

Is flirtation an effective negotiation tactic?

When I teach negotiation skills, my students and I explore a variety of strategies for reaching agreement, but we almost never mention flirtation. This may be because there is very little research on flirtation as a negotiation tactic – but it may also be because, as we found in one of our surveys, negotiation students do not consider flirtation to be an effective strategy. Nonetheless, flirtation is often alluded to in popular culture, particularly when men talk about female negotiators, **so my co-authors and I felt it was worth investigating.**

There is a lack of academic research on flirtation in the workplace, but we did discover a survey of female MBA graduates which found that 49 percent admitted to engaging in sexual behaviours including flirting or feigning attraction to a male colleague in order to advance their careers. But the more likely a woman was to use such behaviours, the lower her salary and worse her career outcomes would be.

While flirtation might not be an effective way to manage one's career, could it be more effective at the bargaining table? In fact, there is reason to believe that flirtation might be a useful negotiation tactic. Negotiators must be confident and assertive in order to convince the other party of one's views, but women who exhibit confidence and assertiveness are behaving contrary to gender stereotypes and often experience "backlash". Gender stereotypes create the expectation that men should be assertive and decisive (i.e., "agentic") and women should be warm and caring (i.e., "communal"). An assertive woman is behaving contrary to the female stereotype, and some studies have found that this makes her less likable and less able to influence the other party. In order to soften her image and be more influential, a female negotiator could potentially use flirtation. Consistent with this, we found that a videotaped female negotiator was judged to be more likable when she flirted than when she used neutral behaviour. A videotaped male negotiator did not elicit the same responses: he was equally likable in both conditions.

If flirting makes assertive women more likable, does it also result in better outcomes in a negotiation? The results are mixed. When we surveyed students in a negotiations class, we found that female negotiators who were more likely to use "personal charm" also performed better in a negotiation later that week. Male negotiators were just as likely to use personal charm but did not see any effect from it. Similarly, in a scenario study where participants had to imagine selling a car to a female buyer, male participants offered the buyer a better price when the scenario described her engaging in flirtatious behaviour than when she did not. In other words, flirtation seems to be an effective tactic for women but not men.



However, the results changed when we asked participants to engage in a live negotiation simulation. We paired male and female negotiators and gave the female negotiator special instructions to make frequent eye contact, smile, laugh, and compliment her negotiation partner in the most sincere fashion. Contrary to previous studies, the women who engaged in these flirtatious behaviours performed worse than those who did not.

Why did flirtation work in some studies but not others? It turns out there are two elements to feminine charm: flirtation and friendliness. The former leads to better negotiation outcomes (compared to neutral behaviour); the latter does not. When we asked participants to engage in a live negotiation, we could not control the extent to which they used one versus the other. Those who came across as more friendly performed worse in the negotiation, perhaps because they

were perceived as less assertive. Those who came across as more flirtatious performed better, in part because flirtation improved the mood of their male counterpart.

In summary, it seems that flirtation is an effective negotiation tactic only for women, and only when the woman is perceived as using relatively more flirtation than friendliness. But the research on influence tactics points out a risk to using flirtation: if the negotiator is perceived as trying to manipulate the other party – and flirtation is often perceived as manipulative – it can backfire. In other words, flirtation can be an effective tactic but only if it is enacted with skill!

Notes:

- *Featured image credit: Sam Churchill Inside photo credit: Steven Depolo.*
- *To find out more about this research, read [Feminine Charm: An Experimental Analysis of its Costs and Benefits in Negotiations](#).*



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