A Strategy for Negotiators

Dr. Arlen Etling, Associate Director
International Affairs
University of Nebraska
110 Agriculture Hall
Lincoln, NE 68583-0702
aetling1@unl.edu


Are you a negotiator? According to the author we all have to negotiate, daily, with supervisors, clients and co-workers – even with our children and our spouses (pp. 3-5). This very practical handbook explains how to turn a potential confrontation into a positive experience of joint problem-solving. It describes how to turn “win-lose” arguments into “win-win” solutions.

Ury’s strategy for negotiation employs five steps: 1) step back from the emotion of the conflict and observe, listen; 2) show the other side respect by acknowledging their points and their feelings; 3) reframe their position by asking questions and clarifying until it becomes a common problem rather than one side’s position; 4) bridge the gap between their interests and yours in order to create a mutually satisfactory solution; and 5) use power to educate, “...show them that they cannot win by themselves but only together with you” (p. 13).

Further explanation of those five steps is necessary if this strategy is to be useful for agricultural and extension educators. Step 1, overcome your emotions and listen, is easy to understand but difficult to implement. When we are involved in conflict, our emotions are hard to control. Our natural reaction is to argue mentally, if not verbally, which keeps us from truly listening. Carefully listening to the “other side” of the argument, however, is key to the rest of the steps in Ury’s strategy.

Step 2, show respect by acknowledging the other person’s points, is accomplished by listening (step 1) then reflecting – restating those points. When we restate the other person’s points we tell that person that we heard what was said. We also give that person a chance to correct any of our misstatements. Already we are moving from confrontation to collaboration. We are moving the conversation from an argument to mutual problem solving.

Step 3, reframe their position, continues the movement from “working against each other” to “working together.” We reframe when we ask questions to clarify their points. Their natural reaction will be to soften their sharper points. We continue the reframing step when we agree with some (or parts) of their points. These points of agreement draw us together. Then the points of disagreement become the common problem which we must resolve. This resolution will come when we work together on the common problem.

Step 4, bridge the gap between their interests and yours, normally happens through compromise. If I concede one of my points and you concede one of your points, we have eliminated some of the disagreement and solved part of the problem. Many techniques can be used besides compromise (i.e., sharing information, sharing feelings, correcting misinformation, brainstorming other solutions to the problem, seeking third party mediation if necessary). The key, however, is to encourage movement in our thinking as opposed to “digging in” – being stubborn about our points of disagreement.

Step 5, show them that they cannot win without you, is the clinching step. It is the
culmination of the first four steps. If you are able to listen to each other, to show respect by acknowledging each other’s points, to reframe opposing positions through clarification until they become a common problem, and to bridge the gap between positions, you will have proven to each other the power of collaborative problem solving. If, on the other hand, stubbornness sets in, you will have proven that you cannot solve the problem without each other. The result is the same.

A “preparation worksheet” found on page 173, summarizes these steps in a way that lets you think through your actions for each step before you start the negotiation. These five steps are designed to overcome the common barriers to successful negotiation: 1) your emotions, 2) their emotions, 3) conflicting positions, 4) their dissatisfaction, and 5) their power.

This strategy seems overly simple. Understanding the strategy is easy; implementing it, however takes a lot of thought and preparation. Most of the book (pages 31-156), therefore, discusses the five steps in detail and gives different ideas about how to accomplish each step successfully. You are told how to analyze different situations; how to choose an appropriate tactic; then you are told what to say or do.

Under step one, for example, Ury describes the “three natural reactions” to a position that conflicts with our own – we strike back, or give in, or walk away. All three reactions are likely to worsen the situation and prevent a satisfactory solution. You should avoid these reactions, step back to analyze what is happening, prepare yourself to use Ury’s strategy, and then implement your plan.

Some ways to reframe their position (step 3) are to ask, “Why?” (not in a challenging way but in a problem solving way); ask, “Why not?” or “What if?” Ask for their advice. Use silence to diffuse anger or to encourage them to rephrase a position. Ignore personal attacks. Reframe an attack on you to an attack on the problem. Ury suggests other tactics for dealing with the stone wall (“this is our position, take it or leave it”), with attacks and with other negotiating tricks.

Another section of the book talks about preparations for a negotiation. You are advised to enter any negotiation knowing your “best alternative to a negotiated agreement” – what you will do if the negotiation fails. The concluding chapter restates the book’s premise: how to turn adversaries into partners.

This book has been available in paperback since 1993. Some readers might consider this to be a disadvantage. The ideas, however, are not dated. The book is just as timely today as it was when published. Every year several books on negotiation are published. Most, however, are business-oriented, focus on labor disputes, or focus on international affairs. None of these books is as practical and relevant to agricultural and extension educators as Ury’s classic book.

It is certainly relevant to international agricultural educators who are trying to manage programs in times of chaos, conflict and budget reductions. The book is useful in supervising employees or volunteers where differences of opinion are inevitable. It is useful in resolving conflicting needs of client groups or conflicting strategies for community development projects. It is useful in negotiating with governmental organizations or funding agencies that have different agendas than the local people. For these reasons this book should be a part of every agricultural and extension educator’s personal library. This book is available from local book sellers. The ISBN number is 0-553-37131-2.