

The Behaviour of Successful Negotiators



Background

Almost all publications about negotiating behavior fall into one of three classes:

- ✦ Anecdotal “Here’s how I do it” accounts by successful negotiators. These have the advantage of being based on real life but the disadvantage that they frequently describe highly personal modes of behavior which are a risky guide for would-be negotiators to follow.
- ✦ Theoretical models of negotiating which are idealized, complex and seldom translatable into practical action.
- ✦ Laboratory studies, which tend to be short-term and contain a degree of artificiality.

Very few studies have investigated what actually goes on face-to-face during a negotiation. Two reasons account for this lack of published research. First, real negotiators are understandably reluctant to let a researcher watch them at work. Such research requires the consent of both negotiating parties and constitutes a constraint on a delicate situation. The second reason for the poverty of research in this area is lack of methodology. Until recently, there were few techniques available which allowed an observer to collect data on the behaviour of negotiators without the use of cumbersome and unacceptable methods such as questionnaires.

Since 1968, a number of long-term studies have been carried out by members of the Huthwaite organization, using behaviour analysis methods. These have allowed direct observation during real negotiations, so that an objective and quantified record can be collected to show how the skilled negotiator behaves.

The Successful Negotiator

The basic methodology for studying negotiating behaviour is simple—find some successful negotiators and watch them to discover how they do it. But what is the criterion for a successful negotiator? The Huthwaite studies used three success criteria:

- ✦ **They should be rated as effective by both sides.**
This criterion enabled the researchers to identify likely candidates for further study. The condition that both sides should agree on a negotiator’s effectiveness was a precaution to prevent picking a sample from a single frame of reference.
- ✦ **They should have a track record of significant success.**
The central criterion for choosing effective negotiators was a track record over a time period. In such a complex field, the researchers were anxious for evidence of consistency. They also wished to avoid the common trap of laboratory studies—looking only at the short-term consequences of a negotiator’s behavior and therefore favoring those using tricks or deceptions.
- ✦ **They should have a low incidence of implementation failures.**
The researchers judged that the purpose of a negotiation was not just to reach an agreement, but to reach an agreement that would be viable. Therefore, in addition to a track record of agreements, the record of implementation was also studied to ensure that any agreements reached were successfully implemented.

A total of 49 negotiators have been observed who met all three of these success criteria. The breakdown is:

Labor relations negotiators (Union)	17
Labor relations (Management)	12
Contract negotiators	11
Others	9

All together, the 49 successful negotiators were studied over a total of 103 separate negotiating sessions. For the remainder of this document, these people are called the “skilled” group. In comparison, a group of negotiators who either failed to meet all the criteria or about whom no criterion data was available, was also studied. These people are called the “average” group. By comparing the behaviour of the two groups, it was possible to isolate the crucial behaviours which made the skilled negotiators different.

The Research Method

The researchers met negotiators before the negotiation and encouraged them to talk about their planning and objectives. For 56 sessions with the skilled negotiators and 37 sessions with the average negotiators, this planning session was either tape-recorded or extensive notes were taken.

The negotiator then introduced the researcher into the actual negotiation. The delicacy of this process can be judged from the fact that although most cases had been carefully prehandled, the researchers were not accepted in upwards of 20 instances and were asked to withdraw.

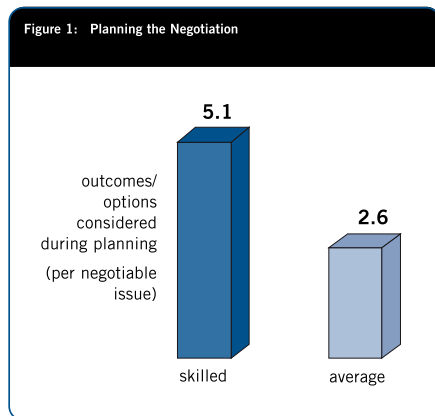
During the negotiation, the researchers counted the frequency with which certain key behaviours were used by the negotiators, using behaviour analysis methods. In all of the 103 sessions, interaction data was collected, while in 66 sessions some content analysis was also obtained.

