NEGOTIATION INSIGHTS
IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT YOU

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Key Point
It’s important to put yourself in the other party's shoes, and there are ways you can do it.

Negotiation theorists and practitioners emphasise the importance of putting ourselves in the other side's shoes. The old adage that you will never know another person unless you have walked a mile in their shoes is very apt; empathising with the other side opens the gates to better communication, the establishment of common ground and, ultimately, more effective negotiation. Nonetheless, in many respects negotiation is a counter-intuitive process. After all, we go into a negotiation thinking about our own problem, the objectives that we want to achieve and ultimately our bottom line or our fall back position. We comprehensively prepare (or at least we should) to put forward the best and most attractive view of our own position so that we might convince our opponent to accept our wisdom and our view as to how things ought to turn out. Indeed this is how most negotiators instinctively press their arguments.

However the vast majority of reputable authors in the field will tell us that we must get inside our opponent's head and develop a sense of the view of the problem as seen by the other side. The question then arises of how this is achievable. How do we as negotiators go against our instinct to boldly press forward with our position and instead consider what the other side is thinking and feeling?

There have been many suggestions as to how one does this, ranging from doing the now traditional interest-based analysis to adopting what may be seen as less orthodox approaches, as has been suggested recently.

Perspective taking

In an article in the publication “Negotiation”[1], Galinsky, Maddux, and Ku stress the importance of “perspective taking”. They define this as the:

“Active consideration and appreciation of another person’s viewpoint, role, and underlying motivations”.

They refer to a series of statements adapted from Mark Davis’s “Interpersonal Reactivity Scale” as follows:

“Perspective takers tend to agree with the following statements:
1. I try to look at everyone's side of disagreement before I make a decision.
2. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.
3. I believe that there are two sides to every question and I try to look at them both.
4. When I am upset with someone I usually try to “put myself in his shoes” for a while.”
The authors direct us to a number of questions which assist us in pursuing a more optimal way of negotiating:

• What are my opponent’s underlying interests, motivations and needs?
• How can my opponent meet his/her needs elsewhere?
• Why is my opponent behaving that way?
• In relation to the last question, I am inclined to the view that you must always question whether your opponent is really acting irrationally.

A valuable technique I use in the course of negotiations when it appears that one’s opponent is acting irrationally is to try to “reverse engineer” the so-called irrational behaviour. The question should be asked, “If this behaviour was rational why would my opponent be acting that way?” Often by simply pausing and answering that question one may unlock the secret of that negotiation.

By being able to understand an opponent’s behaviour, you can then look to ways to contain it rather than battle against it. For example, it may be that an issue that is trivial to one party in the scheme of the bigger picture of the negotiation may be of substantial importance to the other. So if one was to have a dismissive attitude, the other party may react in a way that is seen to be irrational at the perceived indifference to an issue of importance. However, by looking beyond the behaviour and questioning the reasoning behind it parties can better understand what it is that the other side wants.

The effectiveness of mimicry

In the context of stressing the importance of perspective-taking, the authors refer to the work of a psychologist Tanya Schartrand of Duke University who has observed that people who automatically and unconsciously mimic other people’s mannerisms, ranging from chin-rubbing to arm-crossing to sitting upright in a chair, have a highly pronounced perspective taking ability.

Why then is mimicry so effective? The research suggests that we have a natural affinity for people who are similar to us and therefore communicating this “sameness” through our behaviour will make people like us more. In one study psychologist Rick van Barren of the University Nijmegen (in the Netherlands) demonstrated that instructing wait staff to mimic their customers resulted in bigger tips. The research of the Harvard authors shows that mimicry can be an effective strategy in negotiation.
In experiments, they instructed buyers in simulated negotiations to mimic sellers’ mannerisms (eg. face touching, foot tapping, etc) and they found a greater percentage of interest-based deals arising from this behaviour. In essence, by communicating this sense of “sameness”, a sense of trust may flow on to the negotiation process in terms of communication, the approach to issues and how agreements are reached. In his book “A Sudden Outbreak of Common Sense”, Andrew Acland identifies what he believes to be the hallmarks of good process in resolving conflict.[2] Acland says that good process encourages people to do the following:

- Listen actively to each other and try to understand other points of view
- Recognise legitimate needs and interests of others;
- Improve and build on their relationship whenever possible;
- Discuss issues purposefully, systematically and rationally;
- Look for joint solutions to what are perceived as joint problems;
- Look for new options and ideas;
- Keep difficult problems in perspective - not allowing them to prevent agreements on other issues; and
- If all else fails seek a specific and amicable agreement to disagree which safeguards areas of agreement.

