

Today's Negotiator

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Introduction

Few of us have the absolute power necessary to force others to do what we want. Therefore, we must negotiate with our co-workers, project team members and representatives of government agencies, as well as with family and friends. We negotiate over roles and responsibilities: car and home purchases, job assignments, family chores and government requirements.

The successful negotiation is one that reaches the best agreement—not just any agreement. It ensures that both parties have met their objectives and will live up to their commitments. Negotiation is a vehicle for problem-solving—nothing more and nothing less.

Negotiation Success

Negotiation does not take place in a vacuum, but within the context of a relationship. What happened between us yesterday will affect what happens today, and what happens today will impact tomorrow. It is not necessary that we like each other but, rather, that we trust each other. When people trust each other, the communication is likely to be more open, and the parties more willing to take risks with each other. In low-trust relationships, the parties are likely to be much more circumspect in what they say and do—they are risk averse. There are many factors at play in the successful negotiation, but none as important as the degree of trust between the parties. As Dale Zand pointed out in a 1972 article on managerial problem-solving:

*“...in low-trust groups, interpersonal relationships interfere with and distort perspectives of the problem. Energy and creativity are diverted from finding comprehensive realistic solutions. By contrast, in high-trust groups there is less socially generated uncertainty, and problems are solved more effectively.”*²

The remainder of this article looks at what negotiators must do to ensure success prior to the negotiation, during negotiation and after it ends.

Prior to the Negotiation

“Most people just walk into a negotiation and fire away.... However it is crucial that you do your homework. The trick is to acquire all the information concerning the issues involved, even ones [issues] you may not deem important at first glance,” Bob Woolf said in his book about his life as a negotiator.²

Preparation: We suggest you start your planning by asking the

following questions:

- What are your objectives?
- Are some objectives more important than others?
- What is your ideal settlement?
- What are your needs and interests?
- What will you accept if you can't achieve your primary objectives?
- Is there a point at which you'll decide it's not worth doing the deal?
- What concessions are you prepared to make?

The same questions should be asked of the other party—walk in his or her shoes for a while:

- What do you think the other person needs to be able to say yes?
- What are the other person's needs and interests?
- What do you think will be influencing the other person?
- What do you believe is the other person's ideal settlement?
- Is there a point beyond which you think the other person will not go?

Several additional items should be included as part of the planning process:

Team negotiations: If you are negotiating as part of a team, it is critical to review how you plan to work together. Everyone on the team should have a role, e.g., observer, note taker, spokesperson. You should also decide how to signal each other if things are not going well, or if you think something has been missed.

Cross-cultural issues: Americans tend to be insensitive to other cultures. If you are going to another country, it is critical that you understand the people and culture. Not everyone sees the world through the unique American perspective. When negotiating with colleagues in other parts of the world, many Americans fail to consider the effect of culture and language differences. Although many of our international associates speak and write English, few can do it at the pace and tempo with which we are comfortable. Nor are they familiar with our idioms and colloquial expressions. This leads to a great deal of misunderstanding and confusion.

Clarifying authority: You must clarify the amount of authority you have in reaching an agreement. It is hard, if not impossible, to be effective at the bargaining table if your status as a negotiator has not been previously clarified with your significant other—be it spouse, boss or co-worker. There is nothing more embarrassing than returning home or to the office and being told that the deal you worked

so hard to achieve is not acceptable.

Put it in writing: Write down your plan's key points and take that summary with you to the negotiation.

During the Negotiation

Once negotiations begin, successful negotiators follow a rational process:

Climate setting: Many people think climate setting, where the process of building trust begins, means spending a few minutes on small talk—the “how’s the family” type of questions. Instead, climate setting is where you and the other party set the tone for the entire negotiation, be it friendly or serious.

The physical aspects of climate setting can be as important as what you say. Where you negotiate and how you greet the other person send a strong message. The objective is to set an atmosphere that says, “I am someone you can trust. We’re in this together; this is something we’ll handle successfully.” Climate setting is particularly important in new relationships.

Clarifying issues: The next important step is identifying the issues and outlining the problems to be solved. All too frequently, people neglect to identify the issues and rush from small talk directly to bargaining. Clarifying issues sets the agenda for the meeting and provides a strong anchor for the negotiation—it gives the negotiation a center.

The following guidelines will assist you in defining the issues under discussion:

- Encourage the other party to share his or her issues.
- Listen, don’t interrupt.
- Be prepared to discuss your own issues, needs and interests.
- Summarize all the issues before you move into the bargaining stage.

You set the framework for a more open, rational process when the issues are clearly identified and both parties work to build a joint agenda. The temptation to begin bargaining as soon as an issue is listed is strong. You should resist this temptation and continue to list issues. Once all the issues are listed there is more room to find answers both parties can be comfortable with. When time is of the essence or the issues are particularly complex, issue identification can be enhanced through the use of e-mail or faxes before the parties meet.

Finding a solution: The primary objective of any negotiation is to achieve a mutually satisfactory solution both parties can support. However, many negotiators are so focused on what they want that they don’t take the time to ask questions so they can understand the issues, interests and needs of the other party. Instead, both parties try to sell each other on their respective points of view. They argue about whose position is right, rather than exploring the problem and trying to understand where the other party is coming from. It is important to remember that the other side believes they, too, are right. The goal is to determine why they believe they are right, and see if a new definition of “right” can be found. Throughout the problem-solving phase, successful negotiators

work hard to avoid position bargaining and are willing to share their needs and interests—and understand those of the other party.

We have found that good negotiators:

1. **Clarify.** To make sure they fully understand what is being said (both the words and feelings), negotiators clarify to ensure that there will be no misunderstandings.
2. **Summarize.** Good negotiators frequently summarize important points to make sure there is mutual understanding and agreement throughout the negotiation.
3. **Propose and seek solutions.** Once the nature of the issue is clearly understood, good negotiators are willing to take some risks and offer suggestions or solutions to solve the problem. Conversely, these negotiators encourage the other party to offer potential solutions. If the trust level is high enough, this can be an extremely rich process.
4. **Ask questions.** In an effort to clarify the issues and understand the needs and interests of the other party, good negotiators are active interviewers. In a very subtle way, they are able to control the negotiation through their questioning.
5. **Actively listen.** Good negotiators listen carefully to ensure that what is being said is fully understood, and they rarely interrupt.

Put it in writing: At the end of the negotiation, it is very important to take the time to reiterate what each side has agreed to accomplish. Failure to summarize the agreement and put it into writing frequently leads to confusion and disagreement during the implementation phase. We suggest you include in this summation the action steps both sides will complete when they leave the room.

After the Negotiation

In this phase, successful negotiators work hard to meet their commitments and makes sure the other party is informed of any problems that arise. As a result, there are no surprises, and the relationship is reinforced.

Summary

Becoming a good negotiator is not magical; it is a procedure that takes time, effort and practice. However, we believe you can radically improve your skills by attending to each of the steps outlined above. Following these steps will increase the potential that you will achieve a solution both parties can support.

Notes

1. Dale E. Zand. “Trust and Managerial Problem Solving,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 7 (June 1972): 238.
2. Woolf, Bob. “Friendly Persuasion: My Life as a Negotiator,” p.63. New York: Putnam, 1990.

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