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The Voice: Is 'Staying in Character' Good Advice When Negotiating?

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On last night's *The Voice*, which began the elimination sing-offs between two members of each judge's team, Lionel Ritchie provided some tasty and not necessarily musical advice for the person he was coaching. "Stay in character," he said, while the other guy -- your competitor -- sings.

He's got a point. If a song tells a story, then the singer becomes the character within the narrative -- a bad boy, broken-hearted gal, vengeful spouse or sympathetic onlooker. When you're singing, you own the persona.

If you step off to the side of the stage and relax into your "real" self when your competitor is in the limelight, you've quite possibly blown your lack of focus. Once you've got the mic back in your hand, your persona may be so diluted that your performance has lost most of its credibility.

Just about every business or money transaction you're involved with is a bit like these musical elimination rounds. You need to stay focused enough to emerge the better player.

You'd think Ritchie's advice would apply to negotiating too.

Consider how often we let down our guard when haggling. There's usually two of you. You talk and then the other guy takes his turn. Most interviewees hold it together while it's their turn to speak. But they let down their guard when the other person -- who invariably controls the purse strings -- takes charge. Wouldn't the outcome be better for interviewees who maintained that tough negotiator stance -- even while listening to the other guy talk?

Jim Thomas doesn't think so.

Thomas, a lawyer and CEO of Common Ground, a negotiating and educational training company, says that, unlike *The Voice* -- in which dueling competitors have their less featured time while standing to the side of the stage -- a real negotiation is one inherently dynamic situation. "You don't need a fixed persona -- you need a variable one," says Thomas, author of *Negotiate to Win: The 21 Rules for Successful Negotiation*.

In fact, he says, having one persona you're projecting -- for example, a stern take-it-or-leave-it type -- could be the kiss of death. "Nothing will turn off the other side more than a tactic."

The negotiating-mode ideal, says Thomas, is to be in the moment. That means paying attention to what quality each minute calls for, be it humility, sensitivity, enthusiasm or problem-solving.

"Character includes various types of behavior, not just one, which can make you appear stilted in a negotiation," he says. "A tactic takes you out of the moment." In other words, you could lose your voice.

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