Dear Labby,

I am in the admittedly enviable position of negotiating the terms of my first academic faculty position. My postdoc advisor has suggested that I negotiate aggressively and forcefully to get as much as possible on all fronts—for salary, start-up funding, ideal teaching responsibilities, a non-tenure-track research position for my partner, and help with buying a house. Another trusted mentor has suggested that this negotiation is the start of a (presumably) long-term relationship with a department and department chair, and that my negotiation strategy should thoughtfully consider the implications of the process and outcome on this relationship, which could be the basis for my professional success and happiness.

Labby, can you advise me on ways to work out a good and fair offer that will optimize my long-term success and reputation as a terrific scientist and desirable colleague?

—Negotiation Novice

Dear Novice,

Effective negotiation is an ability that few of us scientists have much experience with, but it is an invaluable skill to learn. It is wise of you to consider that just getting the biggest piece of the pie possible at the start of your position may not mean that you have conducted an optimally successful negotiation.

First of all, determine which of the components of your offer are most important to you. Your department chair might not be able to do everything you ask for, but if she knows your highest priorities, those items will get the most attention. For instance, arranging a position for your partner may require tapping the same limited pool of funds that contribute to your salary, so not pushing for the highest salary possible might make it more feasible to create a position so that your partner can work at the same institution.

Another important part of the negotiation is to realize that you and the department have the same ultimate goal, to maximize your productivity and success. A department chair may be operating under constraints or political pressures that are not obvious to you, so creatively suggesting solutions that yield good outcomes for both of you will signal your willingness to contribute to the greater good of the department, and you will be well on your way to being a valued colleague even before you start your position. For example, many people need one or more pieces of expensive equipment, so one way to generate goodwill is to suggest sharing these items with other members of the department.

It is important to have a written record of the key agreements that you make as part of your recruitment to your new position. Although it is crucial to develop a trusting and supportive relationship with your department chair, remember that department chairs are transient positions—the culture of your new department is an important and longer-lasting contributor to your professional prosperity. The negotiation process itself can reveal much about the character and environment that you may be committing yourself to.

Above all, negotiate in good faith and confidence. Whichever department you decide to join will be lucky to have you!

—Labby