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Save Face, Save The Deal

“Indirect confrontation” may be a useful way of helping a counterpart save face, according to Professor Jeanne Brett (Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management). You may deal with an opponent whose pride has been wounded, or is in jeopardy, such as a CEO whose company has made an embarrassing mistake. In such cases, it will be worth your while to help that party save face during the negotiation. Rather than hitting them between the eyes with specific claims or demands that could be deemed offensive, indirect confrontation allows your counterpart to infer what the problem is and how they should respond.

Brett relates this true story: Bicycles manufactured by a Chinese company rattled. The American middleman sourcing the bikes could have confronted the factory manager by pointing out the rattles, telling him it was unacceptable and directing him to fix it. Instead, the middleman *generally told the manager about his German buyer’s expectation of quality*. This allowed the manager to decide for himself how to meet those quality standards (and fix an embarrassing mistake). In this way he saved face for the factory manager, indicating that he respected the manager’s expertise and relied on his integrity to make the repairs.

Brett’s research suggests that conflicts negotiated indirectly are more likely to reach agreement than conflicts confronted directly. By asking a question, telling a story, or sharing an experience, you can engage your counterpart in helping you find a solution while reducing the odds that he will lose face.

Giving face in negotiation may cue reciprocity, leading to problem solving and agreement. Face attacks in negotiations, such as claims, threats, and other aggressive verbal strategies, may generate retaliation, counterthreats, deception, and impasse.