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High Anxiety

Chris Voss, former lead international kidnapping negotiator for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, spent his career navigating high-pressure life-or-death hostage negotiations. Voss recently summarized his 24 years of Bureau experience to a few key points to get the maximum benefit in negotiations:

Patience: The most important concept Voss learned in his career as an FBI hostage negotiator is that patience can be a weapon. If you slow down just a little bit, it gives you an enormous advantage. Let things come to you. Prompt the other side in a way so that they will come to you. But let them come to you.

Collaboration: Successful negotiators understand that it has to be a collaborative process, even when the person you're negotiating with might not see it as a collaborative process. Look for ways to work with other people so that both parties benefit, instead of trying to punish a counterpart or adversary. Take a long term view of success.

Planning: Successful negotiators get their game plan down and then they stick to it. They are not rattled by changes or unexpected surprises. Voss believes that surprises are only unexpected if you are afraid of them. If you welcome surprises, they usually bring opportunities.

Really Listen: Voss believes that the best way to start a negotiation is with a good opening question, such as: "What is the biggest challenge you face?" Then actually listen to the answer. A lot of people are used to being asked questions and not having their answers listened to. They're going to know right away whether or not you're the kind of person who asks a question and then doesn't listen to an answer. If you turn them off, it gives them permission to turn you off. Starting with a good question and really listening creates an environment that lets the other side know you're actually going to listen to what they have to say.

According to Voss, success comes from patience, proper planning, and a genuine desire to listen. These tips worked for a man whose negotiation skills determined whether people lived or died. They can also work in your negotiations.