genius possible, and the notion that making things happen lies in the hard work we do seems to apply to many things in life. However, negotiation is one activity where there is more to it than perspiration alone. It is true that hard work prior to, and even during, a negotiation is a vital component. Doing our homework, thorough pre-planning and going into a negotiation with full understanding of our position (and as much of the position of the other side as possible) is a key success factor. Good and thorough negotiation planning is simply hard work if we want to have any chance of securing a good outcome. Indeed, I've written many articles where I talk about the different sources of power we must consider; however, here I am going to focus on a different type of power.

The 5x5 power model summarizes the different types of power that bring success in a negotiation (see Figure 1). First is our tangible power and the five areas where we need to consider and truly assess our position relative to our opponent. Once we know this, we can use the power of alternatives to create advantage. Here there is lots of homework and fact finding to do in order to prepare well - plenty of perspiration there! However, our intangible power is an equally substantial component to any negotiation, and this can easily get overlooked in our quest to plan, prepare and manage our negotiation strategy.

Arguably, the five sources of intangible power represent the most important dimension to any negotiation because together they shape how we come across to

our opponent and what happens at a subconscious level in their minds when we engage with them. It is also what happens at a subconscious level in our minds as we interact with them and how we can tap into and begin to use or counter this power through awareness of self and what others do.

### 5X5 NEGOTIATION POWER SOURCES MODEL

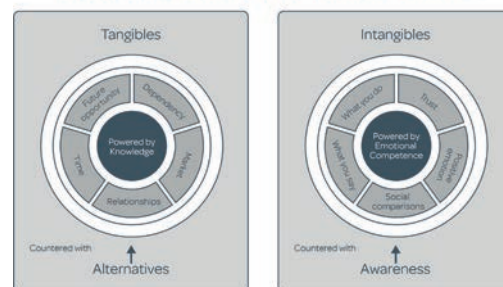


Figure 1: The 5x5 negotiation power sources model

### TAPPING INTO THE SUBCONSCIOUS DIMENSION OF NEGOTIATION

The subconscious dimension of negotiation that lies behind intangible power is not necessarily obvious, and many don't even realize or pay attention to its existence. However, it can trigger behaviours and responses without conscious thought.

Have you ever met someone who makes you feel instantly at ease, whom you are happy to trust from the get go? Have you ever wondered why? Moreover, have you ever met a sales person who has these attributes and managed to make you feel good about buying from them? Have you walked away, not feeling sold to, but rather, the interaction had been great and you had chosen and spent well? Have you stopped to think why? The 'instant like' phenomena seems to be something that some people just have, and we tend to rationalize this by believing someone we meet is simply highly likeable.

People in sales are recruited based upon having this magic thing, and whilst this ‘instant like’ does come naturally to some, it is in fact a series of things that happen at a subconscious level to make us decide if we like and might trust the other person. These are things we can be in control of if we are aware of them and they are things that sales people receive training in how to do if they don’t naturally have it. When we meet someone who has had this training, it could be that we are on the receiving end of a series of things they are doing that are, in effect, programming us to come to trust them, like them and want to buy from them. In a negotiation, no matter whether we are buyer, seller or otherwise, the side that knows how to use the power of the subconscious to their advantage will increase their chances of making a deal that better achieves their outcomes in a negotiation. The entire negotiation can be won or lost depending upon how aware we are of what our opponent might be doing. Moreover, if we can have the know how to do these same things with our opponent, we can utilize this intangible power advantage ourselves.

## HOW OUR BRAINS CONSTANTLY WORK TO PROTECT US

Behind the scenes, our subconscious brains are constantly looking after our interests and protecting us. Our subconscious mind can be our greatest ally in a negotiation; it can also be our worst enemy if we don’t know how to tap into its potential. How we act, behave, perform, what we say and how we say it are all influenced directly by how we interpret the situation we find ourselves in and how we represent the situation in our minds.

We are exposed to billions of pieces of information each day, and we have evolved to prevent overload by filtering out information that is not relevant to us. Our subconscious mind takes control of that and decides what we need to know about, using millions of years of evolution to guide it. I can sleep through most things, including a long, loud and powerful thunderstorm, yet the tiny sound of an unexpected stair creak and I am awake and instantly alert. A primitive part of my brain looking out for me.