How The Skilled Negotiator Plans

Negotiation training emphasizes the importance of planning. How does the skilled negotiator plan?

A. Amount of Planning Time

No significant difference was found between the total planning time which skilled and average negotiators claimed they spent prior to actual negotiation. This finding must be viewed cautiously because, unlike the other conclusions in this document, it is derived from the negotiators' impressions of themselves, not from their actual observed behavior. Nevertheless, it suggests



the conclusion that it is not the *amount* of planning time which makes for success, but how that time is used.

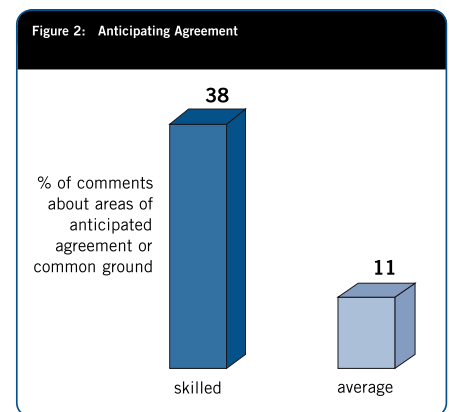
B. Exploration of Options

The skilled negotiator considers a wider range of outcomes or options for action than the average negotiator.

Skilled negotiators are concerned with the whole spectrum of possibilities, both those which they could introduce themselves and those which might be introduced by the people they negotiate with. In contrast, the average negotiator considers few options. An impression of the researchers, for which, unfortunately, no systematic data was collected, is that the average negotiator is especially less likely to consider options which might be raised by the other party.

C. Common Ground

Does the skilled negotiator concentrate during planning on the areas which hold most potential for conflict, or instead give attention to possible



areas of common ground? The research showed that although both groups of negotiators tended to concentrate on the conflict areas, the skilled negotiators gave over three times as much attention to common ground areas as did average negotiators.

This is a significant finding and it can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It may be, for example, that the skilled negotiator has already built a climate of agreement so that undue concentration on conflict is unnecessary. Equally, concentration on the common ground areas

may be the key to building a satisfactory climate in the first place.

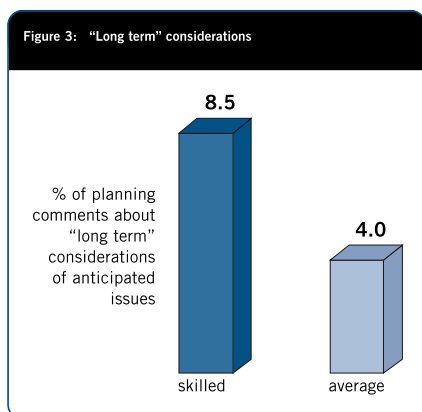
A relatively high concentration on common ground areas is known to be an effective strategy from other Huthwaite studies of persuasion, notably with “pull” styles of persuasion and in selling situations.

In any event, potential negotiators wishing to model themselves on successful performers would do well to pay special attention to areas of anticipated common ground and not just to areas of conflict.

❖ D. Long-term or Short-term?

It is often suggested that skilled negotiators spend much of their planning time considering the long-term implications of the issues, while unskilled negotiators

concentrate on the short-term. Is this true in practice? The studies found that both groups showed an alarming concentration on the short-term aspect of issues. With average negotiators, approximately one comment in 25 during their planning met our criterion of a long-term consideration, namely a comment which involved any factor extending beyond the immediate implementation of the issue under negotiation. The skilled negotiator, while showing twice as many long-term comments, still only averages 8.5 percent of total recorded planning comments. These figures must necessarily be approximate, partly because of the research method (which may have inadvertently encouraged verbalization of short-term issues) and partly because our ignorance of individual circumstances made some comments hard to classify. Even so, they



demonstrate how little planning time is given by most negotiators to the long-term implications of what they negotiate.

