Ten Commandments for a Negotiator

Janos Nyerges

Toward the end of my professional career—I was Special Representative of the Hungarian Government to International Economic Organizations—I was asked by my younger colleagues about the “secret” of my negotiation ability. This question, though flattering, took me by surprise because, as a matter of fact, I never gave much thought to how I did what I did.

As a very young man, I was almost literally pushed into the deep and troubled waters of economic negotiations. And representing Hungary in a not always friendly world—to put things mildly—was not a very easy task. When I began, my only assets were an interrupted academic education, a few foreign languages, and an unconditional identification with the country I was privileged to represent. I had no teachers, no systematic preparation for this job—other than experience I was soon to gain from experienced diplomats, businessmen, and other shrewd negotiators. As the result of dealing with these “teachers,” I discovered the truth of a well-known saying in the prewar business community of Budapest: “The best professor of a businessman is his customer.”

The question about my “secret” intrigues me, simply because I was not aware that I had any “secret” or that negotiations have some “secret” to be discovered at all. I’ve spent hours and hours of time with colleagues discussing what makes a successful negotiator. A large amount of reading was also necessary so that, at the end of my negotiating career, I became a student of negotiation. And being a student has eventually enabled me to teach.

The question of what makes a good negotiator continues to intrigue me. Based on my experience, observation, and study I’ve developed my own “Ten Commandments for a Negotiator.” Here they are:

1. You shall love and cherish your trade.
2. Be courageous. Accept your responsibilities gladly.
3. The eagle’s eye must be yours: Assess situations quickly.
4. Remember, there are no problems, only opportunities.
5. Be honest under all circumstances.
6. Love your opponent even if you receive something less than that in return.
7. Put yourself in the shoes of your opponent, but do not remain there too long.

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8. Convert your opponent into your partner.
9. Do not act before you have found out your partners' aims.
10. Your partner is at least as intelligent as you are; but, you must have more will.

Now, since nothing is ever quite as simple and straightforward as this little list of commandments, please indulge me while I offer some thoughts on the meaning of each of them.

1. You shall love and cherish your trade.
Regarding this admonition, an anecdote comes to my mind told to me by a close friend of Henri Spaak, the Belgian leader during World War II. Mr. Spaak was visiting Winston Churchill in London, and complimented him on his admirable conduct of war. To this, Churchill replied in French with a heavy English accent: "Pour bien faire la guerre, Monsieur le President, il faut l'aimer." (In order to make war well, Mr. President, one must love it.) Likewise, in order to negotiate well, one must love it. A good negotiator enjoys the negotiation process in the first place, is thoroughly involved in it, and strongly identifies with the issues at stake.

It is obvious that involvement and dedication to a cause are not enough; in fact, without a strong sense of professionalism, this type of adherence can be a liability. Professionalism, to my mind, is not simply the fact that a good negotiator has a high professional standing. I view professionalism as an intellectual and emotional involvement and commitment to the profession itself. True negotiators are enthusiastic about negotiation, just as good lawyers, doctors, engineers, and teachers are in love with their trade.

In international negotiations, true professional negotiators are quick to recognize each other. The true professional can recognize other professionals very soon, not in a formal way but through the mutual sympathy among people who worship the same goddess. This is a great asset, for such acceptance confers additional weight to anything the professional negotiator has to say. This bond of recognition sometimes crosses boundaries of countries and even ideologies without ever putting in question one's loyalty to his or her own constituency. An invitation to an informal dinner of fellow professionals some twenty years ago was my debut in these ranks; it showed that I was accepted not only as "the distinguished delegate of Hungary," but as one of them.

2. Be courageous.
A good negotiator must command respect. Respect cannot be conferred by rank or functions; it is due to character. Nothing confers respect more than courage, which is the readiness to accept responsibilities and to make decisions.

In German terms, there are two different qualifications: Entschlussf"ahig (i.e., capable to make decisions) and Entschlussfreudig (i.e., enjoys making decisions). Being capable of making decisions seems obvious. In reality, however, many negotiators are not born to negotiate, nor even trained to do so. They simply find themselves in the role of negotiator because they hold a corresponding rank in the bureaucracy. As well-trained and well-advised bureaucrats, they need orders from higher echelons of the hierarchy. To negotiate, to decide what