Communication and Interaction Patterns

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Editors' Note: *Certainly you know how to communicate; you're a negotiator, after all. But what if you're trying to decide whether or how to threaten to walk away? How can you communicate to your best possible advantage at some other particularly sensitive moment? Putnam examines three different areas of communications research—negotiation strategies, language analysis and process patterns—to explain that* how *we say things is often as important as* what *we say. This chapter should be read in conjunction with Welsh's on Fairness.*

Negotiation depends on some form of verbal or nonverbal communication. In particular, negotiators use communication to exchange proposals, manage perceived incompatibilities, and work out the nature of a bargaining relationship. Even early studies that employed the Prisoner's Dilemma game relied on a cue system of choices that conveyed implicit messages between negotiators.[1] Scholars who observed actual negotiations recognized the importance of communication and even described types of messages that negotiators exchanged.[2] This early work suggests that communication functions to make bargaining both tacit and explicit. Communication scholars, however, entered the arena of negotiation much later than did social psychologists, legal researchers, and political scientists.[3] During the last twenty-five years, however, scholars have produced a wealth of knowledge about communication processes, knowledge that falls into three broad categories—negotiation strategies and tactics, language and discourse analyses, and process patterns and phases.

These three arenas of research underscore the importance of communication as an impromptu code to signal intentions, respond to the other party's moves, exchange information, coordinate outcomes, and manage the dynamic tensions between cooperation and competition.[4] These dynamic tensions are rooted in mixed-motive interactions in which negotiators often walk tightropes between trust and distrust, escalation and exploitation, and concealing and revealing information. These antithetical poles simultaneously push and pull on the negotiation process. Communication aids in managing the shifts between them; that is, negotiators through their interactions can alter the course of bargaining from an initially cooperative endeavor to a highly competitive one or vice versa. Communication patterns also help negotiators transform their

deliberations through redefining the issues, altering interpretations of events, and managing identity and face concerns. In effect, bargainers use social interaction to navigate between extreme opposites, a process that Rubin labels as 'the quintessential illustration of interdependence in negotiation.'[5] Overall, then, communication aids in enacting the very nature of negotiation as an ongoing process rooted in tensions between cooperation and competition.

Studies of communication and negotiation employ a number of research designs that link interaction to bargaining outcomes. In some studies, communication directly influences negotiated outcomes whereas in other research, communication acts as a mediator or moderator of input variables, such as a bargainer's goals, orientations, motivations, gender, and ethnicity.[6] Other investigations, especially ones that examine the development of negotiation over time, treat communication as the bargaining process itself. In like manner, communication research relies on a variety of outcomes, including whether the parties reach an agreement or a stalemate, if they achieve joint or individual gain, and if the negotiation ends up distributive or integrative. Studies of distributive and integrative negotiation also examine the communication strategies or tactics that contribute to these bargaining outcomes.

Negotiation Strategies and Tactics

Early work on communication and negotiation drew from researchers who observed and categorized the frequencies of bargaining strategies and tactics.[7] A negotiation strategy refers to an approach or a broad plan that encompasses a series of moves while tactics are the specific messages that enact the strategies. For example, competitiveness is a strategy often characterized by the use of such tactics as bluffs, exaggerated demands, and commitment statements. The research on negotiation strategies and tactics falls into six arenas: communication styles, distributive and integrative tactics, information management, arguments and reason giving, and generating proposals and concessions.

Communication Styles

Broad negotiation strategies are similar to what communication scholars call styles. However, a style is an automatic or habitual form of behavior while a strategy is often tailored consciously to achieve particular ends. A common style difference in the negotiation literature is tough versus soft bargaining. Tough bargainers open with extreme offers, give few and small concessions, concede slowly, and exaggerate the value of a concession. A meta-analysis of studies that compared these two strategies revealed that tough negotiators received high individual outcomes, but they also increased the likelihood that the negotiation would result in deadlock. Hence, bargainers need to shift from tough to reasonable offers early in a negotiation to avoid potential escalation.[8]

When tough bargaining is treated as a communication style, it resembles aggressiveness or domineering communication. Interestingly, a comparison between cooperative and aggressive negotiators reveals that skills, not styles, predict bargaining effectiveness. Cooperative negotiators who are personable and courteous may be too trusting and critical of their opponent's position while aggressive negotiators may be too demanding. Thus, bargainers should aim to develop the skills of being well prepared, having knowledge of baseline criteria, and being consistent with the facts of a case.[9]

