

Food-at-the-Bargaining-Table

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SPEAKERS

Chris Casillas, Emily Martin, Matt Greer



Chris Casillas 00:08

Food, we all need it. And many of us take great joy in its consumption, whether it be a favorite type of food, or a particular setting in which to enjoy a nice meal. Food is also the binding element that brings family and friends together for some of our strongest memories, from the backyard cookout to an annual holiday meal. Can food have a place at the collective bargaining table? In other words, might food help us be better negotiators? Join Matt, Emily and Chris for this episode of the PERColator where we will explore the role of food and the effect it has on all of us as a possible tool for advancing your next set of negotiations. Hello, and welcome to the negotiation project podcast. Today we are gonna talk a little bit about food at the negotiation table. But before we get into some of the specifics of that just want to kind of set up the conversation by mentioning a few things. So one thing here at the negotiation project that we're working on is thinking about ways in which we can be more effective negotiators and really trying to create kind of a more collaborative environment. And recently, at one of our lunchtime zoom sessions, we got into a great dialogue, talking about the benefits of eating meals together at the bargaining table. And we heard from a lot of folks out there in the field doing this work talking about the benefits of sitting down and sharing a lunch together with your partners across the bargaining table. And that got us thinking like, what, what did where did, where does some of those benefits come from? What is the advantage of that, because I think we see that in some occasions, and in some environments. And so we started thinking about that a little bit more. And actually, not surprisingly, there's there's some research out there that kind of supports this idea that there are some intrinsic benefits from sharing meals and having kind of this communal space together when performing a complex task like bargaining. And there's there's kind of some fancy terminology in the social or behavioral psychology world about this, which we can kind of continue to talk about and develop. But really, it comes from this idea that there's a lot of complex problems out in the world, our brains have limitations and our abilities to kind of tackle those problems. And there's actually a lot of benefit in coming together as a group to collectively solve these problems. What is kind of more colloquially or, or kind of more euphemistically, I should say, kind of referred to as groupiness, which is kind of a fun, fun term. And so we looked at that in the context of meals. And as I said, there's some research out there talking about this and the benefits of being more collaborative when sharing meals. And so I just wanted to mention a couple of those studies and talk about them, and then have some dialogue with my colleagues, Emily and Matt here to

kind of think through what that all means. So in one study, by Lakshmi Balachandra, did this experiment, looking at the kind of benefits of negotiating while having a meal at a restaurant or also looked at in a conference room versus not having a meal together. And the research showed that, in fact, when you have meals, and particularly like in a setting like a restaurant, it generated 12% higher profits than those negotiating without that. And a similar result happened even in a kind of a conference room space where folks were sharing meals. And so just some speculation in that study, that kind of sharing that time together that space together, and also the physical physical benefits of kind of increased glucose levels that allow for kind of stronger decision making and more creativity. So there was there was that other studies have kind of supported this as well in terms of looking at the benefits that shared meals have on increasing trust and cooperation. Another interesting article about eating together, firefighters who eat together at a firehouse and study there of a big city fire department showing that there was a really strong positive association between those communal meals and the performance of the group as a whole. So anyway, some really interesting kind of social science research to really support kind of some anecdotal observations that we have heard from our clientele. And I wanted to use that to kind of preface our conversation with thinking about, What is it about the meal that can enhance group cooperation and creativity? And maybe thinking a little bit about why we don't see that more in bargaining? Why? Why aren't folks kind of doing this on a more regular basis? And I don't know, Emily and Matt, you want to offer some of your own perspectives or thoughts about what you've seen out there? And maybe some of the benefits or some of the obstacles to this happening?

E

Emily Martin 05:24

Yeah, I think, as a mediator, we do see food occasionally. So I'm thinking through, like, when do we see food. And I think when I work with firefighters, it's not unusual for us to be in a kitchen, or they need a space that has a kitchen and has a has a literal gathering place where they're used to eating together? I don't, I don't know if I've actually seen a whole lot of food in those negotiations. But it feels like a food setting just because of the nature of firehall. I think in education, I sometimes see food, I certainly see food. And in some IBB groups, it's kind of a hallmark of old school interest based bargaining is thinking about breaking bread together. I'm kind of curious, where else, are we seeing food? Or is it possible that as mediators, we're not seeing the food? Because the groups that are eating together are not the ones that need a mediator? Maybe that's happening? I don't know. What do you guys think?

