

Separate the people from the problem

Everyone knows how hard it is to deal with a problem without people misunderstanding each other, getting angry or upset, and taking things personally.

A union leader says to his men, "All right, who called the walkout?"

Jones steps forward. "I did. It was that bum foreman Campbell again. That was the fifth time in two weeks he sent me out of our group as a replacement. He's got it in for me, and I'm tired of it. Why should I get all the dirty work?"

Later the union leader confronts Campbell. "Why do you keep picking on Jones? He says you've put him on replacement detail five times in two weeks. What's going on?"

Campbell replies, "I pick Jones because he's the best. I know I can trust him to keep things from fouling up in a group without its point man. I send him on replacement only when it's a key man missing, otherwise I send Smith or someone else. It's just that with the flu going around there've been a lot of point men out. I never knew Jones objected. I thought he liked the responsibility."

A basic fact about negotiation, easy to forget in corporate and international transactions, is that you are dealing not with abstract representatives of the other side but human beings, who have emotions, deeply held values, and different backgrounds and viewpoints; they are unpredictable. So are you.

Every negotiator has two kinds of interests: in the substance and in the relationship.

Every negotiator wants to reach an agreement that satisfies his substantive interests.

A negotiator also has an interest in his relationship with the other side. (An antiques dealer wants both to make a profit on the sale and to turn the customer into a regular one.)

At a minimum, a negotiator wants to maintain a working relationship good enough to produce an acceptable agreement if one is possible given each side's interests.

Most negotiations take place in the context of an ongoing relationship where it is important to carry on each negotiation in a way that will help rather than hinder future relations and future negotiations.

With many long-term clients the ongoing relationship is far more important than the outcome of any particular negotiation.

The relationship tends to become entangled with the problem.

We are likely to treat people and problem as one.

Within a family, a statement such as "the kitchen is a mess" or "our bank account is low" may be intended simply to identify a problem, but it is likely to be heard as a personal attack.

People draw from comments on substance unfounded inferences which they then treat as facts about that person's intentions and attitudes toward them.

Positional bargaining puts relationship and substance in conflict.

Framing a negotiation as a contest of will over positions aggravates the entangling process.

"I see your position as a statement of how you would like the negotiation to end; from my point of view it demonstrates how little you care about our relationship".

Positional bargaining deals with a negotiator's interests both in substance and in a good relationship by trading one off against the other.

Yet giving in on a substantive point may buy no friendship; it may do nothing more than convince the other side that you can be taken for a ride.

Separate the relationship from the substance; deal directly with the people problem.

To find your way through the jungle of people problems, it is useful to think in terms of three basic categories: **perception, emotion, and communication.**

Where perception are inaccurate, you can look for ways to educate.

If emotions run high, you can find ways for each person involved to let off steam.

Where misunderstanding exists, you can work to improve communication.

Perception

As useful as looking for objective reality can be, it is ultimately the reality as each side sees it that constitutes the problem in a negotiation and opens the way to a solution.

Put yourself in their shoes.

People tend to see what they want to see.

The ability to see the situation as the other sees it, as difficult as it may be, is one of the most important skills a negotiator can have.

Consider the contrasting perceptions of a tenant and a landlady negotiating the renewal of a lease:

TENANT'S PERCEPTIONS

The rent is already too high.

With other costs going up, I can't afford to pay more for housing.

The apartment needs painting.

I know people who pay less for a comparable apartment.

Young people like me can't afford to pay high rents.

The rent ought to be low because the neighborhood is rundown.

I am a desirable tenant with no dogs or cats.

LANDLADY'S PERCEPTIONS

The rent has not been increased for a long time.

With other costs going up, I need more rental income.

He has given that apartment heavy wear and tear.

I know people who pay more for a comparable apartment.

Young people like him tend to make noise and to be hard on an apartment.

We landlords should raise rents in order to improve the quality of the neighborhood.

His hi-fi drives me crazy.

