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## Dealing with Aggressive Negotiators: Don't Respond in Kind

One of the most basic principles of negotiating is to attack the problem, not the person. But not everyone learns how to negotiate this way. Without the knowledge or skills to negotiate collaboratively, some people resort to aggressive tactics. Others deliberately employ tactics that most people consider off limits. Examples of aggressive tactics include:

- Bullying.
- Using threats and ultimatums.
- Playing good cop / bad cop.
- Using misleading information.
- Withholding key information.
- Insulting the other person.
- Presenting take-it-or-leave-it offers.
- Presenting unreasonable offers.
- Employing emotional outbursts.
- Negotiating in bad faith.

How does one maintain composure when facing a person who uses aggressive negotiating tactics? When is it appropriate to fight fire with fire?

As a general rule, do not respond in kind unless the other party proves to be so unreasonable, unethical or dysfunctional that hardball responses are the only way of achieving your objectives. But beware. Unless the project or issue at hand is of vital importance, you may be better off not reaching an agreement. How a person behaves during a negotiation usually indicates how they will act throughout a relationship. Do you really want to do business with someone so unreasonable that, to protect your interests, you need to stoop to their level?

For design professionals, effectively managing a negotiation can mean the difference between profitability and jeopardizing one's livelihood, between accepting reasonable versus onerous terms, and between establishing a productive relationship or an adversarial one.

When negotiating with an aggressive person, try the following:

1. **Recognize the game.** Once you understand that your opponent's behavior is simply a tactic, you can respond coolly and effectively rather than reactively and emotionally.
2. **Detach yourself.** Even if the other party insults you or attacks your integrity, don't take it personally. He probably has little regard for most people in his life — you're no different. Maintain your composure. Keep telling yourself that his behavior is a reflection on him, not you.
3. **Ignore the tactics.** When tactics don't bring desired results, people eventually change their behavior. Only respond when his behavior is acceptable. Otherwise, move on to the next topic. Spend your energy crafting solutions that satisfy all parties.
4. **Befriend the aggressive person.** Emphasize what you have in common. Agree with him whenever possible. Compliment him on what he achieved to date during the negotiation.
5. **Discuss the negotiating process.** Point out that the larger goal of reaching agreement is at stake. Suggest that the negotiations resume based on trust and respect. Consider bringing in other people to help the process get back on track.
6. **Concede on an item.** It never hurts to appease someone now and then. Choose an issue that has little significance to your firm but is of great importance to the other side. See if the concession leads to a spirit of cooperation. ■