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Selective Hearing

“Take it or leave it” offers are in the Top 10 list of hardball negotiation tactics. Ultimatums like “Take it or leave it,” “We will never . . . ,” or “You must . . . ,” are absolute statements that leave no room for negotiation. So how do you respond to this roadblock when you don’t want to accept the offer, but are not ready to walk away? Harvard Business School Professor Deepak Malhotra’s recent book, “Negotiating the Impossible,” offers advice on how to handle tactics such as ultimatums.

Professor Malhotra offers this simple advice: Ignore the ultimatum. Don’t ask the person to repeat what he said or clarify what he meant. Instead, pretend he never said it and move on to other issues. **Why ignore it?** Professor Malhotra explains that if you ignore an ultimatum, it will be easier for your counterpart to back down later because you have not engaged with or legitimized the ultimatum. Ignoring the ultimatum downplays its seriousness, and allows your counterpart to change her mind without losing face.

What if you can’t move forward without acknowledging the ultimatum? Professor Malhotra suggests another option: Reframe the statement as a nonultimatum before continuing with the conversation. For example, if someone says, “I will never do this,” you might respond: “I can understand, given where we are today, that this would be very difficult for you to do.” This gives the person two ways out. First, you’ve pointed out that acquiescing would be “very difficult” but not impossible. Second, you’ve situated the negotiator’s reluctance as “given where we are today” but perhaps not forever.

What if the other party’s ultimatum demands really are nonnegotiable? Professor Malhotra believes that opening by ignoring or reframing the ultimatum still remains a sound approach. If it is a real ultimatum, the negotiator will repeat it over and over again in countless ways in future conversations. At the appropriate time, based on your evaluation of the situation, you can decide to take it seriously.

Professor Malhotra notes that many “ultimatums” are not true deal breakers. Sometimes people are simply feeling emotional, are trying to assert control, or are using strong language in an attempt to gain a tactical advantage. In such cases, if you have ignored or reframed their statements, you may have done both sides a favor.