

My Journey in Enhancing Negotiations Outcome Through Effective Communication

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Introduction

“And the Tower of Babel ¹was never completed”, early in 3000-3500 B.C. the descendants of Noah were planning to build a tower that could reach to the heavens. However, God confused their languages and they were unable to understand each other. Accordingly, the tower was never completed and the task was left unfinished until today, due to lack of communication.

The reason

I was not yet in my senior year at University, when I had to pick one elective course to fulfil my credit hours. Looking through the possible options, I had to choose between Financial Coding courses, Research Methodology, and Negotiation Skills course. Since I was my class head achiever all through my school years, I always had people telling me that I can argue whatever issue there is and I would somehow make it sound sensible, so I thought why can't I get some educational material for my negotiations and arguments so that they would appear/sound even more logical.

I remember this workshop at one of this course sessions, when we were playing the role of some engineers coming from a developed country to help at building a bird tower in one of the undeveloped countries of Africa.

The main problem was that this African tribe could barely understand English, and could not speak it, the only way to express their opinion or thoughts to us was through the use of sign language, and what made the situation even worse, is that they had their own sign language that wasn't easy to predict.

So we were faced with a very low possibility of success, but we went on trying, my colleague was presenting to them the different tower design, and by the time she finished demonstrating the third design the leader of the African tribe stood up. Naturally we all thought that he didn't like the designs presented so far, so my colleague went on trying to show him other designs, and then he got angry. I felt that I had to interfere, so I went up to him, lowering my head to show respect and good intentions, and I only used the sign language trying to figure out what upset him. After a couple of disagreement signs, he expressed that he liked the third design and that is why he stood up as there sign of acceptance. And the next thing you know is that we are starting to build the birds tower.

What I learned from that play is that I should never make assumptions in negotiations; I always need to confirm my understanding with the party I am negotiating with.

My experience

✿ In my role as a commercial graduate in BG Egypt, I have attended a meeting conducted in English between BG, the National Egyptian gas company, and a French buyer, while they were negotiating contractual

¹ Gate of God; in Greek

terms. I noticed that the negotiations were sometimes ambiguous; This was due to language barrier (i.e. French grammar is so much different than the English one, as well as cultures, traditions and beliefs, resulting in a different way of conducting business).

I took up the role of translator; since I grew up in Egypt and went to a French school, then English speaking university has exposed me to these three cultures and allowed me to become fluent in the languages. I helped them reach middle ground by clarifying the cultural misunderstanding.

In this manner we were more able to clutch all opportunities and maintain a more effective relationship with governments, partners and competitors in the gas business. This taught me to always be aware and culture sensitive.

- ✿ In one of my previous job experiences, one of the company teams had held a workshop outside the office premises, and they invited one person from each of the other different teams to give their feedback and brainstorm on building up their future plan. I was one of those persons invited to be part of the workshop and what I found to be really frustrating, was that sometimes when people are too excited about doing something, they get so fuelled by their idea, that they tend not to listen to any other opinion and especially if its against their idea.

I was thinking that this can get pretty risky to the company outcome, and so I tried to use different approaches to make them listen to me but unfortunately it was impossible, and I being the youngest in the room with the least obvious experience did not help either. And I learned from that to always ask for the workshop agenda before attending in order to be well prepared, and also know my audience so that I am able to tailor my message to encourage them to listen.

- ✿ When I was working for Maersk, I was attending a meeting with people from four or five different countries. One of them was a Chinese woman, who was so silent during the meeting and did not participate at all, so I thought she is not interested in the deal and that she did not want to work with us, but I thought of giving her benefit of the doubt. I went to talk to her during the coffee break, and I realised that she was not that good in speaking English, so she preferred not to speak in the meeting, I felt for her and tried to give her more confidence to speak her mind. I did this by telling her that I am also not a native English speaker, and working in a multinational company gives the exposure of different cultures and different languages and you are not expected to speak all of them. And when we came back, she had totally forgotten about her discomfiture and was engaged in the deal negotiations.

From this valuable experience I learned always to judge negotiator behaviour or any situation based on objective criteria, and never jumps to conclusions.

My research findings

Personally experiencing how important clear communication is to employee safety, successful delivery of projects and enduring commercial negotiations, has fuelled me to read more about this subject to improve my knowledge and skills more.

I have learned some other guidelines from my readings as well which are:

- Communicate regardless of disagreement,
- Listen actively,
- Focus on what they will hear,
- Consider consulting before deciding,
- Design communication channels carefully,
- Speak for myself, not them.²

The Five Steps³ to Enhance Negotiations Outcome:

- 1- Do not bargain over position: realise that the position (hierarchy/seniority) of negotiators is not the bargain.
- 2- Separate the people from the problem: seek first to understand then to be understood.
- 3- Focus on interest not position: there is usually an alternative that can satisfy both parties.
- 4- Invent options for mutual gain: creating a win/win situation.
- 5- Insist on using objective criteria: use criteria that can be objectively evaluated against market benchmark, scientific facts, cost, efficiency, moral standards and, no violation of law.