❖ E. Setting Limits

The researchers asked negotiators about their objectives and recorded whether their replies referred to single-point objectives (e.g., “we aim to settle at 83¢”) or to a defined range (e.g., “we hope to get 37¢, but we would settle for a minimum of 34¢”). Skilled negotiators were significantly more likely to set upper and lower limits—to plan in terms of a range. Average negotiators, in contrast, were more likely to plan their objectives around a fixed point. Although one possible explanation is that skilled negotiators have more freedom, which gives them the discretion of upper and lower limits, this seems unlikely from the research. Even where the average negotiators had considerable capacity to vary the terms of an agreement, they usually approached the negotiation with a fixed-point objective in mind. The conclusion, for would-be negotiators, is that it seems to be preferable to approach a negotiation with objectives specifying a clearly defined range, rather than to base planning on an inflexible single-point objective.

❖ F. Sequence and Issue Planning

The term “planning” frequently refers to a process of sequencing—putting a number of events, points, or potential occurrences into a time sequence. Critical path analysis and other forms of network planning are examples. This concept of planning, called sequence planning, works efficiently with inanimate objects, or in circumstances where the planner has real control over the sequence in which events will occur. The researchers found that average negotiators place very heavy reliance on sequence planning. So, for example, they would frequently verbalize a potential negotiation in terms like, “First I’ll cover C and finally go on to D.” In order to succeed, sequence planning always requires the consent and cooperation of the other negotiating party. In many negotiations, this cooperation was not forthcoming. The negotiator would begin at point A and

the other party would only be interested in point D. This could put negotiators in difficulty, requiring them to either mentally change gears and approach the negotiation in a sequence they had not planned for, or to carry through the original sequence risking disinterest from the other party. In many negotiations, sequences were, in themselves, negotiable and it was ill-advised for the negotiator to plan on a sequence basis.

Figure 4: Planning the Negotiation

**sequence planning –
used more by average negotiators**



**issue planning –
used more by skilled negotiators**



process that each negotiator mentioned sequence of issues, as seen in the table below.

The clear advantage of issue planning over sequence planning is flexibility. In planning a negotiation, it is important to remember that the sequence of issues itself (unless a pre-set agenda is agreed upon) may be subject to negotiation. Even where an agenda exists, within a particular item, sequence planning may involve some loss of flexibility. So it seems useful for negotiators to plan their face-to-face strategy using issue planning and avoiding sequence planning.

Face-to-face Behaviour

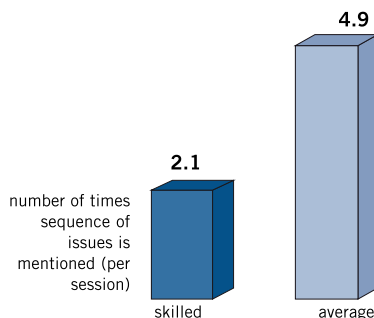
Skilled negotiators show marked differences in their face-to-face behaviour, compared with average negotiators. They use certain types of behaviour significantly more frequently while they tend to avoid other types.

A. Irritators

Certain words and phrases which are commonly used during negotiation have negligible value in persuading the other party, but do cause irritation.

Probably the most frequent example of these is the term “generous offer” used by negotiators to describe their own proposals. Similarly, words such as “fair” and “reasonable,” and other terms with a high positive value loading, have no persuasive power when used as self-praise, while serving to irritate the other party because of the implication that they are unfair, unreasonable, and so on. Most negotiators avoid the gratuitous use of direct insults or unfavourable value judgments. They know that there is little to gain from saying

Figure 5: Sequence of Issues

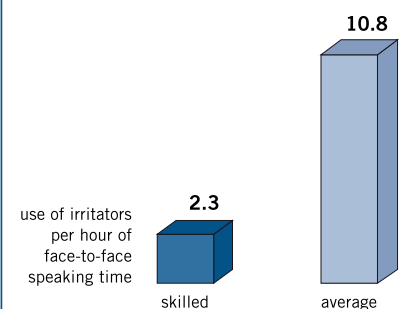


But sequence planning is the most common way in which people plan and, if it doesn't work with many negotiations, then how *should* a negotiator plan? The researchers

found that skilled negotiators tended to plan around each individual issue in a way which was independent of any sequence.

They would consider issue C, for example, as if issues A, B, and D didn't exist. Compared with the average negotiators, they were careful not to draw sequence links between a series of issues. This was demonstrated by observing the number of occasions during the planning

Figure 6: Use of Irritators



unfavourable things about the other party during face-to-face exchanges.

However, the other side of the coin—saying gratuitously favourable things about themselves—seems harder for them to avoid. The researchers called such words “irritators” and found that, although the average negotiator used them fairly regularly, the skilled negotiator tended to avoid them.

It is hardly surprising that skilled negotiators use fewer irritators. Any type of verbal behaviour which antagonizes without a persuasive effect is unlikely to be productive. More surprising is the heavy use of irritators by average negotiators. The conclusion must be that most people fail to recognize the counter-productive effect of using positive value judgments about themselves and, in doing so, implying negative judgments of the other party.

❖ B. Counter-proposals

During negotiation, it frequently happens that one party puts forward a proposal and the other party immediately responds with a counter-proposal. The re-searchers found that skilled negotiators made immediate counter-proposals much less frequently than average negotiators.

This difference suggests that the common strategy of meeting a proposal with a counter-proposal may not be particularly effective. The disadvantages of immediate counter-proposals are:

Counter-proposals introduce an additional option, sometimes a whole new issue, which complicates and clouds the clarity of the negotiation.

Counter-proposals are put forward at a point where the other party has least receptiveness, being concerned with their own proposal.

Counter-proposals are perceived as blocking or disagreeing by the other party, not as proposals. (A

study of 87 controlled p a c e negotiation exercises by the researchers showed that when one side in a negotiation put forth a

proposal, there was an 87 percent chance that the other side would perceive it as a proposal. However, if the proposal immediately followed a proposal made by the other side [if, in other words, it was a counter-proposal], the chance of being perceived as a proposal dropped to 61 percent, with a proportionate increase in the chances of being perceived as either disagreeing or blocking.)

These reasons probably explain why the skilled negotiator is less likely to use counter-proposing as a tactic than is the average negotiator.

❖ C. Defend/Attack Spirals

B e c a u s e negotiation frequently involves conflict, negotiators may become heated and use emotional or value-loaded behaviours. When such behaviour was

used to attack the other party, or to make an emotional defence, the researchers termed it “defending/attacking.” Once initiated, this behaviour tended to form a spiral of increasing intensity: one negotiator would attack, and the other would defend, usually in

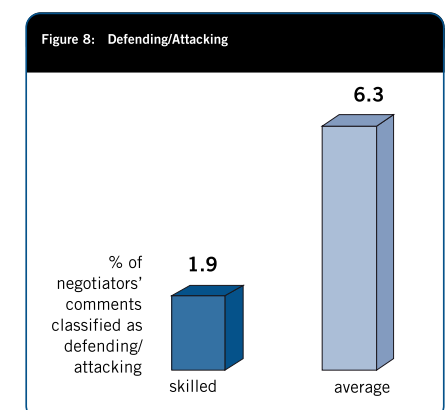
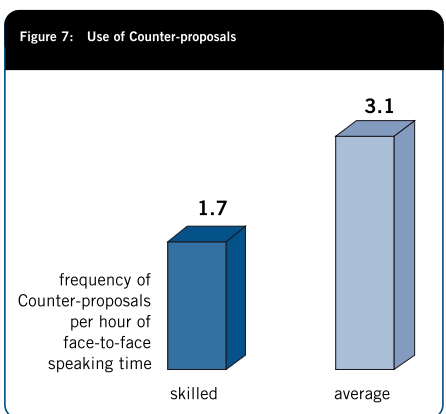
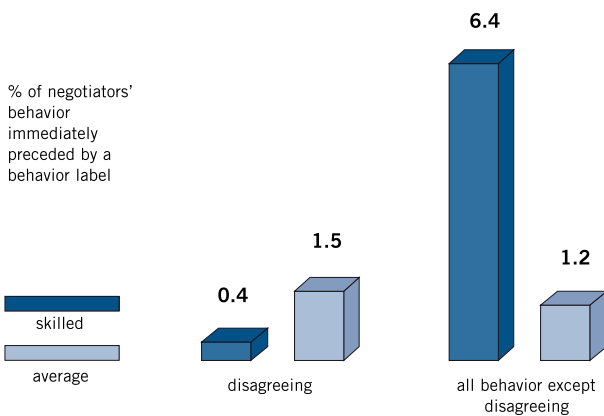


