

How to Transform a Stack of Tortillas Into a One Hundred Dollar Bill



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I recently challenged a classroom of high school juniors to negotiate the best "deal" in a simple game of persuasion in which *all* competitors *can* (but rarely do) win hypothetical \$100 prizes.

Explaining his offer to trade real homemade tortillas for the hypothetical \$100, one student reasoned that anything of genuine value was better than any imaginary reward.



When I asked his negotiation partner to explain why he'd rejected this perfectly reasonable offer, he explained that it was more important to him to "win" than to get a few free tortillas.

Besides, his Mom's tortillas were better than his friend's.

Smart kids, right?

They both reached underneath appearances and each knew what they truly valued.

The young man offering the tortillas valued creative problem-solving - the fun to be gotten out of the game - while his bargaining partner valued winning over tangible rewards.

The students' savvy solutions - and the reasons they gave for reaching them - should remind the rest of us that we can't cut a good business deal if we don't learn how our

bargaining partners value the items to be traded.

Today In: Leadership



How We Categorize Things of Value

In *None of the Above: What IQ Doesn't Tell You About Race*, Malcolm Gladwell explored the curious case of constantly increasing I.Q. scores. It seems they just keep going up. Turns out that the gains in our presumed intelligence have more to do with the *way* in which we think rather than how *well* we think.

I.Q. inflation, Gladwell explains, arises from the analogy portion of the test - the part that includes questions like "in what way are dogs and rabbits alike?"

Moderns categorize things in abstract classes. The right answer on a contemporary I.Q. test would be that dogs and rabbits are both mammals.

A nineteenth-century American would have categorized dogs and rabbits according to their *use, rather than their species*, answering that they have "hunting" in common because "you use dogs to hunt rabbits." And they would have scored poorly on modern I.Q. tests as a result.

Cross-Cultural Pairings

Let's take a look at what happens when the IQ mavens go to "primitive" societies with an analogy exam.

“*[When researchers gave] members of the Kpelle tribe, in Liberia [the IQ] similarities test, they took a basket of food, tools, containers, and clothing and asked the tribesmen to sort them into appropriate categories. To the frustration of the researchers, the Kpelle chose functional pairings. They put a potato and a knife together because a knife is used to cut a potato.*

“A wise man could only do such-and-such,” they explained. Finally, the researcher asked, “How would a fool do it?” The tribesmen immediately re-sorted the items into the “right” categories.

So, how does this help us negotiate?

The Kpelle experience powerfully reminds that everyone *does not think the same way we do*.

When we assume we know what other people are thinking, we fail to ask the simplest questions.

Like "how is a stack of tortillas like a hundred dollar bill?"

There's no apparent similarity between them whatsoever unless you ask questions about the circumstances in which an exchange might be made.

If the man with \$100 in his pocket is on a desert island with the only other man on the island, who just happens to have a waterproof bag of tortillas on him, the tortillas are priceless and paper money worthless.

The tortilla negotiation and Kpelle I.Q. tests also remind us that we don't have any idea *how* our negotiation partner equates one thing for another. And if we don't know *that*, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to satisfy all of both parties' needs and desires in a single trade.

So here's our negotiation tip of the week

Act like every one of your bargaining partners is a member of the Kpelle tribe, sorting the subject matter of the negotiation according to functionality instead of abstract categories.

Remind yourself that just as you're rating your opponent's intelligence as sub-par, he's already decided that only a fool would be categorizing the facts in the way you are.

With those stark differences in mind, what's a negotiator to do?

Ask questions.

"What are your goals? Why do think I'd be willing to enter into an agreement that appears to be so foolish to me? What metric are you measuring your benefit by? What metric do you imagine I'm applying to mine?"

These are the type of questions that take the struggle out of the negotiation -- that relieve you of the chore of overpowering your negotiating partner into accepting the "wisdom" of your offer.

Never again miss the opportunity to ask that crazy Kpelle why he paired a potato with a knife and or to explain why you set it down next to the yam. Then you can start trading



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