**Module 2: Communication in Negotiation**

## 1. The Role of Communications in Negotiating

Communication is the substance of negotiating. The process of negotiation is the exchange of information that is communicated in some form. There are two levels of language used in a negotiation situation. The logical level contains the actual facts concerning the item(s) being negotiated. The pragmatic level contains the hints and inferred messages embedded in the communication style, syntax, and semantics. Each piece of information communicated in a negotiation contains both logical and pragmatic levels. An offer’s dollar amount is the logical level of a piece of information being communicated; and, the tone of voice, the words chosen, and the nonverbal aspects of delivering the dollar amount of the offer are all part of the pragmatic level of the communication.

Culture—even regional culture—can dictate a negotiator’s comfort and style within the pragmatic level of communication. For example, people raised in the southern part of the United States are exposed to regional euphuisms that have traditionally been used in communicating information in that part of the country. A negotiator from Tennessee may respond to the other party by saying, “That dog won’t hunt,” meaning, “I can’t accept that proposal.” Using that euphuism is a southern cultural way of softening a straight “no.” The other party in the negotiation, especially if he or she is not from that part of the country, may be confused by what “that dog won’t hunt” means, thereby impeding progress and setting a different tone in the next iteration of the negotiation.

**Nonverbal Communication**   
Smiles, hand gestures, voice tone and inflection, and body posture are just a few examples of the many nonverbal communication symbols we use. A negotiator can use nonverbal communication skills as a strategy to steer the process in his or her favor. Making eye contact and leaning forward while the other party speaks are forms of positive body language that help to create an integrative and collaborative bargaining situation. If a negotiator is standing with arms crossed over his or her chest, and with eyebrows squeezed together, the other party will understand that he or she is not happy with what is being proposed.

Watch the following video on effective negotiation, and take note of the importance of preparation in the negotiation process.

**2. Virtual Negotiating**

When considering negotiation situations, it may often be assumed that they are usually played out in face-to-face settings. However, many negotiations take place over the telephone, such as when negotiating with a business supplier over price. Increasingly, however, negotiations take place through the use of email and other virtual settings (Ricardi, 2012). Negotiating by telephone allows for voice inflections and tone, but it does not offer the ability of enhancing words with hand gestures and body posture. In email, emoticons may help, since voice tone and/or inflections and body language cannot be detected.

Using email for negotiation situations can be enhanced by adding steps to the process. For example, setting up a face-to-face meeting or even a telephone call can improve a virtual negotiation process. People tend to deal more truthfully with someone they have met face to face. Even a video or photograph accompanied by a podcast can enhance the communication in a virtual negotiation situation.

One advantage of negotiating through email is that the parties have time to contemplate a response, because the information exchange is asynchronous (Koeszegi, Pesendorfer, & Vetschera, 2011). Therefore, email negotiations, if done positively, have the potential to create a more equitable outcome for both parties than a face-to-face negotiation situation.

To provide for a positive virtual negotiation situation, the parties should agree on parameters before the negotiation begins. For example, will there be a time limit between emails? Will there be face-to-face or video conferencing opportunities? Will there be a chance to “schmooze” offline? Will the assumptions be written? Since virtual negotiations through email have a written component, there is the potential for more documentation. Having a written record of the negotiation ensures a more accurate information exchange, which may increase cooperation, trust, and optimism.

## 3. Improving Communication in Negotiating

Listening is a very important component of effective communication. There are three levels of listening:

* **Passive listening** occurs when the listening party provides no feedback as to whether he or she is listening. Passive listening can be a successful strategy in a distributive bargaining situation if the other party is very talkative. The talkative party can create an unfavorable position for himself/herself and not realize that he/she was responsible for that negative result.
* **Acknowledgement** occurs when the listening party interjects short responses, such as “I see” or “hmmm,” while the other party is communicating. The talking party understands that the other party is listening, but may infer an erroneous message that the other party is in agreement.
* **Active listening** is the most encouraging to the talking party. During active listening, the listening party engages fully with the talking party, rephrasing and repeating what the talking party has said and asking questions for clarification.

There may be a tendency to believe that active listening is the best choice for a negotiation situation. However, research shows that people speak more fully and freely when the other party is listening passively. More information is not always accurate information.

Gender differences in communication styles also may affect a negotiation process. Most women have learned to communicate differently than most men because of childhood social norms (Greenwood, 2014). Most girls learn to communicate in such a way as to maintain harmony in the group. Most boys learn that they must clearly communicate their position in the group, as there is a hierarchy that assumes its own communication norms within that group. Girls usually learn to communicate in a style that emphasizes the relationship aspect of the information exchange, or the pragmatic level. Boys usually learn to communicate in a style that emphasizes the factual or logical level of the information exchange. When a negotiation occurs between a woman and a man, some of these different communication assumptions and styles may impede the process.

For example, assume that Frank wants to negotiate with his boss, Charlotte, for a pay raise. Charlotte has discussed Frank’s annual review with him by highlighting his accomplishments, while encouraging him in the areas in which he needs to improve. Charlotte believes that she has successfully communicated to Frank his needed improvement by couching it within the areas in which he exceeded expectations. Frank believes that his performance review was very successful because Charlotte said he was doing such an awesome job. He is ready to negotiate with her for a larger pay raise:

**Frank:** *“Charlotte, since you said that I have exceeded expectations with my cold calling, I think I deserve a higher pay raise percentage.”*  
**Charlotte:** *“Yes, you did exceed expectations with your cold calling, but your follow up and relationship building needs improvement. You may be losing sales by not returning phone calls of potential customers”*   
**Frank:***“You never said that in my review. You said I needed to improve my communication skills – doesn’t everybody?”*   
**Charlotte:** *“Yes, I told you that your communication skills need improving, but that was within the context of following up on cold calling.”*  
**Frank:** *“But you never said that I needed to follow up with potential customers.”*

And so, the conversation will continue until Charlotte dismisses a confused Frank. Charlotte speaks more indirectly and groups potentially negative aspects of Frank’s performance with positive ones to downplay the negative issues. Frank hears only the strong positive aspects and doesn’t hear the indirect soft suggestions. Since Frank already knows his position in this relationship hierarchy, he is looking for tangible directions from Charlotte, the leader. Charlotte is trying to keep relational situations positive and in harmony by emphasizing success and downplaying the need for improvement.

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One strategy for communicating in a negotiation situation where the parties use different styles and syntaxes is to stop the negotiation and redefine its goals and the appropriate process (Mujtaba, 2013). As the goals are redefined and the parties become more aware of each other’s interests, a more collaborative negotiation process can emerge, and the situation may be settled with an equitable outcome. As negotiators find themselves in situations that are more diverse, they will need to become better at communicating and reading the other party’s communication style, and learn to adjust their own style, to achieve more successful interactions and negotiation outcomes.

### References

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