

Do the tips and advice in other items in this series mean that one should never use hardball tactics? Not necessarily. Dr. Kathleen O'Connor, a psychologist who teaches negotiation at Cornell University, has stated that "Seasoned negotiators know that certain negotiations require some toughness...."

Imagine a situation similar to 9/11, where a national emergency has grounded all air traffic. Suppose you are on a business trip, a thousand miles from home. You can't fly home, you find that all available train and bus seats are gone, and all rental cars have been snapped up. You decide that your best option for getting home is to go to a car dealer, buy a decent quality used car, and sell it once you get it home. The difference in what you pay for the car now and what you can sell it for later will determine how financially sound this plan is – you might break even, you might even make a few bucks, or you might lose thousands. Is buying the car an appropriate time for more aggressive tactics? The stakes – potentially thousands of dollars – are not insignificant. Your need to maintain a relationship with this car dealer – who you will probably never see again – is insignificant. Your reputation in an area a thousand miles from home is not a significant issue. This would seem to be a much better chance to play some negotiation hardball.

Negotiation experts often suggest imagining an X-Y graph. On the X axis, place the value of what is being negotiated, from very low to very high. On the Y axis, place the amount of jeopardy this negotiation places on your relationship and reputation. If the negotiation you are currently having falls in the lower right quadrant of the graph (high value, low reputation risk), then you should consider tougher, winner-take-all, type tactics. If the dispute you are addressing falls in the upper left (low value, but significant relationship risk – like deciding where to go to lunch with your spouse), this might be the time to back off, and worry less about the nominal "win". Learning how to balance value, relationships, and reputation will help you to determine what techniques are acceptable in any situation, and how to truly define what it means to "win". A basic rule of negotiating is that it is always easier to say "yes" to someone you like. Make sure you are making it easy for others to say "yes" to you.