M

Matt Greer 06:14

It's interesting. I, I was thinking about this too. And I, I have seen food as mediator, but it seems like I see it almost as often in maybe a not so positive way. Sometimes, like some groups, I've certainly seen like union groups who are employer tries to bring in lunch or offers to buy lunch, they take it kind of negatively, if there's if there's a heated bargain, they may actually see it as kind of a way to, "Oh, you're trying to buy our vote," or something like that, I've actually seen that kind of dynamic play out a little bit when it wasn't, the table wasn't set, right for that moment. But then I've also seen it like change dynamics in a very positive way. I remember one, probably the most heated mediation I've ever been involved in a few years ago, where actually the role of the mediator, maybe this is where as a mediator, I can think of food and maybe a little differently than negotiators do. But my fellow mediator was in a really, really, really rough moment in that mediation, she went out and bought doughnuts for everyone and

brought in, I started the day off with some donuts. And maybe it was a coincidence, maybe not, but the dynamics of that room changed dramatically after those donuts were shared. And everyone kind of grabbed doughnuts. And we're talking about which ones were their favorite flavors. And it was kind of a moment like that, which really did have a real impact in how the mood of that room changed pretty drastically so but Emily, I think you're right, it is pretty rare. I don't see food a whole lot except for in like the trainings, IBBs where almost like, like classic ground rule in IBB's where we're going to take turns bringing in snacks and and that's almost like almost written in stone sometimes. So it's kind of interesting to see in that context. But in the mediation negotiation world, not so much or not so often.

E

Emily Martin 07:48

Well I'm wondering if it has to do with money. And because I talked to mediators in different contexts outside of our world, it is not unusual for the mediator to bring doughnuts as a as an opening move. I mean, that's just kind of, it's kind of in their bag of tricks. But, but for us, I have had pushback on that. And I think there's a concern, like we don't have a budget for that, our agencies gonna pay for that. So if it's expected that every mediator is going to feed everybody, that's a problem in light of the way that public sector dollars work. And I wonder if that's also one of the things that's going on with food, I know that that when there is food there, if I'm if I'm an IBB facilitator, and they have a shared meal, I get weird about the money, I pay for my meal. And I don't care where the money goes, as long as I don't have a free meal. And is there in the public sector a perception of you guys like buttering us up? We don't want to be buttered up by a letting us buy us lunch. You know what I mean? Is there perceptions about that? Then is there also weirdness about what you can spend public dollars on? If you all went to a restaurant and had your negotiations there? Would there be pushback on why are negotiations happening with a catered meal every time? Or why are they going out to eat every time they're talking to each other? Is there is there a part of public sector bargaining that makes who pays for the food and extra burden?

C

Chris Casillas 09:13

Yeah, I think that's probably part of it Emily, and I and I think what you and Matt both touched on there in terms of, you know, kind of assuming maybe bad intent around you know, offering to get a meal or inviting, you know, the other side into sharing a meal with you that there's some kind of nefarious purpose with that rather than just thinking of it as a moment of, you know, levity and shared experience and, you know, an opportunity to kind of recharge and relax a little bit for a while, even in the context of kind of a difficult negotiation, and there is some obstacle there for a lot of folks for various reasons, but I think that's part of it. Also, I would say too you know, I think in this day and age, even kind of coming together on a shared meal can be a challenge, because there's so many different, you know, options out there and dietary restrictions, maybe it seems to people that it's almost like another thing to add into their negotiation is they also have to bargain over, you know what food to get, which maybe seems too taxing sometimes in the midst of a difficult negotiation. Although that seems like an obstacle you could overcome in different ways. But I wonder if that contributes to things as well, and why we don't see it as often as maybe you would think you would and wouldn't be beneficial?



E

Emily Martin 10:38

Yeah, I think there's something to that. I think the last time I brought, oh, I was excited about this delicious danish that I arranged for a group and but then, what about the fruit? Or what about the people who are gluten free? Or what about the fact that it wasn't the healthiest thing in the world and there's just it feels like it's hard to get food, right. And I think, I don't know how to fix that. But I do think that the choice of food has become an opportunity to mess up.

