



For Better Negotiations, Cut “But” from Your Vocabulary

By Steven Tomlinson

At work, the same diversity of perspective that fuels innovation can easily derail collaboration or spark conflict. Under the pressure of deadlines and performance metrics, we drive to convince our colleagues of our point of view, and sideline anything that threatens what we feel compelled to defend.

Beneath these predictable patterns, if we're willing to see it, is a more promising opportunity to learn from one another's intuitions, values, and formative experiences. This is what we miss when we focus on winning rather than understanding.

If we're tired of defensive exchanges and willing to risk a more generous and intimate connection with our coworkers, it's worth considering changing how we approach office negotiations.

A simple approach starts by focusing on one word: “but.” It's hard to think of a word that triggers more reactivity and drains more trust from conversation. Notice how often you hear it (and say it) when you're negotiating or arguing. Notice how this one word changes the temperature and tone in the moment.

To prevent the damage that “but” inflicts, I offer three hacks, based on my experience coaching Wall Street, Fortune 500, and high-tech startup executives and managers preparing for difficult conversations. Each of these moves requires courage, patience, and practice — and the return on investment is impressive.

1. Focus on what's said before "but."

In any argument or negotiation, the other side is likely to make positive offers of agreement or alignment. These are often made spontaneously and usually followed by "but." ("I like parts of your plan, but it's not going to work.")

We usually focus reflexively on what comes after "but." What if instead we engaged what they offered before?

I saw this in action when I was working with a team selling expensive premium logistics software. One sales rep was closing many more deals than her colleagues. I listened to her calls to learn how she was handling pushback on the price.

Essentially, she listened for every opening her prospects gave her to talk about what differentiated the product. When people said, "We like your solution, but it's just too expensive," she asked, "What do you like about it?" By accepting the positive offer, she shifted the frame from price to value, and prospects who cited specific benefits proved more likely to buy.

In another situation, I overheard the following exchange between a young pastor and an older man in the foyer after church:

Man: "I'd give money to your church, but I don't like your politics."

Pastor: "What's making you feel generous?"

The pastor's thoughtful move set up a more intimate and fruitful exchange.

Prioritizing the positive offer reshuffles the conversation.

2. Replace “but” with curiosity.

In the typical argument, your opponent says their piece, and you respond with “but” and insert your counterargument.

What would happen if your next move was genuine curiosity instead? What if you replaced “but” with a question or an invitation? “Say more about that. I want to make sure I see how this looks to you.” Or, “Why do you suppose we get so worked up talking about this issue?” Or, “We obviously both care deeply about this question. How did it become so important to you?”

Trying to understand the values beneath the other person’s point of view demonstrates vulnerability and receptiveness. It pre-empts antagonism, in part by offering your neighbor airtime, the currency of debate.

In one tense meeting I observed, the customer-care team manager was arguing passionately that the company needed to assign his people responsibility for supporting their newly launched product. Most of the rest of the room disagreed. Finally, the executive who was leading the meeting said, “Tom, I’m hearing you have strong feelings about this, and it would help me to understand where they’re coming from.”

That opening led him to say that he was afraid. The company had started making higher-quality products that needed less support, and he feared they would lay off the team he had nurtured and developed in these support roles. Loyalty and personal responsibility for his teammates’ wellbeing was his real issue.

He put the truth on the table because someone saw his emotion as a signal of an unexpressed value and invited him to share it. This move made way for a conversation about new responsibilities for the support team.

If you'll allow one move to honor the other person's unexpressed value, you'll likely have a deeper conversation than you're used to.

3. Stop before the "but."

At one financial services firm, the visionary CEO and his chief marketing officer were advocating an ambitious digital transformation initiative to keep the company competitive. The other executives refused to support the plan, arguing that they couldn't afford it.

Finally, the CEO said, "You're saying the board needs to see how we're calculating the return on this investment." He paused. Then he said, "I agree."

He didn't add "but." He simply stopped talking.

This move is powerful and all too rare in debate — and it's simple: Acknowledge agreement when you see it, and make your acknowledgment your whole turn in the conversation.

Signaling that you've understood suspends antagonism for a moment.

We're often afraid that if we express agreement, the other party will press their advantage, when in fact agreement is a magic move that builds the bit of trust that can transform the exchange.

As the other executives tell the story, the CEO's willingness to honor their values inspired them to develop a new framework for assessing disruptive investments that helped the CEO win board support for the initiative.

An offer like, "It sounds like we both care a lot about this," puts you temporarily on the same side, letting in some air and possibility. Even if the fight resumes right away, that small dose of trust will likely pay off later.

Finding Common Ground Via Shared Values

Defense feels natural when we "need" to win an argument. These "but"-busting moves engage the creative possibilities underneath verbal conflict and build the respect and trust that grounds more fruitful collaboration with coworkers.

Changing your relationship with "but" may cost you the chemical rush that comes with familiar fights. Fresh perspective and deeper connection are worth the sacrifice.

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