**“We are exposed to billions of pieces of information each day, and we have evolved to prevent overload by filtering out information that is not relevant to us”**

Perhaps you’ve experienced a situation like the one I faced recently, in which I set out to find a first car for my daughter who was learning to drive. Following some careful research around what might or might not be suitable for a new driver, especially considering insurance and running costs, I settled on one car type. Prior to that point, I had held little interest in this particular car and was familiar with it, but had not paid much attention to this model on the roads. From the point where I was considering buying the model it seemed that the roads were suddenly flooded with this car. They were everywhere in all sorts of colours and configurations. This was my filter in action. No one suddenly turned on the car tap, but rather, my filter was deciding when my eyes fell upon this model; this information was now relevant to me and I should pay attention. Our mind’s filter determines how we interpret and represent the situation in our mind, and here is where we need some awareness of how the filter operates in order to put our subconscious mind to work in a negotiation. Left to its own devices, our filter will happily keep doing its thing. However, the problem is sometimes it can do this too well and cause us to miss things that could help us. This happens in three ways:

- **Deletions** – We remove information not essential for survival or relevant to achieving our ambitions or the task at hand. This is why we don’t typically remember much about an uneventful journey to work or college.
- **Distortions** – We change or interpret information based upon our own experiences in order to make sense of it. If someone tells us about an experience they had we will, relate it to theirs if we have had a similar experience. We can easily assume their experience to be just like ours.
- **Generalizations** – We will interpret the information based upon apparent rules or established views or meanings that we apply to things. We all know what an elephant looks like, but ask a group of people to close their eyes and picture an elephant. Ask each to describe their elephant and the chances are, each person will have seen their elephant in a unique way.

If we are aware of how our brain’s filter determines how we see the world, we can begin to manage it and this is the first step to tapping into our subconscious to develop our power in a negotiation. It is easy to miss or delete vital information given by their body language or what they say and equally easy to distort or generalize by not taking the time to precisely determine what they might be saying about their position. When someone reports a crime to the police, the police will invariably use a series of clarifying questions to get to the precise facts.

## BUILDING RAPPORT AND MAKING THEM TRUST YOU

Rapport building is one of the most powerful things we can do in a negotiation, a sales pitch or any situation in life where we want to secure as much of our outcome as we can. Once again, this is where we find the subconscious at work. Rapport building is about being intensely interested in the other party and becoming 'just like them.' Whilst this may seem odd, it is the most effective way to win people over to our cause. If we want someone to do something for us or concede to our position in a negotiation, the first step is to get them to trust us. Who do you trust the most? The answer is simply yourself. Therefore, when we meet someone who appears 'just like us' we will, without realizing it, tend to trust that person.

Sales people are taught how to make this happen and it can also be found in stage performers. The performer Darren Brown puts rapport building at the centre of his performance and uses his skills to take a person the point where they will do anything he wants. This is not some strange magic but simply about matching or pacing ourselves with the other person – gently mirroring their body language, their tone of voice, how they speak and the language patterns they use. Doing this begins to make us 'just like them' so they see themselves in us without knowing it. It is about appearing interested in them and connecting with them and their situation. People who do this well slip all sorts of subconscious connections into the flow of discussions. Perhaps you've experienced a presentation in which someone says something like "perhaps you're sitting there, wondering where this is going." A simple enough and seemingly meaningless statement, yet one that connects directly and subconsciously to anyone who is sitting and wondering. Another connection, another bit of rapport building at work.

### **"Building rapport enables us to connect directly with our opponent's subconscious"**

It is also about connecting with the way they represent their world in their minds and recall memories and information. The majority of people do this visually by pictures in the mind. However, for some, this is more auditory, where the mind represents things by words and sounds, and for others, it is based around how things feel. We can build rapport by connecting directly with their representation system. If they use visual language such as "how does that look to you" or "I'm getting the picture" then this suggests they see the world in visual terms. If we make our language respond with similar visual predicates such as "let's see if we can

find a way to make this work" we are, without them realizing, talking straight to their subconscious, once again telling them we are just like them.

I cannot do justice to this topic in this limited space and there is much more to this. Skilled negotiators are taught how to build rapport and do all these things and more. Building rapport enables us to connect directly with our opponent's subconscious. It puts them at ease with us and will make them feel we understand them. It creates a connection and makes them like us and therefore builds trust through our interactions. This trust is built further still if we demonstrate consistency in all our engagements and interactions with them. If we can establish trust, we claim power in the negotiation.

## BEING THE 'ONE UP'

In days gone by, timber or lumber planks would be cut from newly felled trees by a hard-working team of two labourers. Equipped with huge saw, the tree would be placed across the top of a large pit and one labourer would take one end of the saw and saw the tree from above. The other would be on the other end of the saw in the pit, underneath the log. Together the team would 'push-pull' the saw the entire length of the tree to cut planks. Being the 'one up' was the better job, and the labourer taking this role would be superior to the 'one down' who had to saw from beneath the log, get showered by sawdust and manoeuvre the saw in the confines of the pit.

