

# The Universal Applicability of Negotiating

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We have all experienced negotiating when asking for salary raise, when purchasing a new house, or when creating a specification for a broadcast studio. Negotiating is nothing other than a process for finding a compromise that balances incompatible values, goals, wishes and requirements, which design engineers call “sorting trade-offs.” Competing requirements frequently appear among individuals, within a single person, or as part of a technical situation. While we all negotiate and sort trade-offs, few of us have considered that there is a formal technique that makes the process efficient, thereby leading to an optimum solution with a minimum of stress, anxiety and acrimony.

I did not invent what I am about to describe, but I have used it successfully in a wide variety of engineering, business and personal situations. For those who want to explore the topic further, I strongly recommend the popular book: *Getting to Yes. Negotiating Without Giving In*, by Roger Fisher and William Ury. It is available for a few dollars at your local bookstore. It originated from Harvard University’s Program on Negotiations, and the principles have been applied to international disputes, labor conflicts and purchasing a home. These techniques are just as useful to engineers functioning in their technical profession.

There is a right and wrong way to negotiate. The right way begins with goals; the wrong way begins with a proposed solution. Consider a professional example. An engineer who asserts that the radio station needs a new license to broadcast with more power is beginning with a solution. But an engineer who asserts that the station should try to expand its listening audience is beginning with a goal. The former fixates on a single solution, while the latter includes the possibility of installing repeater stations, broadcasting over the Internet, or syndicating programs over a national network.

Now consider a personal example. An engineer who desires a shorter workweek is proposing a solution, but an engineer who wants time for a personal activity is articulating a goal. There may be many ways to find extra time that do not involve changing the structure of the workweek. Perhaps there are periodic intervals when the engineer must be present but when there is nothing for him to do. The ideal solution would be for the engineer to use that free time for his personal needs.

Beginning with goals, and ending with a solution, there are five recognizable stages in a negotiation process.

Stage 1: all the parties articulate their values and goals while being careful not to include hidden solutions. For example, a station manager may articulate the following goals: increase profitability for the owner, increase listeners’ loyalty, establish a unique sound that is recognized among advertisers and create a pleasant working environment

for the staff. At a personal level, an engineer may desire to earn a large income, have an opportunity for professional growth, be within walking distance of his home and become well known in the industry.

Stage 2: each party sorts their goals in order of priority. It is unlikely that a solution exists that will satisfy all goals. Some goals are obviously more important than others and the least important ones can be abandoned if the highest priority goals are met. For most people, figuring out what is most important is the hardest stage. Give it the time it deserves.

Stage 3: the parties engage in a dialog to understanding each other's list of goals. One must not challenge the list since it is a given. Because nobody can tell another person what he should want, one must respect everyone's right to have a personal set of goals. Goals are not negotiable.

Stage 4: the parties brainstorm for a comprehensive list of possible solutions but without regard for their quality or utility. With a large enough list, there is the likelihood that some variant of a solution, or some combination of solutions, will match the highest priorities for all parties. Through this process shared interests emerge.

Stage 5: only now, do the parties explore how to select a solution that matches the highest priorities. Inventing solutions is everyone's job, and that job requires solutions that optimize the collective needs of all parties. By devaluing everyone's low priority needs in exchange for elevating everyone's high priority needs, trading takes place. Everyone contributes because everyone's situation is public. However, good-will is still required for the process to work. If one party tries to force a solution that matches his goals, while ignoring the goals of the other party, the process becomes a deadlocked stalemate without a solution.

Consider an example of how these stages might be applied. Rather than advocating that a transmitter should be replaced because of its inadequate frequency response, the process begins with the goal: creating a unique sound. The list of values might include the ease of implementation, the cost of the change, the risk that the change would be counterproductive and available skills among the staff. These are sorted. Proposed solutions might include: making the sound hotter and louder, adding reverberation to give it a unique spatial quality, improving the signal strength in fringe areas and so on. Creative people (and most are) can brainstorm for solutions if they are not emotionally committed to their particular proposal. Finally, everyone works towards the best solution.

Although the approach easily works when everyone understands and believes in the process, negotiations fail, or become problematic, with a rigid personality who only thinks in terms of solutions. Moreover, aggressive personalities may measure their sense of power by their ability to force a solution onto someone else even if it is useless or counterproductive. Egotists can become emotionally hijacked when thwarted. There are ways of handling such situations but that topic is too complex for our short discussion.

Mostly, however, professionals have good-will as part of their value system, thus making this problem less relevant.

In an earlier article, I advocated the merits of asking the right question when trying to improve quality. Negotiating is just another application of the same idea: ask the right questions in the correct order. More often than not, that initial question should be “what problem are you trying to solve”. If someone begins with a solution, help them translate it into a goal by generalizing the idea.

On a final note, the approach of beginning with goals works when having a dialog with oneself, when writing a specification for a project, when creating a team among diverse individuals and when designing a product. While we all understand the concept of trade-offs, by placing those concepts into the context of negotiating, we are then able to use a time-tested set of rules and procedures that is known to work. Try it: it is fun and harmonious, and it works best when everyone understands the process. If someone is not familiar with the method, get them a copy of *Getting to Yes*, and while you are at the bookstore, buy a few extra copies for your friends and family.