

Articles

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Deadlock, difficulty and dissent: The impact of personality on a successfully negotiated outcome

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The past few months have been fascinating for anyone who is interested in negotiation beyond the Brexit discussion because what has become apparent is that while there might have originally been a strategy, this seemed to get lost because of several key personalities that captured the headlines, persuading individuals that they alone can provide the best outcome. This is not unusual and many negotiations have suffered because of the dominance of one party and/or group. While you can have strong personalities involved in a negotiation the challenge is that the more personality and apparent self-interest becomes the driving force the more positional people become, which leads to deadlock, difficulty and dissent.

Try collaboration?

One approach is to try and harness the energy and dominance of the personalities involved by engaging in some form of collaborative working. It has been widely recognised that the most effective outcome is reached when individuals can be both competitive and cooperative, providing a pragmatic approach which requires some form of collaboration. This can only be achieved by individuals pooling resources, enhancing creativity and engaging in a dialogue that demonstrates that trust is developing. Collaboration is not easy because it forces individuals to consider alternative options, while listening to opposing views. It requires time, patience and the willingness to admit that there is a better alternative and requires that those engaged in the negotiation move away from a person centred 'personality' paradigm to that of a more broader solution focused approach.

The collaborative approach is very possible and has been used in some very difficult and protracted negotiations but with the current post-Brexit vote discussions and the impact that it will have on future negotiations, it provides an opportunity for a hypothetical discussion about how a slightly more unorthodox approach could be applied, in order to acknowledge the potential for dissent and difficulty, introducing a mechanism to overcome deadlock.

Not your typical approach

In the book "Getting to Yes" by Fisher, Ury and Patton, the methods of achieving a principled agreement are outlined and while this is a successful approach, following the recent Brexit vote those engaged in any negotiation process that follows would realise that this would have to be adapted, because of the dominance of the personalities involved and the positional nature, of all parties involved. This provides a valuable opportunity to consider how a negotiation coach/consultant might work with these individuals and what strategic adaptations might be required and how these are uniformly applicable particularly when considering how to work with others, to reach an agreement.

Separate the people from the problem (or be tough on the people and tough on the problem)

Normally when you apply this approach, in a negotiation, you would be tough on the problem and softer on the people. However, when individuals and personalities have dominated, a slightly more radical approach is required, meaning that in the beginning you will have to be tough on the people and not just the problem. Once you have started working with these individuals you might start to realise why the people are the problem and there need to dominate, which leads to internal/external team difficulty and distraction.

If people/personalities are the problem it requires a disciplined approach, in order to avoid the vortex of emotional contagion and individuals becoming more positional/negative. A suggested approach could be to:

- Identify the source of the conflict
- Recognise and acknowledge emotion
- Actively listen
- Reaffirm the purpose of the negotiation
- Use an agreed process and adapt as necessary

Focus on interests, not positions (or focus on positions eventually considering interests)

Normally you would work hard to identify and acknowledge the interests of all involved and by engaging with individuals, with the goal of moving everyone from their original fixed positions. However, when the positions are so fixed and the drama of personality has been involved it is essential that individuals understand why each party has become so positional. This requires that people be honest and open about how they have become so positional and potentially the message has become so muddled that in order to save face, it is much easier to keep using the same strategy/argument. To understand the positions, so eventually there would be some hope of exploring interests individuals should:

- Identify the path of disagreement (either by date or event/issue)
- Reaffirm purpose
- Introduce the concept of empathy and assertiveness
- Manage expectations
- Recognise and acknowledge the emotions of all involved

Invent options for mutual gain (or invent options for individual gain to begin the creative process)

This assumes that individuals are willing to share ideas and that these are potentially mutually beneficial, requiring that a certain amount of trust has been developed. In a situation where trust has been completely eroded either because of the personalities of those involved or where there is a perceived need to adhere to pledges made to significant stakeholders, there will be very little desire to be creativity. There would also be an unwillingness to see any need in achieving an agreement that is mutually beneficial. One of the main challenges is that anything that is proposed will be immediately rejected because of physiological suspicion and resulting process in reactive devaluation. Therefore, individuals need to take one step back and consider developing options for individual gain. This process of creative option generation could start to move individuals away from being so fixed in their position without the challenge of having to think of the other party.

- Provide a process/framework for generating options
- Use an approach to enhance creativity
- Acknowledge participation through active listening
- Reaffirm the purpose
- Identify methods of building and/or restoring trust and trustworthiness

Insist on using objective criteria (or start with the subjective to begin understanding)

This provides a mechanism where solutions can be considered that are independent of either party and that follow common standards or procedures. The challenge is when there has been very little or no standards or procedures and when parties would be unable to agree on the independence of anything suggested then it would require another shift in approach. What should be explored is the underlying history and narrative of each party. Each party in a negotiation has their version of the truth and when this has been dominated by personalities, the negotiation would have drifted the original stated purpose, purely because of the individual/s dominance and the need for stakeholder satisfaction. By understanding the story/message and uncovering individual needs that have to be satisfied then it would be much easier to identify any commonalities. This can be achieved by:

- Active engagement (communication) to understand underlying need/story

- Provide an effective mechanism to enhance the process
- Reaffirm the purpose of the negotiation
- Identify key benchmarks/indicators of success
- Examine individual moral and ethical influences

Conclusion

So while the Brexit discussion will continue and we not be able to provide the answers, what it does provide is an opportunity to analyse various approaches that these types of negotiations might consider. The challenge is ensuring that whatever process is considered provides for maximum engagement and participation by all participants. Recognising and respecting alternative approaches and embracing the opportunity of working with deadlock to unlock the possibility of success.