M

Matt Greer 11:04

I think that's true, but, Emily, I remember, like, nine years ago, when I first started at PERC, and I observed you mediate, and you had a basket of treats or of snacks in your car that you would take around with you. And I remember it was a great was a great variety of snacks and you had a bunch of stuff in there. And I think you, I don't know if you intentionally did it, but there were there was a variety of stuff in there to meet different dietary needs, perhaps. And that was I thought that was kind of a elegant way of doing that. I've never done it myself, but kind of having a bag of treats snacks to bring along to kind of combat that midafternoon kind of fatigue, blood sugar drain. And sometimes I think we as mediators, and maybe as negotiators, lead negotiators could think about that in that context as well, kind of getting that blood sugar boost at key moments and kind of meeting those needs then too.

E

Emily Martin 11:53

Yeah, I used to bring Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, because I grew up in a town where everybody loved Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. I mean, maybe there was some peanut butter allergies somewhere. But I'm from Hershey, Pennsylvania, we have Reese's Chocolate Factory. And the Hershey chocolate factories like it was a hometown thing, we loved our peanut butter cups. And so I came to PERC and I realized at three o'clock, if you hand out Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, that can be a boost of energy that you need to get the day to end on a good note. And so I did that for a long time. And then I stopped doing that because I think the peanut butter, I would have them in my car and they'd melt. So I melted too many bags of peanut butter cups, and then I didn't have any food with me and I would get hungry and and that just led to bad days, you know, hangriness is a real thing. So I created that basket. And I actually I was picking food that I wouldn't mind eating if I was hungry, because I find my blood sugar does drop in the middle of a conflict. And it's nice to be able to grab something that you actually want to eat. And sometimes you don't want to eat a whole lot of there's a lot of stuff that just doesn't feel right in that moment. So I wanted to have variety for myself. And I wanted to have that handy so that I would bring it in, and like, when I was feeling hungry, it usually meant the other side, other people were feeling hungry too. And if it was my basket, it wasn't a problem for me to give it away from for my ethics reasons, cause I wasn't expecting anything from anybody. So I would, I would just leave some snacks out. And hopefully that would help. You know, there's that famous study about parole boards and how the worst time if you're up for parole or was time to have your hearing your case heard is right before lunch, because it makes a difference in how people make decisions.

C

Chris Casillas 13:37

Mm hmm. Yeah. As someone who's been through Hershey, Pennsylvania myself, I can attest to the fact that I don't know how you wouldn't love Reese's Peanut Butter Cups after that, because

the fact that I don't know how you wouldn't love Reese's Peanut Butter Cups after that, because I don't know did they like pipe it into the air? Like I like the opposite of going through a pulp mill town, which is like you want to drive as fast as you can there. You just want to like walk the streets of Hershey forever.

E

Emily Martin 13:58

But yeah, yeah, it was that what that corner town was peanut butter. And then when I was a kid, the regular chocolate factory was on the other end of town closer to school. So we would we'd smelled more chocolate. Yeah. Okay, but on a good day and smell it and then people would come and they'd be like, is it like it every day and be like, totally, every day smells like chocolate. Of course. We're not super excited. This is a fun day.

C

Chris Casillas 14:21

Yeah, but yeah, that's is a fun memory. But I think you're you know, you're you're right, in terms of kind of thinking about the kind of physiological effects of this and sometimes it's so curious to me, because I think some groups are like, you know, when you're in that difficult bargain, it's like, you know, we're just gonna keep going, we're not stopping for dinner. We're not stopping for anything. You know, I get that. I get that on some level, I guess. But as you point out, like there's really serious kind of physical ramifications of not eating that affect our ability to kind of think clearly and think creatively. And there's some really downside effects that I think you know, people would be wise to consider that piece of it, you know, along with the kind of the communal nature of it, even if you're not gonna, you know, break bread with the other side, just thinking about having that recharge those recharge moments throughout your negotiation. So you're kind of keeping yourself in a good state of mind. I think that's really important.

E

Emily Martin 15:18

There is a school of thought that says no, keep them hungry, lock them in the room. Don't let him eat. Don't let him have any water. No one can use the restroom. You know, that's how you get people to cave and you get the deal.

M

Matt Greer 15:29

That's the old school of thought, though, right, Emily?

