

Six Basic Interpersonal Skills for a Negotiator's Repertoire

Roger Fisher and Wayne H. Davis

A well-rounded person has a large repertoire of interpersonal skills, and exercises them appropriately depending upon the circumstances. All of us, however, find ourselves stronger in some skills than in others. We naturally tend to use those skills in which we feel more adept and to avoid those in which we feel less comfortable or less competent.

A skilled negotiator not only has a broad repertoire of interpersonal skills, but also uses those most appropriate to the circumstances of a particular situation. He or she recognizes that one's effectiveness within a given negotiation is likely to be enhanced by being able to change pace and approach.

There is an infinite range and variety in interpersonal skills. Many of these skills can be seen as attractive opposites, such as being independent and being cooperative, or being pragmatic and being imaginative, or being controlled and being expressive. We would like to be good at both but tend to be stronger in one than the other.

These desirable qualities can be visualized as lying on the circumference of a circle, so that becoming more skillful is seen as extending our skills in all directions. Improving our skills can then be recognized not as correct-

ing a fault (such as "I am too flexible"), but rather as becoming more skillful at its attractive opposite (e.g., "I want to become better at being firm when that is appropriate.").

To broaden one's repertoire, it may help to think of these qualities as falling into six basic categories of interpersonal skills in which each effective negotiator enjoys some competence and confidence. We have tentatively identified these as follows:

- expressing strong feelings appropriately;
- remaining rational in the face of strong feelings;
- being assertive within a negotiation without damaging the relationship;
- improving a relationship without damage to a particular negotiation;
- speaking clearly in ways that promote listening; and
- inquiring and listening effectively.

In use, these skills are often closely associated with each other, but in developing the skills and in practicing them it helps to focus on them one at a time. The following checklist can be used as a guide for negotiators who wish to develop a strong, well-balanced repertoire.

Expressing strong feelings appropriately

Disliked Symptoms. Many negotiations take place as if the only effective mode of influence is the kind of rational dialogue that might take place between two computers. We may suppress or ignore flesh and blood feelings. In other negotiations, we may find our rational arguments overwhelmed by emotions such as anger, fear, insecurity, or hatred.

Possible Diagnoses. Many of us learn as children that it is naughty to be angry. We may treat feelings as private problems best dealt with by suppressing them, or by denying their existence. Sometimes we may regard feelings as having less merit than reasoned argument—as something to be ashamed of.

At other times, we may contain feelings because we see no way to express them other than by losing our temper—a performance that our rational selves tell us is likely to appear ridiculous, damage our credibility, and at best prove ineffective.

General prescriptive approach.

- **Recognize feelings.** A negotiator needs to recognize that feelings are a natural human phenomenon. They exist. There is nothing wrong with *having* emotions, although *expressing* them in particular ways may be costly or counterproductive.
- **Be aware.** It is a wise practice to become *aware* of the emotions—both our own and those of the other side—that are involved in any given negotiation. It appears to be true that if we suppress or deny our own feelings, we are likely to be unaware of the feelings of those with whom we are dealing. Before we can safely and appropriately express our feelings, we need to become aware of them, and to acknowledge them consciously.

In general, when some feeling

inside seems to be growing larger and out of control, naming or identifying that feeling internally will, by itself, tend to reduce the feeling, make it more life-size, and help bring it under control.

- **Develop a range of expression.** When it comes to communicating feelings to someone else, it is well to recognize that there is a spectrum of ways to do so, ranging from talking rationally about them, through increasing the emotional content of verbal and nonverbal communication, to letting the emotions take charge.

Because of inhibitions, we often err on the side of insufficiently communicating our emotions. It is good to find a safe environment within which to experiment and practice. It is often useful to explore a range of possible expressions of emotion by deliberately overshooting. When we fear going too far, we are unlikely to learn how far we can, in fact, safely go.

