

Demolishing the urban legends of negotiation

By Ian Newall



Urban legend 1:

“Decide the sequence in which issues should be discussed and stick to your plan”

You need to be seen as the tough negotiator. You need to show the other side who is in charge. You need to set the agenda and see that they stick to it. Right?

Actually...wrong, and for two reasons.

Firstly, you won't be starting the negotiation off on the right foot if you get into an argument about the agenda. There is overwhelming evidence that skilled negotiators start by ensuring that negotiations take place in a productive climate. They are likely to exchange pleasantries in a discussion that will vary in length depending on the culture within which the negotiation takes place. In the UK we typically get through this part fairly quickly. But it goes further than this. Our research showed that, when planning for negotiations, skilled negotiators give more than three times as much attention to common ground than average negotiators. One of the reasons that they do this is that emphasising common ground allows them to maintain a positive climate during negotiations. They will refer to common ground early in the negotiation and come back to it whenever things become difficult.

Secondly, if you try to establish a sequential agenda you are likely to fall into the trap of agreeing items as you work through the agenda and, by the time you reach the last item, you may find that you have reached your limit with no more room to manoeuvre. Any move from then on will erode your margins.

Huthwaite's research showed that skilled negotiators are half as likely to refer to sequence when planning for negotiations than average negotiators. This is because they plan around the issues, linking them to each other, so that they can handle each issue, irrespective of when it is discussed. They are then able to move easily from one item to another and have a clear understanding of the relationship between items.

Working in this way, skilled negotiators will seldom strike agreements on individual items. As every item is linked to every other item, only tentative agreements can be reached on each item.

Essentially, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed!