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Say It Like Clint

Detective Harry Callahan, portrayed by Clint Eastwood on the big screen as “Dirty Harry,” always kept his cool when making threats to the bad guys. We all remember “Go ahead, make my day” as his classic threat to punish bad behavior. His matter-of-fact, unemotional delivery conveyed that he was serious. We can learn from Dirty Harry when it comes to dealing with our emotions in a negotiation.

Expressing anger can be an effective tool to help you claim value in negotiation because it carries the implicit threat that you will walk away from the table. For example, if you shout “I’m not making another move until you start to get serious” to a counterpart, you are conveying anger and the threat that an impasse is likely to occur. Marwan Sinaceur of INSEAD and his colleagues conducted tests to learn which aspect of an angry outburst triggered concessions. Was it the negative emotion or the threat itself (implicit or explicit)?

In one experiment, participants conceded more to angry negotiators than to unemotional ones. In other experiments, half of the participants faced angry statements with implicit threats, such as “This negotiation really makes me angry. I’m fed up with this.” The other half faced unemotional threats from their counterpart, such as “If you don’t seriously modify your offer, there will be consequences.” The participants gave up more ground to the unemotional, threatening counterparts than to those who simply expressed anger and did not overtly threaten. By appearing confident and poised, unemotional negotiators were perceived as being serious about their threats. By contrast, an angry negotiator may be perceived as not in control, not so likely to follow through on his or her words, or not having seriously thought about possible consequences.

So, table pounders take note. Calmly issuing a threat appears to be more effective than getting angry. But be careful. Threats can cause people to dig in their heels or plot revenge. Yet, threats can also break impasse, push back against bullies and motivate parties to honor the terms of an agreement.

Before making a threat, ask yourself the quintessential Dirty Harry question: “Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya?”