Figure 9: Advantages of Behavior Labelling



a manner which the first negotiator perceived as an attack. In consequence the first negotiator attacked more vigorously and the spiral commenced. Defending and attacking were often difficult to distinguish from each other. What one negotiator perceived as a legitimate defence, the other party might see as an unwarranted attack. This was the root cause of most defending/attacking spirals observed during the studies. Average negotiators in particular were likely to react defensively, using comments such as, "You can't blame us for that," or, "It's not our fault that the present difficulty has arisen." Such comments frequently provoked a sharp defensive reaction from the other side of the table.

The researchers found that average negotiators use more than three times as much defending/attacking behaviour as skilled negotiators. Although no quantitative measure exists, the researchers observed that skilled negotiators, if they did decide to attack, gave no warning and attacked hard. Average negotiators, in contrast, usually began their attacking gently, working their way up to more intense attacks slowly, and, in doing so, causing the other party to build up its defensive behaviour in the characteristic defending/attacking spiral.

D. Behavior Labelling

The researchers found that skilled negotiators tended to give an advance indication of the class of behaviour

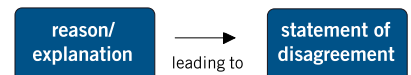
they were about to use. So, for example, instead of just asking, "How many units are there?" they would say, "Can I ask you a question—how many units are there?" thereby giving a warning that a question was coming. Instead of just making a proposal they would say, "If I could make a suggestion. . ." and then follow this advance label with their proposal. With one exception, average negotiators were significantly less likely to label their behaviour in this way. The only behaviour which the average negotiator was *more* likely to label in advance was disagreeing.

This is a slightly unusual finding and it may not be immediately evident why these differences should exist. The researchers' interpretation was that, in general, labelling of behaviour gives the negotiator the following advantages:

- It draws the attention of the listeners to the behavior that follows. In this way social pressure can be brought to force a response.

Figure 10: Strategies for Disagreeing

Skilled Negotiators



Average Negotiators



- It slows the negotiation down, giving time for the negotiators using labelling to gather their thoughts and for the other party to clear their mind from the previous statements.
- It introduces a formality which takes away a little of the cut-and-thrust and therefore keeps the negotiation on a rational level.
- It reduces ambiguity and leads to clearer communication.

Skilled negotiators do, however, avoid labelling their *disagreement*. While average negotiators will characteristically say, “I disagree with that because of. . .,” thus labelling that they are about to disagree, skilled negotiators are more likely to begin with the reasons and lead up to the disagreement.

If one of the functions of behaviour labelling is to make a negotiator’s intentions clear, then it is hardly surprising that skilled negotiators avoid making it clear that they intend to disagree. They would normally prefer their reasons to be considered more neutrally so that acceptance involved minimal loss of face for the other party. But, if labelling disagreement is likely to be counter-productive, why does the average negotiator label disagreeing behaviour more than all the other types of behaviour put together? Most probably this tendency reflects the order in which we think. We decide that an argument we hear is unacceptable and only then do we assemble reasons to show why. The average negotiator speaks this disagreement first, then finds and gives reasons afterwards.

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❖ E. Testing Understanding and Summarizing

The researchers found that two behaviours with a similar function—*testing understanding* and *summarizing*—were used significantly more by the skilled negotiator.

Testing understanding is a behaviour which checks to establish whether a previous contribution or statement in the negotiation has been understood. *Summarizing* is a compact restatement of previous points in the discussion. Both behaviours sort out misunderstandings and reduce misconceptions.

The higher level of these behaviours by skilled negotiators reflects their concern with clarity and the prevention of misunderstanding. It may also relate to two less obvious factors.

