Column

Be Curious

Chris Guthrie

Introduction

Negotiation is an *interpersonal* process. By definition, then, negotiators need to understand their counterparts' perspectives to do well at the bargaining table. As Roger Fisher and his colleagues observed in *Getting to Yes*, "[t]he ability to see the situation as the other side sees it . . . is one of the most important skills a negotiator can possess" (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991: 23). In *Bargaining for Advantage*, Richard Shell goes even further. Among the "wide range of talents" that good negotiators must develop, "the ability to understand your bargaining opponent's perspective may be the most critical of these skills . . ." (Shell 2006: 78).

Understanding the other side's perspective isn't always easy. Often, negotiators focus narrowly on their own concerns at the expense of understanding those of their counterparts. At other times, negotiators assume they already know what motivates the other party or decide that the other party's perspective is irrelevant or even wrong. And sometimes, negotiators ignore relationship building and information gathering altogether, opting instead to haggle back and forth over positions.

Given how valuable it can be to understand the other party's perspective — but given how difficult it is to do so effectively — what are negotiators to do? The answer, according to the negotiation literature, is to "be curious." Shell (2006), for example, advises negotiators to develop "relentless curiosity about what is really motivating the other side" (p. 87). Likewise, in *Difficult Conversations*, Douglas Stone and his colleagues advise negotiators to adopt a "stance of curiosity" (Stone, Patton, and Heen

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10.1111/j.1571-9979.2009.00233.x
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1999: 167). And in *Beyond Winning*, Robert Mnookin and his colleagues advise negotiators to "[b]e curious about the other side" (Mnookin, Peppet, and Tulumello 2000: 58).

The negotiation literature's advice to "be curious" makes a lot of sense *conceptually*. If a negotiator is curious about his counterpart's point of view, he is more likely to use listening and questioning skills more effectively at the bargaining table to gather valuable information from and about his counterpart. Indeed, recent research suggests that curiosity is correlated with empathic ability and empathic accuracy (Banks 2007).

Practically, however, the advice to be curious makes sense only if curiosity is within the negotiator's control. If one's level of curiosity is fixed — like one's height — advising a negotiator to be curious is like telling him to be taller or shorter, something he simply cannot do. If, on the other hand, curiosity is malleable — more like weight than height — advising a negotiator to be curious is like telling him to drop or add pounds, something over which he has at least some control.

Researchers have identified several factors that appear to trigger curiosity naturally. Researchers have found, for example, that people are more likely to be curious when they find themselves in a good mood (Murray et al. 1990; Hirt et al. 1996). Likewise, people appear to become more curious and interested in a task when they are working with others than when they are working alone (Isaac, Sansone, and Smith 1999; Sansone and Thoman 2005). And, in a fascinating series of experiments, Paul Silvia found that people experience greater curiosity when they are engaged in novel or complex tasks that they find comprehensible (Silvia 2005, 2006, 2008).

Of greater relevance to this essay, researchers have also found that people can consciously adopt and implement curiosity-enhancing strategies to heighten their interest in a given task or situation. The three most promising curiosity-enhancing strategies are:

1. vary the task or process (the variety strategy),
2. increase the challenge of the task (the challenge strategy), and
3. focus on the purposes served by completing the task (the purpose strategy).

Negotiators who find their interest waning at the bargaining table can use any or all of these strategies to increase the likelihood that they will "be curious" about their counterparts.

The Variety Strategy

Researchers have found that people are more likely to remain interested and engaged in a task if they vary the way they perform it. In one study, for instance, Carol Sansone and her colleagues asked subjects to perform one of three tasks: solve a hidden-word puzzle, perform a copying task, or

complete a lettering task. The researchers asked the subjects to indicate what they would do to make these tasks more interesting and then coded their responses. They found that subjects mentioned varying the task more often than any other strategy — 56 percent of those doing the puzzle, 62 percent of those copying, and 59 percent of those lettering (Sansone et al. 1992). Similarly, in a follow-up study of interest-enhancing strategies used by ice skaters, Isabelle Green-Demers and colleagues found that subjects who varied their skating tasks (e.g., "I try to vary the way I approach the task"; "I switch training tasks often"; "I vary the elements that I work on with my coach") experienced higher levels of interest in training (Green-Demers et al. 1998: 256, 258).