We can find this 'one up' dynamic in many social situations and relationships where there is no given hierarchy. There is always a 'one up' and 'one down', a pecking order that typically establishes itself without any discussion or agreement between parties and usually without conscious thought. This happens in negotiation and other business meetings and interactions, and if we can be the 'one up', we can claim another source of intangible power. So what is happening here? Once again, we find our subconscious at work. Whenever we meet or engage with someone, enter a social situation, a business meeting or indeed a negotiation, we will, without realizing it, compare ourselves to the others and make a rapid determination of our position relative to theirs. We will decide who is the 'one up' and either assume our role accordingly or try to claim our place as the 'one up.' This hierarchy is usually established early on. It can switch, but rarely does. Once the 'one up' is accepted, that individual holds an unsaid given authority and will have a greater likelihood of securing more in their favour.

How this happens is complex; 'oneupness' can be established by tone and pace of voice, choice of language, posture, body language, how someone enters the room or even how they exude confidence. Many of these things are evolutionary and we will, if we are unaware, allow our subconscious mind to make a

determination of our position in the unsaid hierarchy based upon some primeval sign of strength or wisdom. We can learn from those who seem to naturally command a room or social situation and emulate what they do to give us more power.

'Oneupness' is also established by appearance. Despite what many might think, the phrase 'dress to impress' really carries some weight. Part of the social comparisons we make are given by how we look, and first impressions are particularly powerful. Turn up well dressed and groomed and you will already be claiming 'one up' territory in the minds of the others. Turn up looking 'average' and an opportunity has been missed. Worse, if they arrive smart, you may well find yourself feeling slightly off the mark, which will compromise your confidence and performance. The importance of this changes with culture. If you want to succeed in a negotiation in Italy, a designer outfit is a must. In France, the accessories you sport make big statements and so on.

In a negotiation, we must be alert to the social comparisons dynamic. If we wind up believing we are 'one down', we will fail to negotiate as well as we could because our subconscious minds will hamper our efforts and will naturally yield to the other without realizing it. There is no precise guidance to becoming the one-up. It is all the things we do that give us self-confidence and create the inner belief in us and our opponent that we are the 'one up' in the room. To get good at this, pay attention to how you feel with others in social or business situations. Take note of those we defer to, what they do that makes us feel this way and what exactly they do that gives us the sense they are somehow 'one up.' Once you know this, figure out what you need to do to become the 'one up'. We can also help build our confidence in the days leading up to the negotiation by taking time to picture ourselves in the negotiation being confident, in control, 'one up' and commanding the room. This imagination technique helps program our subconscious to do just what we are picturing and is a very powerful technique that I have used for many years.

## EVERY BODY'S TALKING

Body language is possibly the single most important element of a negotiation. When I train people, I get to watch many negotiations and it is body language that gives away a negotiator's position more than anything else. A shift in the seat at the wrong time, a touch to the face just as the key bluff is being given or even a change in eye movement can give away our position. Using body language to our advantage in a negotiation is not about interpreting the stereotype meanings people give to certain actions. If our opponent folds their arms, it doesn't necessarily mean they are being closed. Perhaps they are cold or making themselves more

comfortable. Instead, being good at body language is about looking at how things change.

We are all experts in reading body language. However, we may not realize this and we may have, without knowing it, allowed our filters to delete the little things we witness as being irrelevant to us. However, if we watch others closely, we will see all sorts of things that give us vital information.

Having power in a negotiation comes from being able to read their body language and manage ours. Once we know what it is all about, managing ourselves becomes straight forward, as we are aware of what to do and not do. Reading body language is about watching for the cues or things that people do, but crucially, it is about looking for clusters of body language actions (rather than isolated actions) and watching for when things change. When things are normal, we will have our own patterns of eye movement when recalling information, and we will move and act in a particular way. Body language changes when things deviate from the normal, and once again, we find our subconscious at work trying to protect us from something it believes is bad or might hurt us. It is almost impossible to completely hide body language and suppress the interventions of our subconscious. It is for this reason that even the most seasoned of professional poker players will still choose to hide behind a hat and dark glasses and sit very still when being dealt a hand.

## "Having power in a negotiation comes from being able to read their body language and manage ours"

If we are trying to bluff a position and effectively tell a lie, our subconscious mind might want to stop this happening to protect us from something it believes might be bad. Our eyes might move to a different place to apparently recall the information and we might move slightly differently. Smart negotiators will, if they can, calibrate their opponent ahead of the real negotiation, perhaps with small talk questions about personal matters, in order to watch normal eye movement responses when the opponent is recalling or giving information. A lie might also be accompanied with a movement of a limb, perhaps a scratch of the nose or a touch of the face, as if the subconscious is trying to physically use the arm stop the words leaving our mouth.