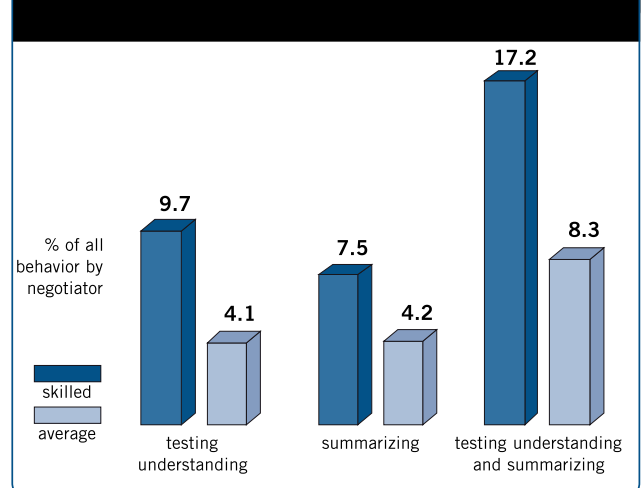
1. Reflecting

Some skilled negotiators tended to use testing understanding as a form of reflecting behaviour—turning the other party’s words back in order to obtain further responses, e.g., “So do I understand that you are saying you don’t see any merit in this proposal at all?”

2. Implementation Concern

Average negotiators, in their anxiety to obtain an agreement, would often quite deliberately fail to test understanding or to summarize. They would prefer to leave ambiguous points to be cleared later, fearing that making things explicit might cause the other party to disagree. In short, their predominant objective was to obtain an agreement and they would not probe too deeply into any area of potential

Figure 11: Negotiating Behavior



misunderstanding which might prejudice immediate agreement, even if it was likely to give rise to difficulties at the implementation stage. Skilled negotiators, on the other hand, tended to have a greater concern with the successful implementation (as would be predicted from the success criteria earlier in this document). They would test and summarize in order to check out any ambiguities at the negotiating stage rather than leave them as potential hazards for implementation.

F. Asking Questions

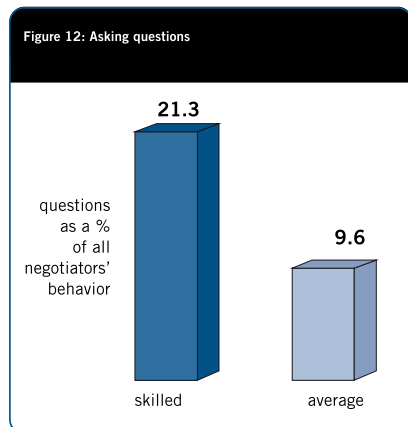
Skilled negotiators asked significantly more questions during negotiation than did average negotiators.

This is a very significant difference in behaviour. Many negotiators and researchers have suggested that questioning techniques are important to negotiating success. Among the reasons frequently given are:

- ❖ Questions provide data about the other party's thinking and position.
- ❖ Questions give control over the discussion.
- ❖ Questions are more acceptable alternatives to direct disagreement.
- ❖ Questions keep the other party active and reduce their thinking time.
- ❖ Questions can give negotiators a breathing space to allow them time to marshal their own thoughts.

G. Feelings Commentary

Skilled negotiators are often thought of as people

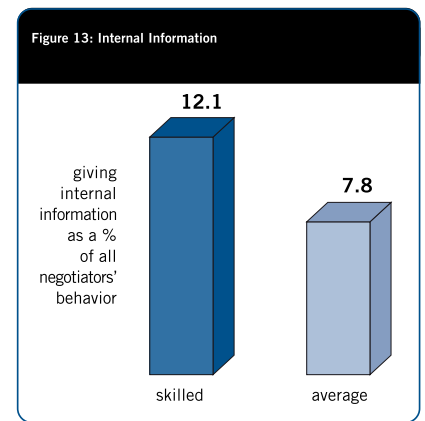


who play their cards very close to the chest, and who keep their feelings to themselves. The research studies were unable to measure this directly because feelings are, in themselves, unobservable.

However, an indirect measure was possible. The researchers counted the number of times that negotiators made statements about what was going on inside their minds. The behaviour category of "Giving Internal Information" was used to record any reference by negotiators to their internal considerations such as feelings and motives.

