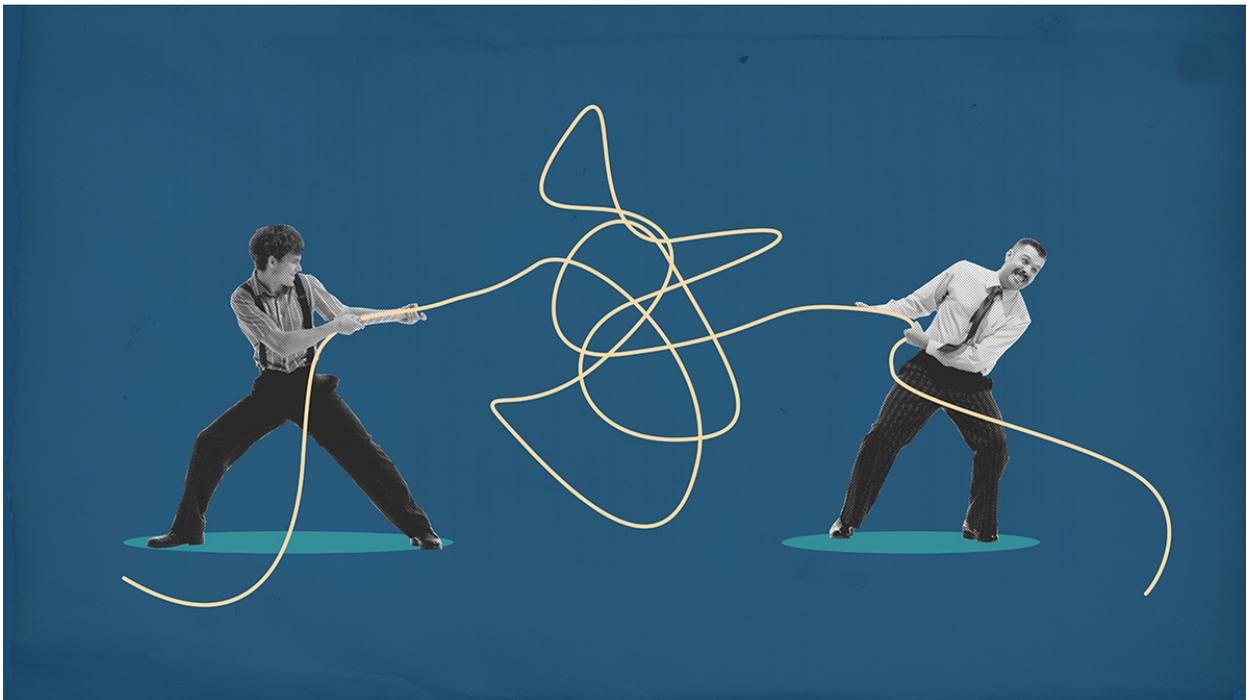


# How to Learn from a Failed Negotiation

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March 18, 2025



## Summary.

Even the best negotiators sometimes fail. When that happens, it is important to consider what went wrong so you can do better in the future. Start by understanding the types of failure you can experience, why you've failed, and how much it matters. Then...more

The winningest coach in college football history, Nick Saban, [is fond of saying](#), “Never waste a failure.” Indeed, failure is the lifeblood of learning. Most people fondly recall their successes in life, and in negotiation, but their mistakes are deeply etched in their psyches. So, how do we ensure that we learn from these failures?

In my many years of negotiation practice, training, teaching, and advising, I've found that there are generally three responses to failure. Some negotiators, to protect their egos and reputations, blame others, preventing them from considering and learning

from their own missteps. Others find their failures so debilitating that they experience significant anxiety and never want to negotiate again; instead of growing from the experience, they shrink. But the savviest negotiators are the ones who step back, take ownership, and invest time and energy in understanding what went wrong so they can do better in the future.

In my recently released book, [Getting Back to the Table](#), I lay out a framework for doing the latter. Start by understanding the types of failure you can experience, why you've failed, and how much it matters. Then follow a five-step process to capture key lessons, get back to the table if possible, and improve your negotiation prowess.