Communication styles also vary in directness. Indirect styles rely on implicit messages and nonverbal cues as opposed to direct persuasion. Negotiators from low-context cultures (typically Western nations) enact direct bargaining styles through using comparisons and contrasts, clear statements of preferences, and reactions to offers; whereas

bargainers from high-context countries (typically Eastern cultures) infer a negotiator's priorities and preferences from his or her offers. Indirect styles of inferring preferences are sensitive to tacit cues and demonstrate more flexibility in information sequences than do direct styles. In cross-cultural, cross-context situations, however, bargainers may accommodate each other through using direct styles, frequent questions, and overt problem-solving strategies.[10]

Distributive and Integrative Tactics
Communication strategies are closely tied to distributive and integrative bargaining. Distributive bargaining refers to the goal of maximizing individual gain, claiming value, and engaging in fixed-sum negotiations. Parties who embrace this approach often treat issues and positions as mutually exclusive. In contrast, integrative bargaining emphasizes joint gains, meeting underlying interests, and being flexible in the distribution of resources.[11] Initially, interaction research focused on the communicative tactics that facilitated the use of one approach over the other.[12] For example, studies of labor-management negotiators revealed that frequent use of threats, demands, putdown statements, and irrelevant arguments fostered distributive processes while a reliance on acceptance statements, procedural statements, and making concessions enhanced integrative negotiations. Contentious tactics linked to distributive processes surfaced as powerful, but they did not necessarily lead to higher individual outcomes.[13]

Information Management
Distributive and integrative negotiations also differ in their patterns of information management. Contrary to common beliefs, honest and open information exchange does not necessarily lead to integrative bargaining, as scholars initially predicted. The key point for developing an integrative process is the willingness to exchange particular types of information. Specifically, sharing information about priorities and underlying interests results in high joint gains, but only for bargainers who hold a cooperative orientation. In contrast, parties in distributive negotiations concentrate on exchanging information about positions, talk about their own preferences and priorities, and make more comparisons than do integrative negotiators.[14] Observations of actual bargainers affirm these findings and note that highly skilled negotiators engage in information seeking as a common communication tactic.[15] Seeking information leads to insights about a negotiator's priorities that, in turn, point to integrative outcomes.

Arguments and Reason Giving
In addition to managing information, negotiators make arguments and give reasons for their positions. Argument, in this sense, refers to advocating and refuting positions, not to verbal aggression. Patterns of argument distinguish between skilled and unskilled negotiators as well as integrative and distributive bargaining. Affirming their confidence, skilled negotiators present fewer reasons to support their claims than do unskilled bargainers. Moreover, they avoid diluting their positions by mixing strong and weak arguments, and they use attacking arguments sparingly, only when they want to signal the seriousness of a situation. Successful distributive negotiators reject their opponents' claims and introduce new ideas that favor their own positions. But, recurring use of contentious tactics, especially attacking arguments, often leads to impasse, particularly when bargainers pressure their opponents.[16] Thus, the types of arguments that parties use may influence negotiated outcomes. In some circumstances, arguing about the causes and inherent harms of a problem and the workability of proposals leads to a

longer search process that reveals the complexities of an issue and fosters the development of creative solutions. Thus, these patterns of argument promote new understandings that uncover underlying interests to aid in reaching integrative solutions.[17]

Generating Proposals and Concessions

Research on proposal generation parallels studies of arguments. Basically, negotiators who receive high joint gains offer more options than do those who end up with low joint gains. For negotiation pairs that attain integrative settlements, both parties ask for concessions, make frequent offers, and engage in problem-solving. Skilled negotiators, however, do not respond with an immediate counteroffer to their opponents' offers;[18] rather they seek to understand an offer before complicating the discussion with counteroffers. Generating proposals, especially ones that incorporate the needs and interests of both parties, follows a creative process that can arise from shifting arguments over time and working out mismatches in the way parties frame issues. Changing the types of claims that a bargainer makes and adding qualifiers to arguments facilitates proposal generation, while providing additional evidence to a claim stifles proposal development.[19]

The research on communication styles, strategies, and tactics reveals problems with recommending specific behaviors to achieve integrative outcomes. Advising negotiators to share information openly ignores the mixed motive nature of conflict and the fact that bargainers simultaneously reveal and conceal information. Communication styles, whether cooperative or aggressive, or direct or indirect, are not the keys to effective negotiation; it is the particular skills that are effective. Hence, advising negotiators to avoid assertiveness does not necessarily lead to integrative outcomes.