Body language shifts can also reveal when people have moved from a comfortable situation to one of discomfort, and this can be vital intelligence and a key sign that they have edged close to or even beyond their least desirable outcome position. When people are

feeling discomfort they can, without realizing, do things to comfort or pacify themselves. Perhaps rubbing their forehead or eyes and closing them for a few moments, temporarily blocking out what is causing the discomfort. Perhaps an exhale, or rub of the legs and so on. All of these can be vital signs of what is going on with them.

Power in negotiation comes by understanding body language, watching for cues, clusters and changes and by actively managing our body language.

## IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY...

Our subconscious minds have a lot of input in what we say and how we say it, often without us being aware. Remember, our subconscious brain is constantly looking out for us, and if it thinks we are about to say something that conflicts with what we know, we may find ourselves giving our true position away. Police, security services, interrogators and expert negotiators are trained to listen to what is said behind and between the words that are spoken and how they are said. Tell-tale signs of what the other person is truly thinking or feeling can be heard in the way something is stated. Someone who is a bit nervous might talk faster than they did when we spoke with them previously in a relaxed setting; are they hiding something, just a bit intimidated by this situation or have they accepted us as the 'one up'?

Once again, our brain's filters may have stopped us being aware, but if we listen carefully when people are relaying key bits of information to us, we can often hear much more in how they say it and what they are saying. We all have the ability to tune into this. Listen to tone, pitch, speed and inflection and ask what this might suggest. Once again, we are listening for changes in how someone speaks. By paying attention to such things, it is possible to tune into what seems less convincing.

Then, we have what is actually said, and our subconscious brains are very good at inadvertently giving away the true feelings we might be trying to hide by adding in words or embellishing the words we say as an attempt to overcompensate – as if trying to protect us from doing something it thinks might hurt us. We can see this in display all around us. When a small child emerges from somewhere looking guilty and they are asked what they were doing, the reply might either be "nothing", which itself suggests something, or "I was just looking for the toy I lost." Here the brain has decided to add the word 'just' to take focus away or deemphasize the lie the child was about to tell. Perhaps you heard someone say something like "to be honest, I've never done things like that." The addition of "to be honest..." at the start might, but not necessarily, be an embellishment from the subconscious to deemphasize a lie. We are all experts at this stuff already, but we just need to tell our brains to be alert for these things and to not filter them out for us.

## "Listen to tone, pitch, speed and inflection and ask what this might suggest"

We need to start taking note of what others say and how they say it, as well as building awareness of what we ourselves do, so we can better master our own speech. If we can do this in everyday life, then we can do this in a negotiation and this will give us power.

## THE POWER OF BEING POSITIVE

The final way we can build intangible power is by displaying positive emotion; maintaining a positive outlook can give us more power than we might realize. If we exude enthusiasm and project a warm, excited and happy persona towards our opponent, it will be difficult for them to not like us. The power of a smile to the other cements a favoured position even more. Displays of positive emotion provide subconscious signals to the other of being trustworthy and cooperative, and will elicit a positive emotional response in the other party, putting them at ease. When you smile at someone, it is really hard for them to not smile back. And when they do, a little subconscious connection gets formed. This is something that works in a negotiation and throughout daily life and helps build likeability.

## PROJECT YOURSELF - PUT THOSE INTANGIBLES TO WORK

In my experience, there are not too many skilled, well-informed and well-prepared opponents out there, and what is lacking is often covered up by overconfidence, some good tactics and a polished routine. If we have little or no power and we are up against an opponent who is more 'front than fact', then with awareness of what they are doing, and if we can project the right power when we are up against them, we have a good chance of getting what we want. Don't underestimate the power of possibilities when using the five intangible power sources. It is often how negotiators get what they want, and we wouldn't even know it is being used on us unless we master doing these very things ourselves.

Intangible power also works by changing how our opponent feels, by creating perceptions and shaping or guiding their actions by connecting directly with their subconscious. The ability to use intangible power in a negotiation comes with the emotional competence of the negotiator. By learning to be aware of ourselves and how we behave, we are able to change our behaviour according to how the other is acting or the negotiation we are in.

Therefore, to build on the classic Edison quote, negotiation is a bit different and might be regarded as 30% preparation, 30% perspiration, 30% presentation of ourselves to connect with them on a subconscious level and awareness of how they might try to do this with us. Of course, the remaining 10% is the repertoire of tactics and techniques we might apply to help secure the right outcome.

Jonathan O'Brien, CEO of Positive Purchasing Ltd, is a leading expert on negotiation and works with global blue-chip organizations to help transform their negotiation and procurement capability. He also helped pioneer the Red Sheet® negotiation methodology.

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