Negotiators who find themselves insufficiently curious about their counterparts' interests and motivations might vary the way they go about eliciting this information. They could break a negotiation into sessions. Alternatively, they might try to elicit some information over the phone and elicit other information in person. In the negotiation itself, they might introduce some variety into the way they listen and demonstrate understanding. By varying their listening and information-gathering behavior in these and other ways, negotiators are more likely to maintain their curiosity at the bargaining table.

The Challenge Strategy

Researchers have also found that people are more likely to be interested and curious if they set goals or otherwise challenge themselves to perform at a higher level. Sansone and her colleagues found that the second most common response among the subjects participating in their study — offered by 47 percent of those doing the puzzle, 31 percent the copying task, and 21 percent the lettering task — was to take steps to make the task more challenging (Sansone et al. 1992). Similarly, in their study of ice skaters, Green-Demers and her colleagues found that subjects who employed the challenge strategy (e.g., "I set long-term goals for myself"; "I set goals for improvement during each training session"; "I like to attempt elements that are beyond my current level") experienced higher levels of interest in skating tasks (Green-Demers et al. 1998: 256, 258).

Negotiators who find themselves insufficiently curious at the bargaining table should thus seek to challenge themselves to understand their counterparts. Negotiators might set both longer-term goals or shorter-term goals. For example, they might strive to become the best active listeners they can possibly be, a longer-term goal, or they might strive in a particular negotiation to understand a counterpart's perspective fully before sharing their own, a more short-term goal. In either event, they are more likely to remain curious, interested, and engaged if they challenge themselves to do so (Green-Demers et al. 1998).

The Purpose Strategy

Like the challenge strategy, researchers have found that people are more likely to remain interested in a task when they focus on the purposes served by performing it. In their study of ice skaters, for example, Green-Demers and colleagues found that subjects who employed the purpose strategy (e.g., "As long as I have a good reason for performing the task, it doesn't matter if it's not that interesting"; "I don't worry about whether or not I like the activity, I just do it"; "I realize that the activity will help me achieve my goals, so I just do it") experienced higher levels of interest in skating tasks (Green-Demers et al. 1998: 256, 258).

Like the skaters, negotiators who find themselves uninterested in their counterparts can enhance their curiosity by reminding themselves of the reasons for trying to listen and understand (Stone, Patton, and Heen 1999). By reminding themselves, for example, that they are more likely to reach agreement — and to do so on favorable terms — by listening carefully, they are likely to find themselves more curious and engaged.

Conclusion

The negotiation literature advises negotiators to be curious about their counterparts. For a negotiator who finds herself feeling insufficiently curious — almost all of us at least some of the time — this column has identified three promising strategies she can use to heighten her curiosity. Before and during the negotiation, she can set concrete listening and information-gathering goals to pursue (challenge strategy), remind herself of the important reasons why she should listen carefully (purpose strategy), and introduce some variety into the manner in which she goes about doing this (variety strategy). By employing these strategies, she can come to better understand her counterpart's perspectives and interests, thereby facilitating the creation of agreements that maximize value (Galinsky et al. 2008).

To be sure, results from the research on curiosity have been limited and somewhat muddled. Little research has been undertaken on curiosity enhancement, it has been methodologically imperfect, and it does not focus on the tasks at issue in this column. Nonetheless, the research suggests that negotiators uninterested in their counterparts are likely to become more curious about them if they implement these strategies.

Moreover, negotiators who cultivate curiosity might enjoy other benefits as well, both at the bargaining table and beyond. Researchers have found, for example, that curiosity is associated with intimacy and relationship building (Kashdan and Roberts 2004 and 2006), emotional intelligence (Leonard and Harvey 2007), optimism about future life events (Maner and Gerend 2007), a sense of well-being and meaning (Gallagher and Lopez 2007; Kashdan and Steger 2007), coping strategies (Mandl 2007), positive

health outcomes (Richman et al. 2005), and greater life expectancy (Swan and Carmelli 1996).

It is certainly true that curiosity can be counterproductive, particularly if it leads to obsessive behavior (Bernard and Schulze 2005; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and van Dijk 2005; Schmitt and Lahroodi 2008). But in the main, curiosity is likely to serve negotiators — if not cats — well.

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