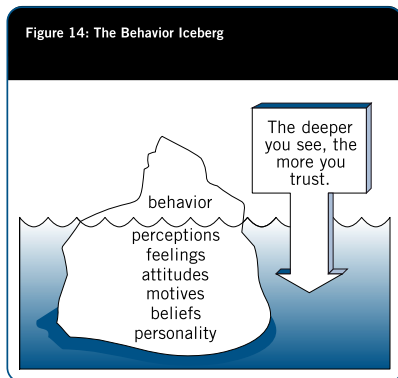
Skilled negotiators are more likely to give information about their internal events than are average negotiators. This contrasts sharply with the amount of information given about external events, such as facts, clarifications, general expressions of opinion, etc. Here the average negotiator gives almost twice as much.

The effect of giving internal information is that negotiators appear to reveal what is going on in their minds. This revelation may or may not be genuine, but it gives the other party a feeling of security because such things as motives appear to be explicit and aboveboard. The most characteristic and noticeable form of giving internal information is a *feelings commentary*, where skilled negotiators talk about their feelings and the effect the other party has on them. For example, the average negotiator, doubting the truth of a point put forward by the other party, is likely to receive that point in uncomfortable silence. Skilled negotiators are more likely to comment on their own feelings saying something like, "I'm uncertain how to react to what you've just said. If the information you've given me



is true, then I would like to accept it, yet I feel some doubts inside me about its accuracy. So part of me feels rather suspicious. Can you help me resolve this?"

The work of psychologists such as Carl Rogers has shown that the expression of feelings is directly linked to establishing trust in counselling situations. It is probable that the same is true for negotiating.



❖ H. Argument Dilution

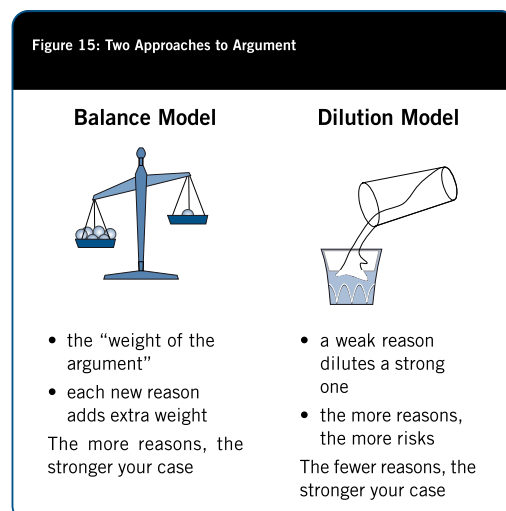
Most people have a model of arguing which looks rather like a balance or a pair of scales. In fact, many of the terms we use about winning arguments reflect this balance model. We speak of "tipping the argument in our favour," or "the weight of the arguments," or how an issue "hangs in the balance." This way of thinking predisposes us to believe that there is some special merit in quantity. If we can find five reasons for doing something, then that should be more persuasive than only being able to think of a single reason. We feel that the more we can put on our scale-pan, the more likely we are to tip the balance of an argument in our favour. If this model has any validity, then skilled negotiators would be likely to use more reasons to back up their arguments than would average negotiators.

The researchers found that the opposite was true. Skilled negotiators used *fewer* reasons to back up each of their arguments. Although the balance-pan model may be very commonly believed, the studies suggest that it is a *disadvantage* to advance a whole series of reasons to back an argument or case. In doing so, the negotiator exposes a flank and gives the other party a choice of which reason to dispute. It seems self-evident that if a negotiator gives five reasons to back a case and

the third reason is weak, the other party will exploit this reason in their response. The most appropriate model seems to be one of dilution. The more reasons advanced, the more a case is potentially diluted. The poorest reason is a lowest common denominator: a weak argument generally dilutes a strong one.

Unfortunately, many negotiators who had the disadvantage of higher education put a value on being able to ingeniously devise reasons to back their case. They frequently suffered from this dilution effect and had their point rejected, not on the strength of their principal argument, but on the weakness of the incidental supporting points they introduced.