- **Relate tone to substance.** Too often we fail to relate the emotional content of a communication to the substantive issue being discussed. It is far easier to be assertive—and certainly more effective—if we have something sensible to assert. Key to an effective communication of feeling is likely to be some well-prepared substantive content that identifies the purpose of the communication, justifies the feeling, and enlists its expression in the furtherance of that purpose.

Remaining rational in the face of strong feelings

Disliked Symptoms. When others display strong emotions—particularly those hostile to us—we are likely to react and let emotions overwhelm our rationality. The cycle of emotional

action and reaction is likely to preclude rational negotiation.

Possible Diagnoses. We get caught up in the fray. We react to the last thing the other side said, and lose sight of the original purposes of talking. We may mistake their expression of strong feelings as a personal attack on us, so we feel obliged to respond in self-defense. If neither side acknowledges the existence or validity of the other's feelings, both may amplify their expression of feelings so that the underlying "message" will be heard. We may try to silence each other's expression of feelings, which compounds the frustration and felt need to be heard.

General prescriptive approach.

There are several different ways to deal effectively with displays of strong emotion in negotiation. Depending on the circumstances, any one of the following suggestions should prove useful:

- **Acknowledge their feelings.** When others begin to heighten the emotive content of their speech, they may not be fully aware of the feelings growing inside them. If we acknowledge that they *may* (don't attribute!) be feeling a certain way, that will usually help them to become more aware and in control of their feelings, and give us enough distance so that we don't react.
- **Step above the fray.** When the discussion turns so emotional that rational discussion seems pointless, we might withdraw from the discussion long enough for us and others to regain some composure. State frankly our reasons for withdrawing, and couple that with a commitment to return.
- **Step aside; let their emotions hit the problem.** If they're expressing an emotion, encourage them to express

it fully and completely—so they can feel that they've "got it all out."

- **Separate the causes of their feelings from the substantive problem, and deal with them in parallel.** Once feelings have been fully expressed and acknowledged, it may be appropriate to analyze what engendered the feelings and take steps to alleviate those causes.
- **Be purposive.** At the outset, consciously consider and decide on the purpose of the negotiation. Then, when emotions run too strong, we can ask the parties to question whether or not the direction of the discussion serves the agreed-upon purposes of the meeting.

Being assertive without damaging the relationship

Disliked Symptoms. Often in a negotiation, we may refrain from being assertive (we fail to speak with conviction or tenaciously pursue a particular point) for fear that assertiveness will damage either the immediate or the long-term relationship. We may acquiesce when it ill serves our interests to do so.

Possible Diagnoses. When a relationship seems to be more important than any one substantive issue, some people tend to give in as soon as the other party's preference becomes clear. But giving in does not help the relationship: It may reward bad behavior or be mistaken for a lack of conviction or spinelessness—undesirable qualities for a partner in most relationships.

General prescriptive approach.

With or without increasing the emotional content of our expressions, it is possible to be assertive without damage to a relationship. The suggested general strategy is:

- **Disentangle relationship issues from substantive ones and work on**

them in parallel. Although substantive disagreements can make a working relationship more difficult, and although a good working relationship can make it easier to reach agreement, the process of dealing with differences is usefully treated as a subject quite distinct and separate from the content and extent of those differences.

- *Be "soft on the people."* Avoid personal judgments. Acknowledge some merit in what the other side has said or done. Be open, polite, courteous, and considerate.
- *Have something to assert.* Know the *purpose* of the session in terms of some product that it is reasonable to expect. Focus on one or two points that we would like to communicate forcefully, such as: the strength of our BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement); the necessity of meeting some interest of ours; or our adherence to a particular standard of legitimacy unless and until we are convinced that some other standard is at least equally fair.
- *Be firm and open.* Be prepared to remain firm as long as that appears to us to make sense on the substance of the negotiation. At the same time, be open—both in words and thought—to alternative views that are truly persuasive.