### Reading the emotions of the other party

Even though mimicking gestures can be effective, the ability to observe facial expressions and draw conclusions from them is likely to be even more effective. In his groundbreaking work “Emotions Revealed”[3], Dr Paul Ekman provides as systematic range of tools by which one can draw conclusions from people’s facial expressions. Dr Ekman’s work suggests that being able to recognise expressions will give some insight as to the mood and in context perhaps even the thoughts of one’s negotiating opponents. The traditional textbooks customarily used by commercial negotiators often overlook the important areas of emotion, gestures and facial expressions.

Professor Roger Fisher and Dr Daniel Shapiro in their book “Beyond Reason”[4] have dealt with the allied issue of emotion in negotiation often ignored by commercial negotiators. They say in relation to strong negative emotions that “they happen – be ready”.

Logic suggests that if they are going to happen then as the authors say, one must be prepared on process, substance and emotion.

At page 171 of their book they suggest you first canvass the seven elements of negotiation, which will raise issues of both process and substance. They suggest that you include communication, build a good relationship, clarify interests early, generate options before making any commitments and identify issues of substance. You should ask what are the issues of the parties, what are the persuasive criteria of legitimacy such as precedents, laws or market value, what are some realistic commitments that each side might make and what is each side’s best alternative to negotiate agreement (BATNA).
On emotions, they advise that we consider core concerns and physiology and in relation to the latter they suggest we use relaxation techniques to calm our nerves, and to prepare ourselves emotionally for the negotiations. If you can move past your own emotions, by being prepared, you are far better equipped to read and address the emotions of your counterpart. The focus should not be how you are feeling, but how the other side is feeling. If you can gauge this and act accordingly, you are doing yourself a service because you are opening up the communication channels without unnecessary and unproductive interference of emotional involvement.

Of course, many negotiations inevitably involve a certain degree of emotion, but the better prepared you are to focus on the emotions of others the better you will be able to engage productively in the negotiation process.

Appreciation of other points of view

In addition to reading emotions, Fisher and Shapiro extol the virtues of finding merit in what the other side thinks. At page 27 of their book they suggest that appreciation for the other side’s point of view can be valuable as it is often the best way to meet the core concerns of the other party as well as the strategic advantages it has in the overall negotiation process.

They describe the three elements to express appreciation as:

- To understand each other’s point of view;
- To find merit in what each side thinks, feels or does; and
- To communicate that understanding through words and actions.

The reality is this can be quite a difficult thing to master. Having an understanding of the other side’s point of view could be seen to be a barrier to putting forward one’s own point of view. However, as the authors suggest, the process of express appreciation does not mean that you have to agree with their view, and indeed it is unlikely that you will. The authors suggest that the best method to overcome these issues is to listen actively and ask good questions. If you can show the other party that you are giving consideration to their opinion, they are more likely to be receptive of yours. Of particular importance is to use the time the other party is putting forward their point of view to absorb what they say, rather than the instinctive reaction to subconsciously prepare arguments in response to it.

Through expression of appreciation, the other side will be more willing to listen to, and appreciate, your point of view. Opening these communication channels and having parties giving thought to the merits of the other side’s point of view will make inroads to successful negotiation.
Conclusion

In summary, negotiation is one of the simplest and most instinctive things that we undertake as human beings but is also one of the most complex, and when poorly executed one of the most dangerous and damaging.

By having an intense focus on the other side, by completing an interest-based analysis, by perspective taking, by observing gestures and facial expressions and by preparing ourselves emotionally we are much more likely to optimise our outcomes than simply by thinking about ourselves, our own objectives and our own emotions. Remember that in negotiations by having the ability to meet the needs of your opponent satisfactorily and your own needs well then you will enhance your ability to have long-lasting and satisfying outcomes and relationships in your negotiations.

Remember it’s not just about you.