## Types of Failure

There are many ways to fail in negotiation, and when trying to learn from your own missteps, it's important to start with a diagnosis of the situation. Here are the seven categories of failure I've identified in my research:

1. **Failure by design (also known as intelligent failure).** There are times when people go into a specific negotiation with the expectation they will fail but learn something useful to get back to the table. It is a process with stepping stones to success.
2. **Not reaching agreement when it was possible.** Sometimes an agreement is right in front of you, but you and the other negotiator(s) don't find a way forward for other reasons, such as not sharing information, offending one another, or making assumptions about what is or is not possible.
3. **Not meeting your negotiation objectives/interests.** This type of failure happens when the parties reach a less than optimal agreement instead of getting as close as possible to the goals they initially set before talks began. If you can't do the latter, you are better off walking away. An agreement that doesn't meet your key objectives is a failure.
4. **Reaching an agreement that damages the relationship.** If you have achieved your objectives but damaged your relationship with your counterpart in the process, that is also a problem, particularly if you will need to interact with the same person or organization in the future.
5. **Reaching a bad agreement that is worse than your BATNA.** Before talks, you need to understand what your best alternative to a negotiated agreement, or walkaway option, is. Negotiators fail when they don't thoroughly conduct this analysis and agree to something that is worse than it.
6. **Emotionally unintelligent failure.** This is when the emotions of one or more of the negotiators overwhelms them and causes the process to collapse.
7. **Under-the-table failure.** This occurs when the parties fail to notice a hidden dynamic or intangible aspect that is subtly driving the process. These problems tend not to be overt and often remain unspoken but are driving the parties behavior to stalemate or worse.

After figuring out which type of failure you've experienced, you should also consider its magnitude. Was it a mere setback that you can quickly recover from? A serious misstep that will require you to exert more effort to resume talks? Or a catastrophe so big that there is little hope for *detente*?

In the first two scenarios, you should be able to reckon with your predicament, learn from it, and come back to the table to try to salvage the negotiation. In the last, you can still study where you and your counterpart derailed, heed the lessons, keep the door open to see what happens in the future, and apply your learning to other situations.

## **Five Steps to Improvement**

**The first step in learning from any kind of failure is to accept that it happened.**

While many people know deep inside that negotiations can fall apart, leaving objectives unmet, they are often in denial when they do. But it's important to face the cold hard facts so you can move on. For example, a few years ago, when I was working at a nonprofit organization, I was courting a key donor from whom I had hoped to secure funding. When the foundation declined, I was frustrated and dove directly into talks with another donor, who also passed. At that point, a colleague encouraged me to pause and feel the sting of those losses. After I did, I was able to regroup with a clearer mindset and think of an alternative, potentially more effective, approach. My next negotiation succeeded.

**The second step is to conduct a deep dive and analyze what happened and why.**

Look at the big picture and determine the primary cause of the failure. Then get granular and look at the tactics, critical moments, and different moves you and your counterpart(s) made that stymied progress.

Consider a real estate agent who had been working hard to help a very picky couple find a new home. After close to a year, they finally came across a house they loved and put in an offer, but the inspection report revealed that the roof needed to be replaced, and the clients hesitated. In an effort to help the couple see the big picture and get the deal done in a fast-moving sellers' market, the agent suggested they take the house as is. "I'm worried you're going to lose the house you love," he told them. "I think you'd both agree it's taken a very long time to find one. So, my suggestion is to take the house and deal with the inspection issues as a cost of doing business." Instead of being persuaded, the couple took offense at his comment about the length of their search and complained that he was prioritizing the sale over their best interests. They rejected his advice and switched agents. In this example, a key exchange led to the failure.

### **Third, consider what lessons apply to future negotiations.**

Too often we think that learning what worked—or didn't—in one situation will help us in another, when the dynamics are very different. So, it's important to think through the particular aspects of the talks that failed and then, when facing a new negotiation, do a deep comparative analysis to understand how it is similar or different to that previous experience and consider the ways in which you might adapt your approach. Put differently, don't let this evaluation process lock you into negotiation heuristics that might eventually lead you astray.

### **Fourth, pinpoint and fix your weaknesses that contributed to the failure.**

Take a good look at yourself as a negotiator and actively commit to unlearning the behaviors holding you back and to building new skills that might be more productive. This notion follows the philosophy of management guru Peter Drucker that to do something new you have to stop doing something old.

For example, a willingness to compromise, which most people see as a positive, can often lead you to suboptimal results. Consider a project manager asking her boss to push back the deadline for work she's overseeing by a month. When he explains that an extension isn't possible, she suggests they split the difference at two weeks, which doesn't meet her or her boss' needs, and thus qualifies as a failure. Imagine instead that the PM and her boss replace compromise with a creative problem-solving approach. When the PM makes her request, the boss asks why she needs the extension, so she explains that she'd approved vacation for a key team member before running into unforeseen problems and doesn't want to go back on her word since it will damage her credibility. The boss still can't move the deadline, but he suggests bringing in someone else to help finish the project on time, and the PM readily agrees.

### **Finally, come back to the table with confidence.**

In those negotiations where you can reengage, you need to make the first move. In preparation for this new discussion, think through what you've learned and commit to approaching the situation differently this time. Perhaps you tried to be persuasive using logic, but have since realized that an emotional appeal that seeks to ease your counterpart's fears and concerns will be more effective.

When you understand how you've failed and go through these five steps to learn from the experience, you not only have the best chance possible of getting back to the table,



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