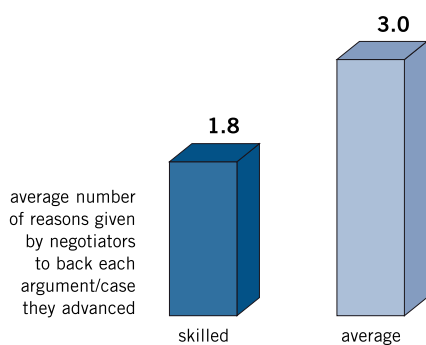
The skilled negotiator tended to advance single reasons insistently, only moving to subsidiary reasons if the main reason was clearly losing ground. It is probably no coincidence that an unexpectedly high proportion of the skilled negotiators studied, both in labour relations and in contract negotiation, had relatively little formal education. As a consequence, they had not been trained to value the balance-pan model and more easily avoided the trap of advancing a whole flank of reasons to back their case.



Reviewing the Negotiation

The researchers asked negotiators how likely they were to spend time reviewing the negotiation afterwards. Over two-thirds of the skilled negotiators claimed that they always set aside some time after a negotiation to review it and consider what they had learned. Just under half of average negotiators, in contrast, made the same claim. Because the data is self-reported, it may be inaccurate. Even so, it seems that the old principle that more can be learned after a negotiation than during it may be true. In the area of labour negotiation, an interesting difference between management and union representatives was observed. Management representatives, with other responsibilities and time pressures, were less likely to review a negotiation than were union representatives. This may, in part, account for the observation made by many writers on labour relations that union negotiators seem to learn negotiating skills from taking part in actual negotiations more quickly than do management negotiators.

Figure 16: Argument Dilution



Summary of Successful Negotiators' Behaviour

The successful negotiator

- ✦ is rated as effective by both sides
- ✦ has a track record of significant success
- ✦ has a low incidence of implementation failure

Forty-nine negotiators meeting these criteria were studied during 103 negotiations.

Figure 17: Planning

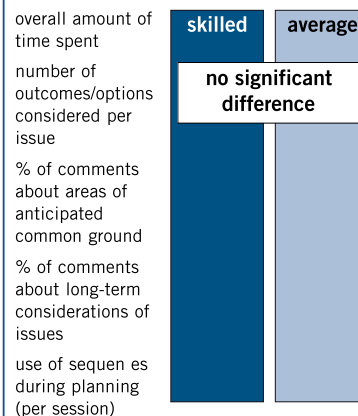


Figure 18: Face-to-face

Skilled Negotiators:

Avoid

- irritators
- counter-proposals
- defend/attack spirals
- argument dilution

Use

- behavior labelling (except disagreeing)
- testing understanding and summarizing
- lots of questions
- feelings commentary

About Huthwaite

Huthwaite, the creators of *SPIN® Selling*, is the world's premier sales performance improvement organisation. In the past 25 years, they have helped hundreds of organisations achieve competitive advantage by developing sales skills, sales management and strategy programs, and innovative sales force responses to market-place demands.

Huthwaite's worldwide research analysing more than 35,000 sales calls over a 12-year period is regarded as the most important study ever conducted in the sales field, and is summarised in the best-selling business book *SPIN® Selling*, by Neil Rackham.

Ongoing research has led to the publication of dozens of articles, white papers and these additional books:

- ✚ *Rethinking the Sales Force: Redefining Selling to Create and Capture Customer Value* (McGraw-Hill)
- ✚ *Major Account Sales Strategy* (McGraw-Hill)
- ✚ *Managing Major Sales* (Harper Business)
- ✚ *Getting Partnering Right: How Market Leaders are Creating Long-term Competitive Advantage* (McGraw-Hill)

Through their extensive research, they have developed sales models and performance improvement solutions that have been proven to be both practical and effective for building world-class sales organisations through sustainable performance change.

Huthwaite solutions enable sales professionals to acquire the right skills and to develop those skills through an ongoing program of reinforcement. They provide a continuum of services that reinforce each other to increase knowledge and strengthen skills, as well as more advanced skills and strategies, including:

- ✚ individual and team selling
- ✚ opportunity planning and strategy development
- ✚ managing the sales process
- ✚ coaching skills for managers
- ✚ presentations and proposals
- ✚ marketing and sales integration

Talk to us about helping your organisation develop your selling, coaching and negotiation skills, sales management, and overall sales strategy to world-class level. 📈