**I always pay the rent whenever
she asks for it.**

**She is cold and distant; she never
asks me how things are.**

**He never pays the rent until I
ask for it.**

**I am a considerate person who
never intrudes on a tenant's
privacy.**

Understanding their point of view is not the same as agreeing with it. It allows you to reduce the area of conflict, and it also helps advance your self-interest.

Don't deduce their intentions from fears.

People tend to assume that whatever they fear, the other side intends to do.

Consider the following: "They met in a bar, where he offered her a ride home. He took her down unfamiliar streets. He said it was a shortcut. He got her home so fast she caught the 10 O'clock news."

It is all too easy to fall into the habit of putting the worst interpretation on what the other side says or does.

The cost of interpreting whatever they say or do in its most dismal light is that fresh ideas are spurned and subtle changes of position are ignored or rejected.

Don't blame them for your problem.

It is tempting to hold the other side responsible for your problem.

"Your company is totally unreliable. Every time you service our generator you do a lousy job and it breaks down again."

Blaming is an easy mode to fall into. But even if blaming is justified, it is usually counterproductive. Under attack, the other side will become defensive and will resist what you have to say. They will cease to listen, or they will strike back with an attack of their own.

When you talk about a problem, separate the symptoms from the person with whom you are talking.

"This factory needs a functioning generator . I want your advice on how we can minimize our risk of breakdown. Should we change service companies, sue the manufacturer, or what?."

Discuss each other's perceptions.

One way to deal with differing perceptions is to make them explicit and discuss them with the other side.

As long as you do this in a frank, honest manner without either side blaming the other for the problem as each sees it, such a discussion may provide the understanding they need to take what you say seriously, and vice versa.

Look for opportunities to act inconsistently with their perceptions.

Perhaps the best way to change their perceptions is to send them a message different from what they expect.

Give them a stake in the outcome by making sure they participate in the process.

If they are not involved in the process, they are hardly likely to approve the product.

If you fail to ask an employee whether he wants an assignment with responsibility, don't be surprised to find out that he resents it.

If you want the other side to accept a disagreeable conclusion, it is crucial that you involve them in the process of reaching that conclusion.

Even if the terms of an agreement seem favourable, the other side may reject them simply out of suspicion born of their exclusion from the drafting process.

Agreement becomes much easier if both parties feel ownership of the ideas.

Face-saving: make your proposals consistent with their values.

Often in a negotiation people will continue to hold out not because the proposal on the table is inherently unacceptable, but simply because they want to avoid the feeling or the appearance of backing down to the other side.

Emotion

First recognize and understand emotions, their and yours.

Ask yourself what is producing the emotions. Why are you angry? Why are they angry? Are they responding to past grievances and looking for revenge?

Make emotions explicit and acknowledge them as legitimate.

Making your feelings or theirs an explicit focus of discussion will not only underscore the seriousness of the problem, it will also make the negotiations less reactive and more pro-active.

"You know, the people on our side feel we have been mistreated and are very upset. We're afraid an agreement will not be kept even if one is reached. Rational or not, that is our concern. Personally, I think we may be wrong , but that's a feeling we have."

Allow the other side to let off steam.

People obtain psychological release through the simple process of recounting grievances.

Letting off steam may make it easier to talk rationally later.

If a negotiator makes an angry speech and thereby shows his constituency that he is not being soft they may give him a freer hand in the negotiation.

Instead of interrupting polemical speeches or walking out on the other party, you may decide to control yourself, sit there, and allow them to pour out their grievances at you.

Communication

There are three big problems in communication.

- 1) Negotiators may not be talking to each other. Instead to talk merely to impress third parties or their own constituency.

Effective communication between the parties is all but impossible if each plays to the gallery.

- 2) Even if they are talking directly and clearly to you, you may not be hearing them.

You may be so busy thinking about what you are going to say next, how you are going to respond to that last point or how you are going to frame your next argument, that you forget to listen to what the other side is saying to you.

- 3) Misunderstanding. What one says the other may misinterpret.

How to prevent these problems?

Listen actively and acknowledge what is being said.

Listening enables you to understand their perceptions, feel their emotions, and hear what they are trying to say.

They will also feel the satisfaction of being heard and understood.