The Seven Elements of Negotiations⁴:

- 1- Alternatives: explore your BATNA (Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement).
- 2- Interests: reflects the needs, concerns and, desire of each party.
- 3- Options: all possible alternatives that can be considered by the parties.
- 4- Legitimacy: when agreement is considered to be fair by both parties, based on external accepted standards.
- 5- Commitment: might be oral or written statement about what each party is willing and promised to do.
- 6- Communication: the process of exchanging information.
- 7- Relationship: how do the parties interact with one another before, during and after the negotiations.

I have used these valuable research findings to create Credit Card size Note for BG Commercial Staff, to inspire them before any Commercial Negotiation.

² Roger Fisher, The 7 Elements of Negotiation.

³ Getting to Yes, Roger Fisher & William Ury, Random House Business Books in 1999

⁴ Roger Fisher, The 7 Elements of Negotiation

Conclusion

“Communication is the lifeblood of negotiations, just as blood clots blocks circulation and cause heart attacks, poor communication blocks progress and ruptures negotiations and relationships”⁵.

We are living in an era in which dialogue has largely replaced confrontation and isolation. (Mrs. Aase Lionaes, Chairman, Nobel Committee)

⁵ Roger Fisher, The 7 Elements of Negotiation.

References

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My CV

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OBJECTIVE

Eager to get exposure to the upstream and business development experience, whereby I can further expand and develop my skills and commercial knowledge and contribute to the company success.

WORK EXPERIENCE

August 2006 – Ongoing

BG Egypt

- **Commercial GDP:** I am working in the LNG Operating Asset;
 - Was the HSE team leader,
 - Gained good understanding of contracts structure and key commercial detail, by compiling all the LNG agreements and researching an Obligation management System to implement, like COMS.
 - Good analytical skills including;
 - Working on Damietta before FCDD and Pooling,
 - Train1&2 shortfall calculations for 2006,
 - Sale of excess cargoes, bidding process and the RR1 to 7,
 - Provided analysis for input into negotiations.
 - Won the 2007 IGEM (Institution of Gas Engineers and Managers) Young paper competition of London and Southern Section.
 - Developed an LNG Asset Guide for new joiners.

July 2004 – January 2006.

Maersk Egypt: Maersk International Shipping Education (MISE) Trainee

Under the MISE management program the trainee is required to rotate in the different departments of the company for two years to acquire a holistic knowledge of the industry, while completing a curriculum of courses in Investment, economics, maritime law and management courses that is equivalent to an MBA degree curriculum

- Department Rotations
 - **Finance:** Responsible for Maersk Sealand and Safmarine Outstanding, Handling the credit customers and preparing daily and weekly outstanding reports. Initiated a change in the way rate of exchange ROEs are handled. And finally, achieving a stable and open relationship with the credit customers.
Skills used: communication and negotiation skills, flexibility to gain customer loyalty, preparing reports, decision making, management skills, self motivation, initiative, attention to details, structured working approach, and working on different tasks simultaneously.
 - **Telesales:** Conduct the day to day activities of selling and providing rates and quotations for small and key clients, based on their required destination, size and type of business practiced by each and every customer.
Selling trucking as well as assisting in the entire integrated sales force process. Provide assistance to all customers.
Skills used: communication and negotiation skills, dealing with different mentalities and backgrounds, working under pressure, adhering to deadlines, achieving targets, persistence, generating creative solutions, dynamic, and team player.

July & August 2001.

Citi Bank

- Summer Trainee in the dealing room, I was assigned to a project concerning developing and updating the clients database.
- Skills used: preparing reports, working under stress, adhering to deadlines.

COURSES/ CERTIFICATES/ TRAINING & IT SKILLS

Courses

- **Maersk Sealand:** Maritime Technology, Economics, logistics, Investment, Terminal Management, and Liner Trade.

Certificates

- Obtained the French language diploma "L'alliance Francaise".

TRAINING

- **Maersk Sealand:** Presentation skills, Communication skills, Negotiation Techniques, Meeting Techniques, cross culture training, Leadership Skills, Team Building and managing projects, and handling stress and pressure.

IT SKILLS

- Windows and Office – Front Page – Internet Skills.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- **Maersk Egypt:** Accomplish a detailed study to launch Maersk activity in the Libyan market with other Egyptian MISEs.
- **Sacre Couer School:** Was head of class for the entire 11 educational years, and student school head in 2000.

EDUCATION

2000 - 2004	The Arab Academy for Science and Technology and Maritime Transport - Egypt Bachelor degree – with Honors (GPA 3.67) Major: Marketing
1987 - 2000	College du Sacre Coeur - Egypt Thanaweya Amma, Arts Section (89%)

ACTIVITIES & INTERESTS

Painting, Drawing, Crafts, Traveling, Reading, Photography, Running, Horse back riding, Tennis and Aerobics.

Active member in Heliopolis Sporting Club.

Carrying a valid driving license and have passed the BG defensive driving course.

PERSONAL DATA

Nationality:	Marital State:	Languages:
Egyptian	Single	Arabic; mother tongue English; Fluent French; Fluent

REFERENCES

Furnished upon request