The consequence of using a particular tactic also depends on how it is worded and interpreted. Some tactics, such as putdown statements and attacking the other side, typically foster distributive processes, but using threats can promote integrative bargaining through indicating the seriousness of a position; thus, the same tactic can serve integrative and distributive functions, depending on its position in the overall bargaining.[20]

Finally, argumentation means more than attacking the other party's position. Arguments are grounded in issues, causes for problems, evidence, and claims. Research suggests that discussing the harm and workability of issues fosters proposal development, especially if parties discover different ways to frame their problems. Overall, research on communicative strategies and tactics pushes negotiators to make choices between cooperation and competition or to oscillate back and forth between them. The absence of research on the way tactics are worded, how they occur in sequence, and what they mean contributes to this tendency to align tactics with particular outcomes.

Language and Discourse Analyses

Research on language analysis in negotiation differs from that of strategies and tactics by focusing on the *how* and *why* of talk as opposed to the tactical *functions* of messages. Rather than focusing on broad plans or the way that messages perform bargaining functions, studies of language use focus on the nuances of meaning. Scholars investigate how negotiators use language to signal interpretations of interactions, promote action, and co-develop the bargaining process. Rather than presuming that an activity such as 'making a threat' occurs, researchers examine the discourse that negotiators use to form a threat and how the interpretation of this message ties back to the bargaining context.

This work clusters into three broad categories: language as action, communication patterns that manage the process itself, and identity and relational discourses. Each arena focuses on the way that language works within negotiations and how messages evoke diverse interpretations.

Language as Action

Discourse analysts treat language as evoking actions and reactions; thus, to give a threat is to enact a commitment to the other party and to provide an explanation is to produce an account for one's actions. Threats, then, are not simply coercive moves; instead, they evoke different kinds of reactions, depending on the way they are expressed. Ironically, early bargaining scholars recognized variation in the way that language forms bargaining tactics. For example, a firm commitment statement or a forceful threat differs from a flexible one in its finality, specificity, and completeness. A statement such as, "If we do not get a 2% increase on benefits by the end of the week, our company will sign with a competitor" includes a specific request, a deadline, and a consequence for noncompliance.[21] A flexible statement, in contrast, employs tentative language, indirect requests, and ambiguous wording, e.g., "We need some increases on benefits or we will have to entertain other options."

Threats and commitment statements can compel a negotiator to respond, or they can simply say "no" to the target, thus functioning as a deterrent. These tactics are more likely to evoke compliance if the consequence clause is worded positively.[22] For example, the statement, "if you don't perform, I will penalize you" is deemed more credible than, "If you perform well, I will not penalize you." The use of a flexible commitment statement is less likely to escalate a conflict, but it is also less credible than a firm one. In effect, threats and commitment statements are seen as more credible if bargainers use direct language to express them, along with an explicit and direct statement of consequence.[23]

Communication Patterns That Manage the Process

In addition to evoking action, discourse patterns also manage negotiation conversations through action-reaction sets of behaviors. Specifically, bargainers who use questions, as opposed to demands, are more likely to elicit responses from their opponents, especially when negotiators know each other and have flexible procedures for working together.[24] Imperative statements, such as "Please give me your counteroffer," are commonplace in negotiation, but they are seen as more controlling than are inquiries. Even though posing questions is a good way to gain insights about an opponent's preferences, the likelihood of a bargainer asking questions relates to his or her role. For example, in transactional negotiations, sellers ask more questions about the buyer's needs, and the buyers make more directional requests such as "can other options be added into the bargaining mix?"[25] Thus, some negotiation roles may be more conducive than others to posing questions. Moreover, some types of inquiries, such as loaded, heated, and trick questions, may generate animosity by making the other party feel uncomfortable. The most effective questions are open-ended, invite the other bargainer to reflect on her thinking, and reveal how both parties are interpreting the issues.[26]

Another way bargainers manage the negotiation process is through the use of procedural and summary statements. These summary statements serve as barometers to get readings on the negotiation progress and to chart optional directions.[27] In a similar way, skilled negotiators label or forecast their actions, e.g., "Can I ask you a question?" They also test out interpretations about what a message means, e.g., "You're saying that

you would prefer to have the policy spelled out in the contract. Am I correct here?" and they express their thoughts and reactions verbally, e.g., "I have mixed feelings about this issue."[28] These discourse patterns, however, are linked to direct styles of expression, ones that may be more common in low- than in high-context cultures.

