

MIT online course to help boost engineers' negotiating skills

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by Rick Nelson

Cambridge, MA. The skills that you bring to your job as an electrical engineer could be detrimental to becoming an effective negotiator. The six-week MIT online course “Entrepreneurial Negotiations: The MIT Way,” beginning April 26, can help you sharpen your negotiating skills.

The course, said MIT Professor Lawrence Susskind in a recent interview, can help engineers protect and increase the value of their ideas, deal with ego to build trust in relationships, and navigate the bargaining process when economic and technical factors are unpredictable or complicated.

Susskind, who will lead the course, elaborated on how skills that can be valuable in engineering projects can be counterproductive in negotiations. Engineers, he said, like to break problems into separate pieces. Negotiation doesn't work that way, and an effort break a negotiation into pieces will yield a suboptimal result.

Further, he said, engineers place a lot of value in data, and if a negotiation isn't going well, they might think the best response is to simply provide more data. Consequently, they may become frustrated and overlook the real reasons a negotiation isn't coming to a successful conclusion.

Also, an engineer might be too focused on reaching an immediate deal, when it's important to establish an ongoing relationship. If you are negotiating with an investor to fund your idea, for example, you may be working with that investor for five years. “Trust is everything,” Susskind said. “Say what you mean, and mean what you say.” And if you have bad news for your negotiating partner, deliver it clearly. Also important are dispute resolution clauses that can be invoked throughout the relationship. He said you don't want to try to set rules in the middle of a fight.

Susskind pointed out that negotiating effectively is not a natural skill—you learn from your own negotiating experience. Further, he said, you needn't negotiate by yourself but can enlist agents and intermediaries. The point is not to gang up on your negotiating partners but to make sure you understand each other. Intermediaries can be particularly valuable in international cross-cultural negotiations, he said—a topic that the course will address.

The course will be presented in six modules, beginning with an introduction and overview of entrepreneurial negotiations and concluding with a summary of important takeaways. The other four modules will center on role-playing exercises with a partner of your choice, for which you will be provided with both shared information (available to your partner) and confidential information (available only to you). The role-playing exercises will focus on four industries: aerospace, information technology, real estate, and biotech. Susskind will critique select role-playing efforts.

Susskind, whose research focuses on the theory and practice of negotiation and dispute resolution, is an adviser to Fortune 100 companies, author of more than 20 books, cofounder of the Inter-university Program on Negotiation (PON) at Harvard Law School, director of the MIT Science Impact Collaborative, and founder and chief knowledge officer of the Consensus Building Institute.

“A recent report from MIT found that companies that have spun off from the Institute generate annual revenues of \$2 trillion per year,” said Susskind. “Through this course, professionals will emerge with a toolkit of negotiation techniques so they, too, can join the ranks of successful MIT entrepreneurs.”

He added this will be his first time teaching negotiating skills through the online edX platform. The course requires a commitment of three to five hours per week to view videos (available 24 hours per day, seven days per week), complete assigned reading, and engage in role-playing negotiations and peer-to-peer evaluations.

“Negotiations in the entrepreneurial arena are critical, but incredibly complex,” said Bhaskar Pant, executive director of MIT Professional Education, in a press release. “We are fortunate to be able to offer a course on the subject from a world-renowned authority at MIT. Professor Susskind’s course will emphasize the paramount importance of interpersonal interactions for navigating a new business through elements such as economic uncertainty, protecting intellectual property and managing investors. Most negotiation programs do not address these important aspects, leaving entrepreneurs ill-equipped to handle real-life negotiation situations, and leaving unclaimed value on the table.”

Candidates for the course include those seeking to advance an idea or product but who do not currently control the resources needed to develop or market what they have in mind and need to convince others to support or join them. The course is suited for entrepreneurs, inventors, app developers, angel investors or potential partners, and intrapreneurs and innovators within large companies or teams charged with creating new products or services.

You can register for the course [here](#). List price is \$475. You can enter the code MITPE30 on the checkout page for a 30% discount.