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Tough Questions

Think back to a question in a negotiation that surprised you. Tough questions can be “What is the least you will take?” (in this bad market), “What other offers do you have?” (when you have none), or “This is my final offer. Take it or leave it. What’ll it be?” (with a short fuse to accept). These questions are manipulative tactics, not innocent queries, to reveal information that may weaken your position. Harvard Business School professor James K. Sebenius offers the following suggestions to help avoid this trap:

Identify your hardest question(s): In preparing for negotiation, identify the questions that may be the most difficult to answer, whether for tactical, emotional, or ethical reasons. List the questions and prepare your answers. Anticipating these questions will help you avoid an awkward response.

Acknowledge and Reframe: When asked to reveal whether you have other offers (when they know that you don’t and want you to admit it), you might respond with “I’m pursuing other possibilities, as I’m sure you are. The question is, how well do your interests fit with my goals? I see genuine potential. Let’s explore it further.”

Turn the tables: When asked, “Tell me the absolute maximum you’d be willing to pay, and I’ll see if I can shave off a bit,” you might respond with “Well, why don’t you tell me the absolute minimum you’d be willing to accept, and I’ll see if I can throw in a little something.” The “tit for tat” response forces your counterpart to shrug it off and change tactics.

Seek objective standards: When asked to disclose your bottom line, shift the focus from what you will or won’t accept to “objective standards” beyond your control: “It’s important to me that the sale price be comparable to those of similar properties in this area. I don’t expect to be paid less, or more, than is appropriate. Here’s some objective data on comparables. Let’s figure out what’s fair.”

Preparing to face the hardest question may alert you to additional data you need, back up plans, and tactics you might use. Above all, preparing for the hardest question takes away the power to trap you.