

Keeping the channels open

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Communication has never been easier, but selecting the right method for optimum results in negotiation is still as important as ever, explains Mike Phillips.

Today's media provides us with a dazzling array of communication options. SMS, email, phone, instant messaging, social networking – the list seems almost endless.

But a skilled negotiator will want to maintain close control of the negotiation dialogue at all times and so a great deal of care needs to be taken in deciding how to communicate with the other party. Most of the more 'instant' types of communication, such as text or instant messaging, leave little scope for subtlety or nuance and are open to misunderstanding and, as such, have very limited value in business negotiation.

The three key communication channels for negotiation are face-to-face meeting, written word – and nowadays this really means email, as traditional mail is almost universally considered too slow – and the telephone.

Face-to-face meeting is unquestionably the best mode of communication for a negotiator but, being the most powerful, it leaves plenty of opportunity for costly mistakes. Although sometimes the only realistic option, teleconferencing should be avoided if a genuine face-to-face meeting can be arranged, even if this means delaying the discussion for a short while. The problem with teleconferencing is that the negotiator can misinterpret or miss altogether key emotional signals from the other party because of the limited view that the TV screen provides. It is also too easy to miss helpful non-verbal signals passing between the members of the other party's negotiating team - a skilled negotiator will instinctively pick up on knowing glances between colleagues.

It is also important not to use the opportunity afforded by the meeting to try to rush the other party. Pushing too hard and too quickly in a meeting is very likely to result in a defensive stance, which will not give you the best result. Be prepared to allow for a break, so the other party can weigh up the options you have presented.

Where practical and reasonable, take the time to travel to the other party's premises for the meeting. This not only shows confidence but commitment. Remember, world-class negotiation is about persuasion. An aggressive and demanding negotiator will always get some sort of result but it is only when you have genuinely convinced the other party of the power of your arguments that you can be sure no money has been left on the table.

The written word, via email, is the next-best mode of communication, particularly when used following an initial face-to-face meeting. I have sometimes been challenged when placing email above the telephone for negotiating. To be fair, the convenience of email can be abused and meanings can be misinterpreted, either because of sloppiness or poor command of English, but it is easy to overlook the power of a skilfully crafted email. A master negotiator should not be in a hurry to hit the 'send' button. The real power of email comes from the ability to write, test and modify arguments before sending. Guard against possible misinterpretations by having trusted colleague not closely involved in the negotiation review the email. Do not be tempted to use email like instant messaging, firing messages back and forth. Again, the real power of this mode of communication comes from the time it allows.

Every negotiator sometimes negotiates on the telephone but it is a severely limited mode of communication. Unlike email, where time allows for a considered response, you have to respond instantly. However, restricted as it is to the auditory channel, critical non-verbal information essential to a complete assessment of the position of the other party is lost.

If you must negotiate on the telephone, make an appointment for the call. Nothing is guaranteed to push the other party into defensive mode more quickly than an unexpected telephone call.

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