Identity and Relational Discourse

Language and discourse analysts also examine the identity and relational functions of messages. Taking the lead from early studies on impression management, scholars realized that negotiators have a strong desire to protect their *faces*. A bargainer loses face when some action leads to discrediting his self-image in the eyes of others; hence, negotiators use language to engage in positive and negative facework. Positive face refers to the desire to look credible while negative face stems from the desire for social autonomy. Negotiation research shows that positive face is threatened by the use of criticisms, accusations, and uncooperative behaviors while the use of orders, offers, and threats can threaten negative face and challenge a negotiator's autonomy. Implying that a directive or order should have been done already also threatens the other party's negative face. A negotiator protects the other bargainer's face through using disclaimers, hiding disagreements, and phrasing demands as questions.[29]

Similar to identity messages, bargainers also use discourse to give implicit messages about bargaining relationships and how negotiators see the nature of their interdependence. These relational cues are subtle and often rooted in word choice and language intensity. For instance, bargainers signal how close or formal they want to be with the other party through using particular pronouns, such as *you* versus *person*. Using the term *you* is more informal than employing a third person referent. Moreover, making use of long utterances, compound sentences, and excessive verbs signals formality that expresses a desire to move away from rather than closer to the other party.[30]

Language intensity also conveys messages about bargaining relationships. That is, relationally-oriented negotiators typically avoid the use of rude comments, excessive interruptions of the other party, and deceptive statements.[31] In their desire to preserve relationships, negotiators tone down their language intensity by refraining from the use of colorful adjectives and adverbs, profanity, and innuendos. Skilled versus unskilled negotiators implement this rule by avoiding the use of linguistic 'irritators,' such as, "my *generous* offer to you" or "my *reasonable* response." Even though these nuances of language seem trivial, research shows that they are tied to managing relational tensions, such as struggles between control versus yielding, autonomy versus connectedness, and liking versus disliking that form the negotiation tightrope.[32] Parties work out these tensions through their interactions during a negotiation.

Discourse studies add complexity to research on bargaining tactics. In particular, threats and commitments function as language in action, not simply as power plays. As such, the wording, finality, and completeness of a tactic influence its impact. Discourse that aids in managing the negotiation process contributes to learning about the conflict itself through questions, summary statements, testing interpretations, forecasting, and expressing concerns. Finally, language aids in working out identity and relational concerns. Negotiators actively manage their own and the other party's face through using disclaimers and through qualifying their disagreements. They also manage relationships through monitoring the intensity of their language, using informal pronouns, and discursively working out the dialectics of control and yielding. Overall, discourse studies provide depth and specificity to the ways that tactics are used, what they mean, and

how they fit within the negotiation context. They complement both the research on strategies and tactics and the work on process patterns and phases.

Process, Patterns, and Phases

The last area of communication research focuses on how the bargaining develops over time. It examines the actions and reactions of each negotiator that form predictable sequences or patterns over time. This work also uncovers how strategies and tactics cluster together in predictable ways, such as a threat followed by a threat, or followed by another contentious move. Thus, it determines what the patterns are, how they change, and how they relate to negotiated outcomes.

Types of Sequential Patterns

Researchers identify three types of sequential patterns in negotiations—reciprocal, transformational, and complementary.[33] When two negotiators match each other's tactics exactly, a *reciprocal* pattern forms. The most consistent and dominant finding about reciprocal patterns is the development of repetitive conflict cycles in negotiations.[34] Conflict cycles occur when bargainers match each other's use of threats, commitments, or contentious statements in ways that develop a momentum of their own. Once a set of cycles locks into place, it becomes very difficult for negotiators to shift to cooperative interaction.

However, bargainers also reciprocate problem-solving messages, statements of concern, and multiple-issue offers that lead to cooperative interactions. These patterns are more likely to occur when negotiators enter the process with a cooperative orientation and general knowledge of integrative bargaining.[35] Not surprisingly, the development of conflict cycles in negotiations often leads to impasse or to one-sided settlements. In contrast, reciprocating priority information and trade-offs result in high joint profits.[36] One way to prevent a conflict cycle from occurring is to respond with an opposite move that *transforms* the tight reciprocal structure. In particular, giving information, responding with an interest-oriented statement, or making a procedural comment can break up the onset of a conflict cycle and makes it easier for the bargainers to engage in cooperative interaction.

