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Got Pepper Spray?

A recent report by the University of California concluded that campus police and administrators should use mediation instead of confrontation when dealing with most student protests, but pepper spray might remain a necessary tool of last resort. While combining “mediation and pepper spray” as compatible negotiation tools may seem extreme, punishing bad negotiation behavior operates as a form of “pepper spray” to encourage good negotiation behavior from your counterpart.

Successful negotiations result from a series of reciprocal concessions. Extreme demands, offers, or tactics can be seen as “bad behavior,” while concessions are viewed as “cooperating.” It’s human nature. If I give you a “gift” in the nature of a reasonable concession, I expect you to reciprocate with the gift of a reasonable move in response.

Start by giving your counterpart the benefit of the doubt. If his first move (demand or offer) is reasonable, present a reasonable offer in response. Continue to “cooperate” by making reasonable concessions as long as your counterpart does. However, the moment your opponent makes an “unreasonable” move, use the “pepper spray” by responding in kind. Don’t add extra punishment. Overdoing the punishment risks escalation, and can lead to a prolonged series of posturing moves. When they eventually respond with a cooperative move, reward them with a reasonable move of your own.

When the other side makes an outrageous proposal, it may be tempting to make a scene or threaten to walk away unless they will change their number. Avoid the urge to shut down. Studies show that the “pepper spray” approach typically yields the best results. Using this strategy, your opponent can do no better than to simply cooperate.