



How Much Does Personality in Negotiation Matter?

What we know about having the best personality in negotiation and how the “Big 5” traits influence our negotiation performance.

BY PON STAFF — ON APRIL 22ND, 2021 / NEGOTIATION SKILLS



We tend to have strong intuitions about which personality traits help or hurt us in negotiation, but does research on the topic confirm our hunches? Does personality in negotiation matter?

Before we explore this topic, please answer “True” or “False” in response to the following questions:

1. Extroverted negotiators tend to perform better than introverted negotiators.
2. Agreeable negotiators generally are more successful than disagreeable ones.
3. Conscientiousness matters more than other personality traits in negotiation.
4. Anxious, depressed, and worried negotiators underperform at the bargaining table.
5. A creative personality in negotiation will carry you far.

The “Big 5”

When studying personality in negotiation, psychologists generally focus on five main factors that are believed to encompass most human personality traits: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. Professor Paul T. Costa Jr. of Johns Hopkins and Robert R. McCrae of the National Institute on Aging analyzed and validated these so-called Big 5 factors in the 1990s. Each factor can be viewed as a spectrum on which individuals fall—for example, from highly introverted to highly extroverted.

Negotiation researchers generally have focused more on identifying commonalities among negotiators, such as our shared susceptibility to the anchoring effect, than on examining our individual differences. However, some findings have emerged on the topic. In a chapter in the Handbook of Research on Negotiation (Edward Elgar, 2013), Washington University professor Hillary Anger Elfenbein, a leading researcher on individual differences in negotiation, surveys what we know about how the Big 5 personality traits play out in negotiation.

Extroversion

Extroversion refers to an individual’s degree of sociability, assertiveness, talkativeness, and optimism. People who score high on extroversion tend to form ideas and opinions by interacting with others. They thrive in group settings and are highly responsive to others’ emotions. At the other end of the extroversion spectrum, introverts tend to be quieter and to prefer working and thinking alone. Although shyness is more common among introverts than extroverts, introverts can be confident and skilled at public speaking.

Given these descriptions, we might assume that the best negotiators are extroverts.

Optimism, assertiveness, and a lively, friendly personality are all traits that we know from experience can be powerful assets in negotiation, enabling dealmakers to build bridges, draw out others’ interests, and advocate persuasively on their own behalf.

But in one 1998 experiment, Vanderbilt University professors Bruce Barry and Raymond Friedman found that extroverts achieved less than introverts in a distributive-negotiation simulation in which individuals haggled over the single issue of price. Extroverts appeared to be more influenced than introverts were by their opponent's first offer, a deficit that they only partially compensated for later in the negotiation. Introverts and extroverts performed similarly in an integrative, multi-issue negotiation simulation where participants could both collaborate and compete. Thus, based on this study, the answer to Question 1 is "False": There seems to be no evidence that extroverts outperform introverts in negotiation.

In fact, as we described in our November 2014 issue, writer Susan Cain, a former negotiation consultant, makes a convincing argument in her bestseller *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (Crown, 2012) that introverts bring valuable skills to the bargaining table. Extroverts would benefit from adopting introverts' tendency to listen to and absorb what others are saying, for example. And because introverts generally prefer to deliberate over important decisions in private, they may be less susceptible than extroverts to making impulsive, poorly thought-out group decisions.

Agreeableness

Agreeableness is a personality factor that encompasses courteousness, flexibility, sympathy, trust, cooperation, and tolerance. Many of these traits would appear to be assets in negotiation, particularly flexibility and cooperation. But could agreeableness turn into a liability if concern for others prevents one from advocating assertively for oneself?

Most negotiation studies, including Barry and Friedman's, have found that agreeableness predicts slightly lower outcomes in distributive negotiations, perhaps due to agreeable people's social concerns, according to Elfenbein. However, agreeableness has shown no effect on outcomes in integrative negotiations where parties can work together to create value. Thus, the answer to Question 2 also appears to be "False," based on current knowledge.

