

Signalling for Movement

“If you do Y then I will look into the possibility of doing X.”

Imagine driving along a narrow country lane, just wide enough for one vehicle. Another vehicle approaches and both come to a stop. What happens now? What if both parties refuse to move? What if one starts pushing forward and intimidating the other to back up? What if both drivers get out of their cars and begin arguing?



This situation is like a negotiation that has stalled, is met with mutual inflexibility or stubbornness. In any negotiation, one of the key issues is who moves first? Another is how do you move without compromising your position or desired outcome?

One way is through ‘signalling’. A signal is not an actual move but rather a suggestion of a possibility that you may move, an indication that some movement from the other side may be reciprocated, or a plea to reason for both parties to move together.

One of the golden rules of negotiation is never to give something away without obtaining something in return. So, in signalling the possibility of movement on your part you need to make the concession ‘conditional’ as in... *“If I do X will you do Y?”* or even better the other way around as in... *“If you do Y then I will do X”*; or if you want to be really smart... *“If you do Y then I will look into the possibility of doing X.”*

Another rule of negotiation is to try to not be the first to make a move. Hence, in the above phrases the speaker shifts the balance of power towards him or herself as they are asking the other party to be the first to move, and with more certainty.

Another technique is to simply appeal to reason, by simply stating that unless both parties are prepared to make some move then the negotiation is unlikely to be resolved, which is in no one’s interest.

But what if the other party asks you to do something or to move first?

A straight “yes” weakens your position; an irrefutable “No” makes you look intransigent, unreasonable or not open to negotiation. So, a mid-way response such as “maybe”, with of course a condition that they must meet, could be your best response. ‘Maybe’ is also useful when you want to buy some time or do not want to commit yourself to too much too soon.



Another useful signalling term is *“What if...?”* This enables you to pose a hypothetical way forward, and to test the other party’s reaction, without making any firm commitment from your side... maybe! 😊