How to Use Disbelief and Strategic 'Flinches' in Negotiations

Key Concept
Making the first offer is usually considered to be an advantage in negotiations, but responding to a first offer with a measured 'flinch' can be just as effective in leading to an eventual win — but it must be measured "I am disappointed in this offer" as opposed to "This is an outrageous offer from people who are trying to rob us".

Idea Summary
A flinch is defined as any show of shock, disgust or disbelief in response to a first offer. Do flinches work for negotiators, or are they counterproductive, and end up damaging the negotiation? Past research has shown that making a first offer can put you at an advantage over your counterpart. Which is more effective: making the opening offer or deciding to receive the opening offer and flinching in response?

New research shows that flinching can lead to more value for the flincher, which means that making the opening offer is not always an advantage. It also means that an aggressive counteroffer — to combat the supposed advantage of a first offer — is not necessary. A measured flinch effectively disarms the other negotiator.

A flinch can be subtle or blatant, and both are equally effective... in the short term. However, an overly demonstrative flinch can have negative long-term relationship consequences. Other parties will become less willing to negotiate with someone who consistently overreacts to first offers. In negotiations that involve ongoing partners, a flinch can be used but with some restraint.

When restraint is manifested, however — when, for example, negotiators are able to flinch without anger — targets of the flinch will not leave with negative feelings about the negotiation, or feel that they did not do well.

Business Application
The best negotiating tactics will achieve two objectives: 1) getting the most value for the negotiator, and 2) leaving the counterpart in the negotiations feeling that he or she did well.

As a negotiating tactic, flinching can achieve those two goals, as long as the characteristics of the flinch are not too aggressive. When negotiating, keep the flinch in your repertoire, and use it but with civility and in a contextually appropriate way. You will thus avoid the collateral damage that this tactic, when wielded unskilfully, can cause.

**Further Reading**


**Further Relevant Resources**

Neil E. Fassina's profile at Northern Alberta Institute of Technology J.R. Shaw School of Business

Glen R. Whyte's profile at University of Toronto Rotman School of Management

University of Toronto Rotman School of Management's Executive Education profile at IEDP