



# The Art of Agreement

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Each week, we make hundreds of agreements with other people. We agree on what TV shows to watch, what food to make for dinner, who does the dishes, and who takes the kids to their special events.

Generally it's not hard to make agreements. It's easy when both people have the same agenda. It is also easy when both sides agree to compromise in order to preserve harmony in an ongoing relationship.

But communication problems occur when people have different agendas. A car salesman wants to make the highest profit possible, while a buyer wants the best bargain. Couples with one TV may disagree about what to watch at 8:00 on Thursday evening. One member of a hungry couple may want to go out to dinner while the other insists on staying home because going out is too expensive.

Typically in these situations people go through back-and-forth negotiations and come to some agreement between the two positions. The dealer asks \$23,000 for the car, the buyer offers \$19,000 and they seal the deal at \$21,000. The husband agrees to watch the wife's show at 8:00 and she agrees to let him watch his show at 9:00. For their dinner plans, the hungry couple agrees to get take-out food from the inexpensive little place right down the street.

Sometimes however, people cannot come to any agreement. The car dealer may be unwilling to go below \$22,500, while the buyer is unwilling to go over \$21,500. So... no deal. Neither person may be willing to compromise over their favorite TV shows. One person might go out for dinner while the other stays home and cooks, and both feel angry and excluded.

When people's agendas differ, it is important to know how to create a "win-win situation" where both people gain. In *Getting to YES: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, authors Roger Fisher and William Ury offer four methods that can help. They are:

- 1) Focus on interests, not positions – What's your true interest? Let's say your teenaged daughter wants to stay out until 1:00 am. You want her home by 11:00 pm. The time that each of you has set is a "position." She says if she stays out later, she'll have more fun. That's her interest. Your interest is that she remains safe. If you each state your interests, you may find it easier to come to agreement. When she hears your concern about her safety and tells you that the "fun party" is at a house with a chaperoning parent, you might negotiate a time of midnight for a curfew.
- 2) Separate the people from the problem – Remember that your focus is negotiating your interest in the problem at hand. The personality of the person you are talking to should not be a factor. The fact that they don't agree with you does not make them a bad person, a greedy person, or a selfish person. They are negotiating their interests as well. Whether you like them or not, you must look for common interests that can lead you to a good agreement. Never call them names, or let yourself get angry with them. This will not get you what you want, and may simply make them even more unwilling to work things out.

- 3) Invent options for mutual gain – Often we see an agreement as an “either-or” situation. Either I get my way or you get yours. “If I drop \$100 on the price of the car that hurts me but benefits you.” Actually, there are ways to bargain by expanding the options you are considering. Here’s an example from *Getting to YES*: Two men sitting in the library are arguing about the nearby window. One wants it open “for the fresh air.” The other wants it closed because “it makes the room too drafty.” Neither can agree on a halfway point of how much to open the window. The Librarian who overhears their argument steps over and offers an alternative. She closes the nearby window and opens wide a window in the next room. By doing so, she lets in fresh air without the draft.
  
- 4) Use objective criteria – If you hit an impasse in negotiation, it often helps to check an outside authority. When buying a new car, you can check with organizations such as Consumer Reports to learn how much profit a dealer must make over factory invoice. Next, you can ask to see the factory invoice. Knowing both figures, you can now calculate a fair price. Remember, this works for the dealer too, so it’s a win-win situation. When your teenager wants to stay out late and he insists that coming in at 1:00 am is “just as safe” as coming in at 11:00 pm, you can look up some statistics of nighttime auto accidents. Teenagers are not impressed by statistics, but as an alternative you can agree to call the parents of three friends, see what they use as a curfew, and agree to take the average of the three.

Use these methods and see how much they help you in negotiating win-win agreements with family members, friends, contractors, dealers, and even with strangers you meet in public. And read the book for more information.

-----  
*Rich Bayer*, Ph.D., is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

For more information contact Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc., 200 Booth Street, Elkton, MD 21921, 410-996-3400. All rights reserved. Copyright 2003