

Behavioral Mimicking in Negotiation

Lovers do it, confederates do it -- and now, a new study suggests, negotiators can benefit from doing it as well. Benefit from mimicking, that is -- mimicking simple gestures, postures and mannerisms of the person with whom one is negotiating, whether for a job, a house, or something else.

A study presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management (Philadelphia, Aug. 5-, 2007) suggests mimicry to be an effective way **"to facilitate building trust and, consequently, information-sharing in a negotiation"** -- **thereby improving the outcome not only for the person doing the mimicking but in many instances for the person across the table as well.**

In one experiment the results were nothing less than dramatic: **10 of 15 negotiations in which mimicking occurred resulted in a deal, compared to only 2 of 16 in which no mimicking took place.**

"Negotiators often leave **considerable value on the table, mainly because they feel reluctant to share information with their opponent due to their fears of exploitation,**" explain the study's authors, business professors William W. Maddux of INSEAD, Elizabeth Mullen of Stanford, and Adam Galinsky of Northwestern. **"By creating trust in and soliciting information from their opponent, mimickers do indeed seem to bake bigger pies at the bargaining table, and consequently take a bigger share of that pie for themselves."**

In the growing body of research on the general phenomenon of mimicry, the study breaks important new ground by testing mimicry's effectiveness in a particularly challenging setting. Previous investigations, the authors observe, "have focused on relatively simple behaviors such as tipping in a restaurant or picking up dropped pens." In contrast, "negotiations necessitate a high level of cognitive engagement, and complex decisions need to be made within a high-pressure environment between parties who may have little or no knowledge about each other but where the stakes can be high, and where there are strong incentives for competition, withholding of information, distrust and conflict."

In addition, "most prior [mimicry] research employed trained confederates," while, in contrast, the participants in the new research had **"no prior training in strategic mimicry [and simply] received a brief instruction to mimic just prior to a very complex task that demanded substantial mental concentration."** Further, **"none of the participants who were mimicked noticed that their opponents were copying their behaviors, suggesting that the effects of being mimicked occurred automatically and unconsciously."**

To test mimicry's potential benefits in negotiations, the professors carried out two experiments.

- 1) **In the first experiment,** 104 MBA students were paired off to conduct a half-hour-long negotiation exercise between a job candidate and recruiter. Pairs (or dyads, as the experimenters called them) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: in one, the candidate was instructed to mimic the mannerisms of the recruiter; in a second, the recruiter was instructed to mimic the candidate; in a third, neither negotiator was instructed to mimic.

Participants were given confidential role instructions a week before the negotiations, but it was only five minutes before the exercise that they were slipped confidential instructions to mimic their adversaries. Eight issues were involved in the negotiations, and points were assigned to each for the purpose of measuring two outcomes -- the amount the adversaries in each dyad gained together and the individual gain that each side obtained.

The investigators found that "when either the candidate or the recruiter mimicked their opponent, the dyad earned higher joint gain relative to when no one in the dyad mimicked their opponent...In addition, mimicry enhanced benefits for the party doing the mimicking (i.e. value claiming), but it did not adversely affect the party being mimicked."

- 2) **In the second experiment** 31 pairs of MBA students tested the value of mimicry in a negotiation for the purchase of a gas station "where a prima facie deal appears impossible." In this case the highest price the buyer was willing to pay was lower than the lowest price the seller was willing to accept. But a deal might still be possible because of an underlying common interest -- namely, that the buyer was interested in hiring managers to run the station in the future, and the seller needed to obtain future employment. If the seller could work as a manager of the station in the future, the prospect of that salary would open up the possibility of a sale.

Achieving a deal would largely depend on whether the seller felt comfortable sharing a piece of sensitive information -- that he or she was suffering from burnout and needed to go on vacation, but also needed employment upon returning from vacation. Half the buyers were instructed to mimic but none of the sellers, since "it is the onus of the buyer to make the seller comfortable enough to reveal this information, understand the seller's needs, and structure a deal to accommodate the seller's interests."

The results were dramatic:

10 of 15 dyads where the buyers mimicked achieved a deal, but only two of 16 dyads in which no mimicking took place. The mimicry resulted in heightened trust for the buyer doing the mimicking, which proved critical in facilitating deal-making.

In both experiments, the benefits of mimicking emerged in **negotiations that "involved multiple issues with multiple potential tradeoffs between the two parties" -- that is in negotiations where there was a "win-win" potential, as distinguished from single-issue negotiations.**

An additional experiment involving a single issue found no significant impact on outcomes.

"Although results from a single study do not necessarily rule out the possibility that mimicry may be able to facilitate purely [single issue] negotiations, at present mimicry appears to be most effective in negotiations with integrative (i.e. win-win) potential," the authors conclude.

The study, "Chameleons Bake Bigger Pies and Take Bigger Pieces: Strategic Behavioral Mimicry Facilitates Negotiation Outcomes," will be among several thousand studies presented at the **Academy of Management** meeting. Founded in 1936, the Academy is the largest organization in the world devoted to management research and teaching. It has about 18,000 members in 100 countries, including some 10,000 in the United States. This year's annual meeting will draw about 8,000 scholars and practitioners to **Philadelphia from August 5th to 8th** for nearly 1,700 sessions on a host of subjects relating to corporate organization and investment, the workplace, technology development, and other management-related topics.

Media Coverage:

The Globe & Mail. *Mimicking person across the table a winning play.* (Friday, August 10, 2007).

The Washington Post. *The copycat effect.* (Tuesday, August 07, 2007).