Improving a relationship without damage to a particular negotiation

Disliked Symptoms. We often hesitate to be open and warm with people on the other side of a negotiation for fear that it will prejudice the outcome. We hesitate to acknowledge merit in what they say for fear that it will undercut what we say.

Possible Diagnoses. We may operate under a zero-sum assumption about

ideas and arguments: To the extent that someone with whom we disagree is right, then we must be wrong. This assumption may stem from childhood fears of being pushed around, from formal high school or college debates, or from the general adversary nature of so much of our society. Some of us may assume that to develop a relationship in a negotiation, we must buy it with substantive concessions.

General prescriptive approach.

- *Good relations help reach good outcomes.* It is important to recognize that relationship-building moves tend to strengthen rather than weaken our chances for achieving a good agreement.
- *Acknowledge merit in something they have done.* It is almost always possible to find something meritorious that the other side has done—perhaps in an area apart from what is being negotiated. By acknowledging that, we can communicate that we recognize and respect their worth as people.
- *Acknowledge a need on our part.* Relationships tend to be stronger when there is some interdependence: both sides feel and recognize their need or reliance on the other side in order to achieve mutually-desired ends.
- *Take steps outside the negotiation to improve the relationship.* We can concentrate our relationship-building actions in temporally-discrete segments of the negotiation, or when we are physically away from the table.

Speaking clearly in ways that promote listening

Disliked Symptoms. They don't seem to be paying much attention to what we say.

Possible Diagnoses. We may be including in what we say things that they know or believe to be mistaken. We often do so when we attribute particular intentions or motives to those on the other side. In the course of rejecting what they know to be wrong, they are likely to reject a lot of other ideas that are closely associated with them. Or something we say early in a long statement raises a red flag for them; they then tune out because they're busy thinking of a retort. Or we may be making unwarranted assumptions about what they know, when in fact they lack certain information needed to make our statements comprehensible.

General prescriptive approach.

- *Speak for yourself.* Phrase statements about their behavior, motives, statements, etc. in first-person terms of our perceptions and feelings. They may deny the accusation, "You're a bigot!" They can't deny the statement, "I'm feeling discriminated against."
- *Avoid attribution and check assumptions.* Recognize when we make assumptions about their thoughts, feelings, motives, and so on, and try to verify those assumptions with the other side before acting on them. Inquire about their understanding of the background issues or information.
- *Use short, clear statements.* The longer any statement we make, the more they will edit it so they can respond. The more important our message is, the more succinct it should be. If the message is complex, break it down into small parts and confirm their understanding of each segment.
- *Ask them to repeat back what we've said.* In effect, encourage them to be active listeners by asking them to confirm in their own words what they've heard us say.

Actively inquiring and listening

Disliked Symptoms. We don't learn as much as we should about the other side's interests and perceptions and the resources they could bring to bear on our joint problem. We may miss options and ideas that could lead to good solutions for us.

Possible Diagnosis. We are often so concerned with our own interests that we ignore those of the other side. We are often bored or tired. When they say something that surprises or angers us, we may ignore the rest of what they have to say while we ready our response. We may fear that if we understand them, our resolve will weaken; or that if we show we've heard and understood, they will mistake that for acquiescence or agreement.

General prescriptive approach.

- *Explicitly allocate time to listen and understand the other side.* Set portions of the agenda for them to explain their interests and ideas. That helps to put us into a "listening mode." An added benefit of this practice is that it establishes a precedent for reciprocal treatment of us by them.
- *Separate understanding their arguments from judging and responding to them.* Make sure that their full argument has been stated, and that we understand it before trying to respond.
- *Repeat back their statements in our own words.*
- *Inquire actively about the reasoning behind their statements.* Even if we repeat back what they said, often they haven't said all they were thinking. There will be some implicit reasoning or logic underlying their statements. It's helpful to ask them

to make that reasoning explicit, and then to repeat back their explanation.

NOTE

Many of the ideas in this article were developed in collaboration with Richard Chasin, M.D. and Richard Lee, Ph.D.