Negotiating with Your Professor: An In-Class Simulation

Joseph F. Byrnes

As I prepared to teach my second course on negotiating, this time with undergraduates, I began searching for a relevant, exciting and instructive first exercise. None of the published exercises and role plays seemed appropriate, particularly for students about 20 years of age with little business experience. I was specifically concerned about the natural fear and shyness that many undergraduates seem to possess.

After much thought, I devised a simulation/role play that proved to be ideal for such a young and inexperienced group. I call it, "Negotiating With Your Professor," and it is included as Appendix 1 of this article. (Please read it before proceeding.)

On the first day of class, I explained to the students that "Negotiating With Your Professor" would be our first simulation and that it would occur in the next scheduled class, one week later. After giving them five minutes to read the simulation, I made the following points:

1) I would select one student from the class to negotiate with me about the final grade in front of the entire class. Each student should prepare as if he/she would be the one chosen. I would announce my choice for this role play during the next class, ten minutes before the simulation would begin. Thus, each student would have to prepare as if he/she would be selected. That meant strategies and tactics needed to be considered before the next class by every student in the class.

2) To be fair to the student chosen, he/she could say "time out" at any time during the actual role play. This would suspend the negotiations, and I would leave the room so that the student could consider the next steps to take. The student could confer with his/her group (the class was divided into four groups during the first class). I would re-enter the room and continue the negotiations when I was called back. There was a ten-minute maximum on each time-out.

Joseph F. Byrnes is Dean of the Graduate School and Professor of Management at Bentley College, 175 Forest St., Waltham, Mass. 02154.
I distributed three actual application papers and a final exam paper from my previous class. The names of the authors were removed from the copies. These four papers would be the basis of the negotiations. How students decided to use these papers would be up to them. They could prepare to discuss one, some, or all of these papers with me.

The student selected would not be graded on his/her performance. However, I assumed that the student would want to do the best job possible, particularly since the instructor and the entire class would be observing. I also reiterated that each student should assume he/she would be chosen, and that everyone should be totally prepared.

If students wanted to investigate me and my style, they could ask other students or even other professors. This was permitted, and might be a good way to prepare for the negotiations.

At the beginning of the second class, we had a general discussion about negotiating styles and ethical issues, such as the acceptability of deception in negotiations.

As students volunteered their opinions and actual experience, I assessed the class, trying to find the student for the upcoming simulation. I zeroed in on a female student who was both articulate and seemingly sure of herself. She stressed the importance of "holding a few cards close to your chest" during negotiations and the need to "diffuse conflict with humor." I had also discovered through some background checks that she was an excellent student with an overall grade point average of 3.7 (A−). She blanched when I chose her, but then smiled and said, "I knew you would pick me." The other students laughed, mostly out of relief that they were not chosen.

I then divided the class into three groups: the first group would be her advisers, the second would concentrate on me during the negotiations, and the third would concentrate on the student. The forms used to record observations are included as Appendix 2 and 3.

The Negotiations and Students' Evaluations

After cautioning the entire class about the need to be silent during the negotiations (no laughing, talking, groaning, and so on), we began. I had no idea how it would go or what it would take to change my mind about the grade issue.

I sat in a chair with a desk in front of me; she sat in front of my desk in another chair.

We began with small talk. ("Are you finished with all your finals? Are you going home for the holidays? Do you know what classes you are taking next semester?" etc.) I initiated the small talk and it seemed to put her at ease. After about three minutes of such talk, she brought up her disappointment with her final grade.

From that point on, we had a serious, complicated negotiation with three time-outs called for by the student and, finally, an agreement. (She would take an incomplete for the course, do another final paper with a different interviewee, with no guarantee that her new final exam paper would even be at the "B" level.) It was an exhausting but exhilarating experience for everyone.

I then handed out an after-exercise questionnaire for the class to fill out. The three questions were: (1) What did you like most about this exercise? (2)