Asking for a Raise? Read This First

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By Sharon Begley

If you figure that a good time to ask the boss for a raise is when she gets back from summer vacation in a few days, you’ve got it half right. Being in a good mood influences people’s judgment and decision making, meaning you have a greater chance of coming away with that extra five percent when the boss is in a good mood than when she has just been chewed out by the uber-boss. But here’s the other half: if the boss knows that you are trying to exploit her “incidental affect,” as psychologists call it, and is therefore reminded that her judgment may be clouded by incidental feelings, the effect may disappear.

So conclude Eduardo B. Andrade and Teck-Hua Ho of the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, who tested how mood affects decision making—and how knowing that someone is trying to exploit that effect for his own ends can make the attempt backfire. They report their findings in the August issue of Psychological Science.

The world is full of examples of mood affecting judgment on issues that “should” turn on logic and rationality alone. When people are negotiating, being in a good mood makes it more likely that they’ll cooperate, while being in a bad mood makes it more likely they’ll be more competitive than cooperative. Let’s say you’re negotiating with someone—haggling over the price of a used car, say—and the seller responds, “that offer is enormously insulting!” Knowing the effect of anger on decision making, and really wanting the car, you backpedal, upping your offer. As Andrade and Ho write, “the angry feeling generated by a disliked offer is taken into account during the negotiation process.”

But what if the mood has nothing to do with the subject at hand—settling on a price for a car—and instead reflects something completely incidental, such as the boss's euphoria about how great his vacation was? In this case, the contentment has nothing to do with your request for a five percent raise. Your best strategy is nevertheless to ask for more when you know the boss is in a good mood, and less if he is in a bad mood.

But here’s where it gets tricky. If he knows that you know he is in a good mood, he is likely to take this into account, figure you’re trying to exploit his good humor, and overreact, telling you and your request for a raise to take a hike.

In real life, people do adopt this strategy, the researchers find. They told 122 students that they could share a small amount of money with a partner. The “proposers” got to suggest how to divide up the pot—either 50-50 or 75-25. “Receivers” decided on the size of the pot, from 0 to $1, and whether to accept or reject the proposed division; in the latter case, neither partner got a penny. The proposers were told that the receivers had watched a film clip that made them feel either happy or angry.

Not surprisingly, proposers who were paired with receivers who had been jollied-up by the film clip suggested a 75-25 split much more often than proposers whose receivers had watched the anger-inducing clip. They correctly figured that someone in a good mood would accept even a patently inequitable offer.
Indeed, 52 percent of proposers’ offers were unfair when they knew that the receiver had watched an angry clip, but 70 percent when they knew the receiver had watched a happy clip.

Now the rules changed slightly. When the proposer was told that the receiver knew what he knew about his (the receiver’s) mood, the proposer rightly realized that the receiver would be sensitive to any attempt on the proposer’s part to exploit that mood. In this case of “knowing that he knows I know,” the percentage of 75-25 offers to receivers who had watched a happy film clip dropped to 55 percent, hardly different from the 52 percent made to receivers who had watched an anger-inducing clip. The researchers conclude, “people are more likely to attempt to benefit from the other party’s incidental feelings when they believe the other party is unaware that they know about those feelings.”

Advice: if you’re going to ask the boss for a raise, wait till she’s in a good mood. But don’t do anything that will let her know you know she’s in a good mood.