

Principled Negotiation: Focus on Interests to Create Value

When people negotiate, they often think they have to choose between two ways: being very tough or being very friendly. But there is a better way. Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton from the Harvard Negotiation Project created a method called *principled negotiation*. This method helps people find solutions that are fair and friendly and meet their goals.

4 Main Parts of Principled Negotiation

Fisher, Ury, and Patton describe four key parts to using principled negotiation. Learning these parts can make you a better negotiator.

1. **Separate the People from the Problem.**

Strong emotions can make a negotiation more difficult. In principled negotiation, people try to keep emotions and personal issues separate from the main issue. For instance, if two team leaders are arguing about resources, they should talk about their feelings separately from the main problem. The goal isn't to "win," but to understand each other's concerns.

2. **Focus on Interests, Not Positions.**

People often argue about who should get what they want or look for a compromise. Instead, in principled negotiation, they try to understand the other person's basic needs and motivations. For example, if two siblings are arguing about where to have their parents' anniversary party, they will only make progress when they talk about their real concerns. One sibling wants to save time, while the other is worried about costs. Knowing this, they can decide on a solution that meets both needs, like having the party at a low-cost restaurant. This approach, called *interest-based bargaining*, finds ways to meet both sides' needs.

3. **Create Options for Mutual Gain.**

People often accept the first solution they find, just to end the negotiation. In principled negotiation, people take time to brainstorm many options before picking the best one. Options are choices that each side can consider to meet their needs. For example, in a job negotiation, if a candidate wants a higher salary but the company needs full staffing, they might agree that the candidate will take fewer vacation days in return for a higher salary.

4. **Use Objective Criteria.**

Negotiators may argue over whose "facts" are correct, which can lead to no agreement or a weak compromise. A better way is to use objective criteria, which means a fair, independent standard to guide decisions. For example, they could use standards like market value, expert opinion, industry standards, or laws. It's best for both sides to agree on these standards before negotiating.

Remember Your BATNA

In principled negotiation, the goal isn't just to reach any agreement. The goal is to reach an agreement that is better than your *BATNA* (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement). You should always know your BATNA and look for ways to improve it during the negotiation. The stronger your BATNA, the more you can ask for. For example, a person looking to buy a house might have a backup plan if their main choices don't work out. If a deal isn't as good as your BATNA, it's okay to walk away. It's the right choice if it doesn't meet your needs as well as your BATNA does.

Inexperienced negotiators and even many experienced negotiators tend to assume they have a choice between two main strategies: negotiate in a tough, demanding manner or in a friendly, accommodating manner. In fact, there's a better, third way of negotiating—one that doesn't rely on toughness or accommodation, but that will improve your likelihood of meeting your negotiation goals. Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton of the Harvard Negotiation Project promote *principled negotiation*, or *negotiation on the merits*, which they designed “to produce wise outcomes efficiently and amicably.”