



Saving face: Lessons from Google's tiff with China

The secret is to allow one's opponents to make concessions gracefully, without having to admit that they made a mistake or backed down



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People who are involved in a conflict and secretly know that they are wrong will often not admit that they are wrong because they don't want to admit that they made a mistake. They, therefore continue the conflict just to avoid the embarrassment of looking bad.

To avoid this problem, it is important to allow one's opponents to make concessions gracefully, without having to admit that they made a mistake or back down. Often a simple change in wording or an exchange of concessions will help negotiators maintain a positive image, even when they are actually giving-in very substantially.

Consider the recent truce negotiated between China and Google over the renewal of the license to run its search engine in China. China clearly didn't want a big fight with the well-known high tech company before its formal visit to Washington. Google wanted the license renewed so it quietly stopped forwarding Chinese Web surfers its uncensored search engine in Hong Kong. Chinese Web surfers can still get uncensored information but they have to specifically click on the Hong Kong link to have access. Both sides were able to let each other save face to avoid further conflict and bad press.

In the context of negotiating litigated cases, the three things that most people need to preserve in order to give something tangible up are their dignity, self-respect and good reputation. When any of those are challenged in a negotiation, it will be impossible for your opponent to eventually reveal what they are willing to do to come to an agreement. That means that the concessions you are expecting will be buried six feet below the surface until such time as your opponent is able to see him- or herself in a better light.

The problem is that most negotiators are so concerned with maintaining their own sense of face-saving, that they forget about assisting their counterparts to protect their own image. Here are some basic steps that should be considered as a means of helping your opponent save face and fully engage in a negotiation:

Steps for saving face

- Understand what the other party values about themselves through their words and actions during the negotiation. This will break down their resistance and lay the groundwork for mutual trust. By indicating that you respect the other side's goals, you put their mind at ease and enable talks to progress.
- Offer a way out with dignity – it is common for negotiators to take a hard line that results in backing themselves into a corner and an inevitable impasse in the negotiation. To move forward, you've got to allow the other side to build a simple bridge to walk over so that they can get out of the mess they put themselves in.
- Consider their good reasons for their actions. Part of their underlying agenda for bargaining involves logical reasons that have been imbedded with superiors.
- Present several options by communicating respect for your adversary's position.
- Ignore gaffes – if someone makes a potentially humiliating mistake, simply ignore it or deal with it in private. Don't throw it back in their face.

In sum, next time someone is driving you crazy in a negotiation, think of Google and China, and remember that allowing them to quietly save a little face will open new doors for settlement.

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