Now consider a trait that might be viewed as an extreme version of agreeableness: unmitigated communion (UC), or the tendency of some people to base their self-esteem on how others view them and behave toward them. In one study, professor Emily Amanatullah of the University of Texas and her colleagues found that individuals who scored high on UC performed just as well as others in one-shot, distributive negotiations with a stranger (where relationship building wasn't an issue). But when participating in integrative negotiations, pairs of negotiators who were both high in UC achieved worse combined outcomes than other pairs—yet were more satisfied with their results. Eager to protect their relationship with the other party, those high in UC set lower goals and claimed less value for themselves.

Conscientiousness

As a measure of self-discipline, organization, carefulness, responsibility, and achievement motivation, conscientiousness might seem to be the Big 5 personality in negotiation trait most closely linked to high negotiation performance. After all, experts consistently tell us that there is no better way to improve your outcomes than to thoroughly prepare for a negotiation.

In their 1998 study, Barry and Friedman failed to find a link between conscientiousness and negotiation performance, but that may have been because highly conscientious participants in the study had no greater opportunity to prepare to negotiate than the less conscientious, suggests Elfenbein. By contrast, a 1991 study by Texas A&M University professor Murray R. Barrick and University of Iowa professor Michael K. Mount found that

conscientiousness predicts overall job performance better than any of the other Big 5 traits. Lacking a definitive answer to Question 3 in the realm of negotiation, it seems at least plausible that it may be “True.”

Although some people are naturally more conscientious than others, the good news is that virtually all of us have the potential to behave more conscientiously in negotiation by taking more time to prepare and working on our organizational skills.

Neuroticism

The sinister-sounding trait neuroticism describes an individual's general level of anxiety, depression, worry, and insecurity. Those who score high on neuroticism performed similarly to others in Barry and Friedman's study; thus, the answer to Question 4 appears to be “False.” However, those scoring high on neuroticism view the negotiation experience more negatively than others do after the fact, Elfenbein and her colleagues found in a 2008 study.

Somewhat relatedly, negotiators who have strong concerns about maintaining their social image, or sense of “face,” created less joint value and reached more impasses in negotiations that threatened their sense of self (as when they played a job candidate in a simulated negotiation), Dartmouth College professor Judith B. White and her colleagues found.

Openness

Not to be confused with a willingness to share one's thoughts and feelings, openness as a Big 5 personality trait describes people's imaginativeness, broad-mindedness, and divergent thinking (generating creative solutions by exploring a range of ideas). People who score high on openness are considered intellectually curious and willing to consider novel ideas, according to Elfenbein.

Not surprisingly, negotiators who score high on openness contributed to greater mutual gain in an integrative negotiation in Barry and Friedman's study, though they did not perform better in a “pie-dividing” negotiation. These imaginative negotiators may be particularly adept at identifying opportunities for value-creating tradeoffs. Thus, it's fair to say that the answer to Question 5 is “True”: a creative personality will carry you far in negotiation.

Why disagreeable negotiators deserve each other

In a new study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Kelly Schwind Wilson of Purdue University and her colleagues measured negotiators' base levels of agreeableness and extroversion and then examined how they negotiated online with others who rated similarly or dissimilarly on these traits.

The results showed that when both negotiators in a pair scored either high or low on these traits (that is, both were either highly agreeable, highly disagreeable, highly introverted, or highly extroverted), their emotional interactions became more positive than when they were less similar on these traits. As a result of this heightened positivity, the similar pairs tended to reach agreements faster, perceived less conflict in their relationship, and had more positive impressions of one another as compared to pairs that were less similar on agreeableness or extroversion. However, the more similar pairs did not actually reach more egalitarian outcomes than the less similar pairs.

Interestingly, pairs of disagreeable negotiators appeared to get along even better with one another than pairs of agreeable negotiators did. Why? One possibility is that when we negotiate with someone whose behavior resembles our own, our appreciation of the perceived similarity overshadows the negative perceptions we might form of him or her.

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One Response to “How Much Does Personality in Negotiation Matter?”

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Negotiations thrive when both parties have a basic appreciation for the negotiated objective at hand. Whether parties are agreeable or disagreeable, as soon as the focus of the negotiation is lost, so are all potential negotiable solutions. Losing focus of the goal at hand is a more disastrous leadership flaw for negotiators than quarrelling too much with an opponent or exhibiting unforgivable personality quirks.

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