E

Emily Martin 15:34

I think so. I don't know, I'm sure you guys have heard it too, right?

M

Matt Greer 15:39

I may have used it myself. once in a while. in a minimal way. But yeah. I'm curious. I'm kind of

thinking about our current role, at least with current roles for most of us right now in Washington is that we're still doing most of this via zoom and virtually. And I'm just wondering if one of the upsides of doing that, as people you do less have less hangryness, because people are at home or someplace where they maybe have easier access to getting a quick snack, but then that kind of also raises the element of like, well, you can't really, you know, to set those positive impacts of eating together, having snacks together, it's harder to do that via zoom. I'm curious if either of you have had any experiences with food in the Zoom world, maybe you can't literally share food, as it had an impact on any of the negotiations or trainings or mediations that you've seen?

C

Chris Casillas 16:25

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think we've, well, I've observed a couple things. One is, you know, there's, I think people are a little bit reluctant to kind of actively eat while their cameras are on. So that kind of creates an interesting dynamic, because you might be meeting over lunchtime or something, and folks want to get a bite, but they feel self conscious about that, so their cameras go off, which creates an interesting issue and some potential kind of drawbacks there. But I've also seen, you know, circumstances where somebody is like eating something, and then other people are like, Ooh, that looks really good. What is it and that you know, kind of prompts kind of a fun conversation around, you know, whatever the person is eating and, and that leads to some just light banter and dialogue. And you still can kind of replicate some of that effect, even though we're all in this kind of weird digital space. So I've definitely seen some some of that.

M

Matt Greer 17:17

I did a training not too long ago, where part of the training was they're getting ready to start bargaining. They were talking about and people who had been through the last bargain, were reminiscing about all the delicious treats that certain people brought in, and all the food they had and how it was it was, it was weird, how it almost replicated the same kind of feeling of sharing, sharing food together, but virtually, but it kind of tied into like those memories that we have of those flavors and foods that we had. And that can be positive. So it's amazing, it can still kind of incorporate that in some weird ways.

E

Emily Martin 17:47

I'm wondering if there is sharing food at the table that we're like, it's not when maybe there's a sharing food in negotiations, but not across the table? It does seem like for some groups, there is a tradition that the union goes out and has lunch together. And that is a team bonding moment that some groups do not have all groups do it. And I think I see it more on the union side, than management side, but is is that idea that sharing, the breaking the bread, happening? It's just not happening across the table, but it's supporting an internal group dynamic.

M

Matt Greer 18:20

Some about that. That's one of the things I've noticed is, and that's, that some of the

sorry about that. That's my film making a weird noise, randomly, though, that came through kind of a funky little music, though. I think you're right, Emily, I think I do see that more times that you know for the Union teams, especially it's kind of their caucus time, during mediation, why see it most often is like, we're gonna go and we're gonna reassess where we are. But we're gonna do it at a restaurant we're at together and do it. And then the union picks up the tab usually, right. So it's kind of one of the, seems like, one of the benefits of being on the union bargaining team, sometimes is that food element.

E

Emily Martin 18:49

And it might be hard for the the meal to be across the table, because that might be an important moment for that group that might not always be together in other context. You know, when it comes to firefighters, they might eat together more often. But but sometimes bargaining units really don't know each other that well or are quite the same. Don't spend as many other meals together. So that might be a really important part of the negotiation as well.

C

Chris Casillas 19:13

Yeah. Well, great, great conversation, Matt and Emily, I really think we kind of touched on a lot of different facets of this kind of phenomenon of bringing food into our negotiation process and thinking about how, you know, we can better kind of tackle these complex problems that are collective bargaining agreements, they're there, they're complex agreements, there's a lot going on within the agreement. There's a lot of things going on around it a lot of history, you know, they're not always easy nuts to crack. And in a lot of cases, we can kind of get to better outcomes when we're when both sides are kind of working toward kind of that common goal of creating a stronger agreement. And and one way I think we've seen out in the research virtue of doing this as is bringing a lot of minds together by engaging in some of these different rituals together like like breaking bread and sharing sharing food and I, I think it's an important concept to kind of give some consideration to and think about for your next your next negotiation. So thanks for joining us, everyone and we'll talk to you again soon.