

Getting to Yes in Negotiations

Idea In Short

Negotiate by separating people from the problem, focusing on interests instead of positions, inventing options before deciding and insisting on objective criteria. This principled approach turns confrontation into collaboration.

A Book That Still Shapes Negotiation

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In is arguably the most famous book written on negotiations. Roger Fisher and William Ury wrote it in 1981, and it has been compulsory reading for negotiation classes at Washington, Columbia, Texas, Princeton, Rutgers, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and other universities for 30 years. More importantly, diplomats, lawyers and business people endorse it because they use these lessons daily. This stuff works. The ideas sound obvious, yet Fortune 500 organizations struggle to implement them and often hire management consultants for help. 1

Separate the People From the Problem

People have emotions, bias, ego and history, so mundane business problems are often actually people problems. Consultants are frequently hired to lend objectivity, arbitrate disagreements between departments or bridge gaps in communication. This breakdown appears often between sales and marketing teams. Political impasse offers a clear example. When each side sees the other as dogmatic, simplistic and self-serving, negotiation becomes impossible. President Ronald Reagan and Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill were fierce opponents who disagreed on most policy issues, yet they shared dinners and drinks. Reagan reportedly told Chris Matthews that in Washington, everyone is friends after six. That human bond made disagreement productive again.

Focus on Interests, Not Positions

Too often people speak in absolutes. They say they will always do one thing or never do

another. They frame the discussion in terms of their position as if it were written in stone. This is not really a negotiation so much as a confrontation. It becomes a zero-sum game where one person's gain can only come at the other's loss. Positions oversimplify the problem. When dealing with reducing the federal deficit, protecting the environment, reducing crime or alleviating poverty, it is laughable to think there is a silver bullet. Complex problems require hard thought, collaboration, leadership and a lot of hard work. As H.L. Mencken noted, for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong. Instead, think of interests. Negotiation goals can be numerous, different, complementary or competing. They are not discrete points on a graph but more like a Venn diagram of two hopefully overlapping circles. The space in the middle represents a win-win or a mutually beneficial compromise. 2

Generate Options Before Deciding

Clients sometimes jump to conclusions because they have been in the industry for 20 or 30 years, or because it has always been done a certain way. Consultants are more willing to start with a blank sheet of paper. Consultants spend time with the data and think through the problem. At the start of a project they look for hypotheses everywhere. They brainstorm new ideas and rule nothing out at this stage. They keep asking why until they reach the core reason. They dig until they find root causes and real drivers. They interview people up and down the org chart. They reach out to industry experts who know the larger trends. They look for points of comparison and benchmarks. It is common for consultants to structure multiple options for the client to choose from. This acknowledges that several potential solutions exist, but each carries trade-offs. The choice depends on the client's time frame, appetite for risk, budget and conviction. There is often one primary recommendation, but multiple implementation options.

Insist on Decision Criteria

One of the best ways to drive consensus is to create evaluation criteria and make the client stick to them. For a strategic sourcing engagement, there is typically a request for proposal (RFP) for vendors and an RFP evaluation form that clients use to rate vendor proposals. The same logic can evaluate a home you plan to purchase or even a political candidate. Sometimes consultants use surveys or pass out evaluation checklists. A maturity model can serve the same purpose. Objective criteria turn opinion into evidence and prevent the discussion from drifting back into positions.

Politicians Ignore These Lessons

Politicians rarely heed the basic instructions in this bestseller. They demonize the other party, talk of unalterable positions and brainstorm almost no new solutions. They say and do things that make solving pressing problems nearly impossible. The contrast with principled negotiation is stark. Anyone married for more than 10 years can vouch for Ury's advice. You have to know what is important, look for win-win solutions and use strategic compromise for the sake of the relationship. In a long-term relationship, a short-term harsh win is often a long-term lose. 3

What Consultants Take Away

Consultants live these four principles daily. They separate people from the problem when arbitrating between factions. They focus on interests when mapping a client's true goals. They generate options before recommending, because forcing one answer hides trade-offs. They insist on objective criteria so decisions survive scrutiny. The framework is simple, but execution is rare. Teams that practice it break deadlocks, build durable agreements and earn trust with clients who watched prior negotiations collapse into trench warfare.

Build the Bridge Before You Need It

Principled negotiation works best when the relationship already has a foundation of trust. Consultants who invest in rapport before a crisis find that disagreements stay focused on the problem rather than the people. They learn the client's real constraints, motivations and stakes during calm moments, so that when pressure rises they can frame options around interests the client already owns. This preparation prevents the sudden escalation that turns a trade-off into a confrontation. It also gives the consultant credibility to challenge a hardened position, because the client knows the pushback serves shared goals. Negotiation skill matters, but most of the win comes from the relational groundwork laid long before the bargaining begins.

- 1Getting to Yes lays out principled negotiation as a method that separates people from the problem, focuses on interests, invents options and insists on objective criteria
- 2Principled negotiation asks parties to reconcile interests, not positions, because interests define the problem and reveal where value can be traded

- 3Cooling down a heated debate at work requires separating people from the problem and finding shared interests before positions harden

Summary

Getting to Yes remains the negotiation bible because its four points are simple yet rarely practiced. Separate people from the problem, focus on interests, generate options and use objective criteria. Consultants who apply these ideas break deadlocks and build durable agreements.