



The Silent Strategy of Seating: How Positioning at the Table Shapes Legal Negotiations

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Delta House, 8a Vladimira Popovića street

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Authors: Nemanja Stepanović, Managing Director

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In high-stakes discussions, your chair is more than furniture—it's a tactical decision. Understanding the psychology of seating can give you and your client a critical first advantage.

In the practice of law, we master the language of contracts, the logic of arguments, and the art of persuasion. Yet some of the most powerful communications in a negotiation occur before anyone speaks. They happen in the silent, deliberate choice of where to sit.

Whether at a rectangular conference table, a round mediation desk, or a U-shaped arrangement, seating positions form an invisible map of power, alliance, and strategy. For attorneys, reading—and intentionally shaping—this map is a subtle but essential skill that can frame the entire dialogue to come.

The Psychology of Proximity and Position

Regardless of the table's shape, fundamental principles of spatial psychology apply. Proximity to perceived authority, sightlines, and the creation of physical "sides" all send strong nonverbal cues.

- ***The Power Positions:*** Traditional seats of authority are typically those that command the broadest view of the room, often at the ends of a rectangular table or at the head of a U-shape. The individual who claims this spot—whether a neutral facilitator, a presiding judge, or a lead negotiator—instantly establishes a focal point of control and attention.
- ***The Inner Circle:*** Seats immediately adjacent to a power position are for trusted allies, key advisors, and seconds-in-command. Occupying this flank signals deep involvement, a protective stance towards the principal, and a readiness to engage directly in the core exchange.
- ***The Specialist Zone:*** Positions along the sides, often with clear sightlines to both one's own team and the opposition, are favored by subject-matter experts. Here, the financial analyst, technical consultant, or specialized counsel can best perform their role: observing, analyzing, and feeding critical information to the lead negotiator.

- ***The Observer's Perch:*** Seats set back slightly, at the far end of a table or just outside the main arc, are chosen for strategic observation. This could be where a junior associate takes meticulous notes, a silent decision-maker assesses the room, or a client prefers to absorb the flow without being in the direct line of fire. Distance here can signify either detachment or overarching oversight.
- ***The Direct Counterpoint:*** The seat directly facing the primary authority figure is a position of equal power and potential confrontation. It is the natural place for the opposing lead, creating a dynamic of balanced dialogue, direct challenge, and negotiation. Eye contact across this divide is constant and charged.

Table Geometry: How Shape Alters Strategy

The physical shape of the table inherently structures the interaction:

- ***The Rectangular Table:*** This classic setup creates clear sides, hierarchies, and a natural “head.” It encourages formal, positional bargaining and can reinforce an “us versus them” dynamic. Strategic positioning here is most critical.
- ***The Round Table:*** By removing obvious heads and ends, a round table promotes an aura of collaboration, equality, and collective problem-solving. It discourages overt dominance and can help diffuse adversarial posturing, making it ideal for mediations or joint sessions aimed at finding common ground.
- ***The U-Shaped or Hollow Square Table:*** Often used in arbitrations or multi-party talks, this setup creates a central “floor” and blends hierarchy with inclusion. The open end often holds the arbitrator or facilitator, while parties array themselves along the sides, allowing for both addresses to the center and direct engagement with opponents.

Strategic Seating as an Opening Move in Negotiation

How your team distributes itself is a pre-emptive communication of strategy and unity:

- ***Projecting a Unified Front:*** A team that sits closely together, forming a solid bloc, projects internal cohesion, preparation, and a shared strategy. It signals that they will negotiate as one.
- ***Signaling Collaboration:*** Intentionally breaking up a team bloc—having a client sit slightly apart or intermingling with the other side at a round table—can soften perceived aggressiveness and suggest openness to integrative, interest-based bargaining.
- ***Controlling the Environment:*** Whenever possible, exercise control over the setting. If a rectangular table is fixed, discuss which side offers the best psychological advantage. If options exist, consider whether a round table would better serve your client's goal of fostering collaboration. Who arrives first to claim key positions? These are calculable elements of preparation.

Practical Takeaways for the Legal Professional

1. **Plan with Purpose:** Seating should be part of your pre-meeting strategy. Align your team's positions with your negotiation goals. Who is the visible voice? Who is the strategic listener? Where does the client best fulfill their role?
2. **Decode the Opposition:** Observe the other side's seating choices closely. Who sits at the elbow of their lead counsel? Who is taking notes versus making eye contact? Their arrangement reveals hierarchy, confidence, and likely lines of communication.
3. **Advise Your Client:** Counsel your client on the nonverbal message their chosen seat will send. Empower them to choose a position that aligns with their desired presence—authoritative, consultative, or observational.
4. **Master the Flexibility:** Be prepared to adapt your reading to any room configuration. The core principles of proximity, sightlines, and alignment remain constant, even if the furniture changes.

Conclusion

In the theater of legal negotiation, the stage is set not just by the facts of the case, but by the physical space of the discussion. Mastering the silent language of seating, understanding its psychology, leveraging its strategic potential, and interpreting its signals provides a nuanced layer of control.

It allows an attorney to frame the conversation, understand the opposing party's dynamics, and ultimately, position their client for the most favorable possible outcome. Before you present your first argument, ensure you've advanced your position by the simple, powerful act of choosing your chair with intention.

Author



Nemanja Stepanović

Managing Director

E: nemanja.stepanovic@jpm.law

JPM | PARTNERS
8a Vladimira Popovića,
Delta House
11070 Belgrade, Serbia
T:+ 381/11/207-6850
E: office@jpm.law

www.jpm.law