

Creating Alternatives When There Are None

Eight steps to arriving at a solution both parties can live with

YOU ORGANIZED A BLACK TIE SURF-AND-TURF DINNER for the attendees. A few hours before the dinner, your boss tells you that he invited all the spouses to attend. The good news is that there is space to hold the extra people, so the set-up crew can just add seats. The bad news is that the chef ordered a set number of “surf” and there will not be enough for the entire group.

Now you’re in a pinch. It would be easy to assume that it is the hotel’s problem to come up with a solution: You need more food, they need to get it — pronto! But that line of thinking will get you nowhere. It is your meeting and you need to drive the solution.

Negotiation is about achieving better alternatives for both parties through cooperation. Always look for mutual gain so the other side has something at stake and is therefore willing to reach an agreement. If the other side thinks they will be put out or not gain as much as you by accepting your idea, they will either walk away or become a reluctant partner. Make it easy for them to say “yes.” For a successful negotiation and to get better compliance, the other side needs to be enrolled in developing or shaping the solution.

Here are eight steps to arriving at an alternative that works for both sides:

1. Sit down with your negotiation partner — next to each other and not across the table like adversaries. Make sure you are on the same page. Define your purpose before you begin. You cannot resolve an issue if you have a different diagnosis of the problem.

2. Identify shared interests.

3. Relax. Don’t focus on the time factor as that will escalate the problem into a crisis. If you are in “crisis mode,” you are less likely to come up with creative alternatives.

4. Both sides should agree to generating as many ideas and getting them on the table as possible. Brainstorm and use active listening, without limiting each other. The more ideas — both specific and general — the better the negotiation.

5. Stick to a ground rule: No premature judgments or criticism of each other’s ideas. That will inhibit your creativity and theirs. Be sensitive to the other side and how they will receive your comments to their ideas.

6. If possible, designate a facilitator to write down all ideas without categorizing them as “realistic” or “crazy.”

7. Do not think ahead to how the idea will be implemented as that may stifle the flow.

8. After all the ideas are on the table, pick out the most promising ones and add to them if needed. Weigh these best alternatives and jointly decide on the best possible one.

Using the process above, both parties might arrive at these possible solutions to the surf-and-turf scenario:

- break up the surf and turf into single entrées
- change to buffet style and add other entrées
- add other types of fish to accompany the meat
- ask other hotels or retail food outlets if they have lobsters you could buy.

That last one is admittedly a far-fetched idea, but sometimes it’s the most unlikely improvisations that work out best. ■

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