NEGOTIATION BREAKING POINTS: CRITICAL MOMENTS THAT REDEFINE WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

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Negotiation Breaking Points

When conversations quietly collapse…

- Everyday negotiations shape trust, commitment, and collaboration
- Breaches occur but are not always acknowledged
- Negotiation Breaking Points – critical moments in everyday negotiations that 'break' a relationship when the other party is unaware.
- This awareness gap prevents repair and quietly erodes the relationship



Trust Violations

- **Trust repair requires acknowledgment and meaningful action**
  Apologies and restitution rebuild trust better than denial or silence (*Schweitzer et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2004*)
- **Sincerity is signaled through costly or effortful acts**
  Substantive penance (not just words) restores cooperation (*Bottom et al., 2002*)
- **How blame is framed matters**
  Taking internal responsibility is more effective than externalizing blame (*Kim et al., 2006*)

Trust repair depends on mutual recognition. What if the break goes unnoticed and unaddressed?

Turning Points

- **Negotiations move in phases punctuated by pivotal turning points** that shift direction toward breakdown or breakthrough (Druckman & Olekalns, 2013).
- **Interpretive filters govern how each party *perceives* those moments,** shaping subsequent strategy (Druckman, Olekalns & Smith, 2009).
- **Literature allows for *different interpretations* of the same event,** yet still presumes both sides notice a disruption (Druckman & Olekalns, 2013).

What happens when a pivotal moment registers for one negotiator but remains *invisible* to the other?

Psychological Contracts

- Implicit expectations shape how people interpret workplace obligations (Rousseau, 1995).
- Psychological contracts often involve employees and organizations, not person-to-person negotiations (Rousseau, 1995).
- Perceived violations typically unfold over time, as patterns of unmet expectations accumulate (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).
- Ambiguity and complexity increase the likelihood of divergent breach perceptions (Conway & Briner, 2005).

What are the relational consequences when a perceived breach unfolds in a high-stakes conversational moment, and the other party doesn't recognize it in time to repair it?

Questions Guiding This Study



What triggers negotiation breaking points?

What words, actions, or omissions trigger a break?

Why are they often left unspoken?

How does the awareness gap shape outcomes?

Why do parties often fail to signal the break?

What are the consequences of these unacknowledged moments?

How do they affect trust, collaboration, and ongoing working relationships in the short and long term?

Qualitative Method

Preliminary Findings – Ongoing Study

Exploratory Phase

- 15 interviews completed to date across diverse sectors (tech, healthcare, education, etc.)
- Wave 2, data collection ongoing
- 45-minute Zoom interviews using semi-structured, critical-incident prompts: *Tell me about a critical moment when a negotiation suddenly 'broke' or led to a shift in a relationship…*

Analysis

- Themes are developed through iterative coding and constant comparison
- Analysis is ongoing and evolves as new interviews are added

What's Next

- Theoretical and snowball sampling to deepen variation and test model transferability

Harry's Hidden Resentment

DS interview

Trigger event:

- DS, a retiring CEO, names a younger partner (Scott) as his successor
- Harry, the older partner, is passed over

Awareness gap:

- DS believes the decision was logical and noncontroversial
- *"I was totally unaware that he was that upset about it."*

Downstream rupture:

- 10 years later, Harry vents in a phone call
- *"He was still angry. I think it's still a sore point."*
- DS realizes Harry had disengaged years earlier, but never said why

Information Gap – DS didn't know a breach occurred

The Quiet Exit

SI interview

Trigger event:

- SI is offered a Regional Director role in a 3-hour meeting
- The next day her boss retracts the offer:
  "*I made a mistake…*"

Awareness gap:

- The boss sees it as awkward but fixable
- "*They just put Sam above me… like that solved it.*"
- He doesn't realize SI has emotionally exited

Downstream rupture:

- SI keeps the title but loses trust
- "*That changed everything.*"

Impact Gap – breach seen, but its effect was not

Two Breaking Points, Two Types of Gaps

Case	Trigger	Gap Type	Result
DS	Named a younger successor	**Information** Gap (breach unknown)	Harry pulled back quietly for years
SI	Retraction of promised role	**Impact** Gap (effect unrecognized)	SI stayed on paper, but had quit in spirit

Conceptual Model v1

Unnoticed Breaches and Costly Breaking Points



Trigger event
Violates salient expectation, value, identity (e.g. input dismissed, publish shaming, unilateral decision)



Sense-making
Privately interprets event and decides severity of event



Awareness Gap
Other party is unaware (or minimizes)



Immediate response
Silent withdrawal, exit planning



Costly rupture
resignation, partnership split, client loss, organizational fallout

Conceptual Model v2

Revealing Hidden Gaps and Diverging Paths



Trigger event
Violates salient expectation, value, identity (e.g. input dismissed, publish shaming, unilateral decision)



Sense-making
Privately interprets event and decides severity of event



Awareness Gap

Information Gap
Other party doesn't realize break occurred

Impact Gap Other party sees the break but doesn't realize its impact



Immediate response

- Assert & stay
- Partial withdrawal
- Re-negotiate terms
- Silent exit



Costly rupture

- Full rupture
- Partial rupture
- Rupture averted

Moderators that shape severity or visibility:

- Public vs. private setting
- Triadic dynamics
- Power & identity vulnerabilities

Implications & Next Steps

- **Single moments in negotiations that quietly redefine relationships**
  Breaking points aren't long-term relationship failures, but momentary ruptures in real-time professional interactions.
- **Awareness gaps block repair**
  When one party doesn't see, or misjudges, the breach, trust quietly erodes.
- **This research opens new questions**
  - How do these breaks go unspoken in everyday negotiations?
  - Can we detect early signs of silent disengagement?
  - What happens when we hear *both sides* of a breaking point?
  - How might interventions help surface and repair these moments?

THANK YOU

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