

# 49 RED HERRING



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A businessman and his colleague were travelling on a company-funded overnight flight from New York to London. They often travelled in business class, but since the global recession hit they now have to travel in economy/coach class. To add to their annoyance, they found they were sitting next to two young excitable girls.

The girls, aged 20 and 21, had flown before but only very occasionally, and always within the US – never long haul and never without their parents. Understandably, this was an adventure of a lifetime for them. They were talking excitedly to each other.

Whilst the plane was preparing for takeoff the businessman called over one of the stewardesses. Quite openly, within earshot of the two girls, he complained that he and his colleague could not remain in these seats as they wanted some peace and quiet during the night flight. He asked if it would be possible for them to move to a quieter cabin.

The stewardess said that she would see what she could do. She said that as the flight was not fully booked there may be a possibility, but there were no guarantees.

The businessman and his colleague sat back and waited, hoping that they might get an upgrade to business class, or at least to premium economy, especially as the stewardess had said that the flight was not full. He and his colleague were used to the additional space, quiet, enhanced service and extra attention that such cabins have provided them in the past, and to hear that the flight was not full should mean that there were spare seats in the higher end cabins – why let them go to waste?

After a few minutes the Stewardess returned and said that, unfortunately, it would not be possible to move them.

At this point the businessman became agitated and annoyed, saying, *'You just told us that the flight is not full, so there must be some seats up front that are not being used – we're only talking about two seats.'*

Stewardess: *'I understand your position, sir. The only thing I can do is to speak to the captain as he has the final say in such matters.'*

Three minutes later the captain came to see the businessman and his colleague.

Captain: *'Sir, I understand that you're not happy with your seating arrangement. I am happy to say that we have found two seats in business class...'*

(Turning to the two girls) *'Ladies, would you like to accompany me to the business class section so these two gentlemen can get some sleep?'*

## INSIGHTS AND LEARNING

Touché!

On the surface of the situation the businessman got what he wanted, which was not to be disturbed any further by the excitable girls. He had asked if they could be moved.

Well, he got what he wanted because 'they' (the girls) were moved!

This is a good example of one party trying to use a 'red herring' (needing to be away from the girls) as an excuse to get what they really wanted, which was to be upgraded. See below, and Part Two, for a definition of 'Red Herring'.

In fact, the captain took the businessman at his word, i.e. he and his colleague wanted to be seated away from the girls, and, as a consequence, the girls moved from a state of excitement, to elation to ecstasy. The only condition the captain imposed was that by placing the young ladies in business class he expected them to fully enjoy the experience in a less excitable and more dignified manner. Of course, they gladly complied. They were screaming with delight inside but talked quietly on the outside, and they 'dined out' on the story for several years.

So did the captain. Of course he was smart, but he deliberately played dumb, and took considerable pleasure from 'resolving' the situation in a rather clever way.

The two girls were also happy not to be sitting next to two rude, boring old businessmen who would probably snore through the overnight flight anyway – if they could get any sleep that is!

## HOW CAN I USE THIS?

In three ways...

Firstly, be careful of pushing too hard for something; it can backfire, confound the achievement of your goals or, even worse, act against you in favour of another party – that's a double negative hit for you.

Sometimes by pushing too hard you defeat your objective. It's a bit like trying too hard to impress someone or appearing too needy. The most likely response in these situations is to not be impressed, to want to run away or... to call the police.

Secondly, and which is the theme of this case, be careful of using what in negotiation

terms is called a 'red herring' – pretending you want something else in order to get what you really want.

The term is supposed to originate in the use of a kipper (a strong-smelling smoked fish) to train hounds to follow a scent when hunting, or to divert them off the trail.

A buyer may focus attention on a minor issue in order to get her way on a major one. For example, she might suggest that her reason for not being able to agree to 'X' is because of 'Y'. She gives in later, on the condition that you provide 'Z'. The point is that 'Y' was never an issue for her in the first place; it was a red herring.

As a diversionary tactic, the red herring can:

- Deflect attention from what you're really interested in, towards something else.
- Be used to cause the other party to waste time chasing things they do not need to and, in doing so, they run short of time to pursue other matters.
- Prevent the other party from discovering or questioning you about something you would rather they did not.
- Enable you to obtain a much bigger concession on the thing that is really of interest to you.

The red herring is a particularly devious tactic.

To deal with a suspected red herring:

- Question the reasons behind the other party's stance; this may well expose a weakness in their argument.
- Ask the other party why this particular request is so important, and whether it is more important than other matters; this may help you to flush out whether it is real or fake.
- Use the red herring yourself by calling their bluff. For example, make out that it's difficult for you to do something the other party is requesting, but promise to try to get it approved or included in the deal if the other party agrees to something else that you want.
- Use it when you *are* able to honour a request, but when you want to imply that you're doing them a big favour. In doing so, make them aware that you're really making a big step towards them by honouring this request and you will be looking for some form of reciprocity from them as part of the deal, or in the near future. See case 27 – 'Reciprocity', and section Two for more information.
- If it really is not such an important issue for the other party (discovered as a result of one or more of the above tactics), they may prefer you to spend

your time and energy working on the issues that really are important to them rather than give away favours on something that they do not really want or need.

- Remember, whenever you're asked for something, a suspected red herring or not, and it's easy for you to meet the request, never give it away easily; use the opportunity to highlight the value of this particular concession, what it will 'cost' you, and ask for something in return.

Finally, when you get annoyed with people, especially when you think they're in a lower position than you – such as the self-important businessman's view of airline cabin crew or his fellow passengers, or the pompous lady mentioned in case 45, trying to check-in for her flight, be careful. People have different sources and degrees of power. Even if they're not empowered to grant certain concessions, in this case a cabin upgrade, they can be obstinate blocks to your progress and achievement of your ambitions.

In negotiation terms they're called 'gatekeepers' or 'blockers'. They have relatively less power than more senior people, but they do have the power to enable or disable your progress in a few critical ways or channels.

Consider, for example, the medical secretary who either grants the pharmaceutical representative a meeting with the consultant or who says that, unfortunately, the consultant's diary is fully booked before then going on holiday, and in any case she rarely sees medical representatives. Compare this with the same person who says, *'Actually, I'm not really supposed to do this, but I know she has a free 20 minutes right now – let me see if I can get you in to see her for a quick conversation.'*

Even if the other party does have the empowerment to grant a concession, if you've annoyed or irritated them, the chances are they'll try to confound you and be laughing all the way home.

They'll be the ones dining out on the story for years to come, whilst you continue to stew in your own self-cooked juice.

Hopefully the businessman learned a lesson from this case too.