Negotiators also exhibit *complementary* patterns in which they match their opponents by using broadly similar strategies, for example, following a threat with a demand. Labor and management, in particular, engage in a complementary dance in which both sides use clusters of tactics aligned with their respective roles. Assuming an offensive stance, labor responds to management with attacking arguments while management exhibits a defensive role through employing self-supporting arguments and commitment statements. These tactics are broadly similar and become complementary as bargainers balance each other in role specializations. However, if either side shifts to the interaction patterns that typify the other role, conflict spirals are likely to develop.[37] In a similar type of complementary pattern, negotiation dyads that mix cooperative with competitive tactics are likely to reach settlements, whereas dyads that keep the two processes structurally separate are likely to stalemate.[38] For example, negotiators who develop separate stages of competition, e.g., making demands, attacking arguments, and contentious statements followed by discrete stages of cooperation are more likely to stalemate than are those that mix attacking arguments with offers, information exchange, and discussion of procedures. The mixing of different tactics buffers the process from escalation.

Phases of Negotiation Interaction

In lengthy negotiations, sequences of messages layer into each other and reveal phases or constellations of communicative acts that form coherent structures.[39] At one time, theorists believed that distributive and integrative negotiations occurred in distinct stages, often arrayed in three or more developmental periods.[40] Current research, however, suggests that negotiators who begin with distributive processes and move to integrative ones are more likely to reach settlements than are bargainers who begin with integrative interactions and transition to distributive bargaining.[41] Once bargainers enter into a distributive stage, it is more difficult to move back into integrative interactions. Moreover, if bargainers reciprocate information about their priorities in the second stage of a negotiation, they are more likely to reach high joint gains.[42]

The development of negotiations over time also reveals different ways that parties manage issues. Overall, making concessions by combining multiple issues as opposed to trading on a single item one at a time aids in reaching optimal outcomes. Negotiators use logrolling and issue development to reach integrative solutions. Logrolling entails conceding on low priority items to obtain high priority concerns. This approach works effectively when bargainers exchange accurate information about priorities. To reach a resolution, though, negotiators need to unbundle, redefine, and package items differently, not simply increase the number of agenda items on the table.[43]

Issue development focuses on how bargainers discover creative options through reframing or re-evaluating the definition and scope of a problem. These options bridge differences and transform the focus of a conflict as bargainers discover alternatives that were once out of their purview. For example, negotiators might engage in intense arguments on the need to increase management's percent of health care coverage. Employees might contend that health premiums are rising and management needs to cover a greater percentage of these benefits. Management might respond that it is not feasible for them to cover an additional amount of insurance premiums for all employees. After a lengthy deliberation, both sides might reframe the issue, asking 'what is contributing to the rapid rise in health care costs?' rather than 'how do we get management to cover a greater percentage of employees' health benefits?' This reframing comes from splintering and exploring related issues that shift the topic of negotiation, thus producing new options, for example, the alternatives to rebid an insurance carrier or to eliminate optical coverage might reframe the discussion and define the problem as lowering insurance premiums rather than paying a higher percentage of the costs. These alternatives were never on the table until the negotiators reframed the issue and posed a different question. Hence, issue framing derives from the way that agenda items shift during interactions and is a critical aspect of negotiation stage development.[44]

Conclusion

The work on communication and negotiation has evolved considerably since the early days when researchers treated communication as moves in a game. Ironically, communication conveys messages both tacitly and explicitly through negotiation strategies and tactics. These communicative acts do not fit neatly into particular outcomes, since tactics can be worded in a variety of ways and have diverse meanings at different times during a negotiation. Contrary to popular beliefs, selective use of threats can aid in reaching integrative outcomes, if they signal the seriousness of a position or function to prevent an opponent from repeating previously rejected issues. Employing tentative language and using positive wording of consequences also moderates the effects and acceptability of this tactic.

Using contentious tactics is problematic, though, when they occur in a series of reciprocal behaviors that develop into a conflict cycle, often culminating in a deadlock. Hence, negotiators need to buffer these tactics by using transformational or complementary patterns. Asking questions, sharing priority information, making offers, and engaging in problem-solving serve as transformational moves to break a conflict cycle. In like manner, negotiators can counteract the development of conflict cycles through making procedural and summary statements, even suggesting overtly that the negotiation should move in a different direction. Bargainers who label or forecast their actions, avoid linguistic irritators, and attend to the subtle nuances of facework and relational messages are able to traverse the tightrope between cooperation and competition.

Walking this tightrope works best when negotiators embrace both ends of these opposites as legitimate. Cooperation and competition are mutually intertwined in bargaining, as are escalation and exploitation. Communication patterns, such as issue development, that bridge opposites through reframing issues offer the potential to embrace both poles equally.

Endnotes

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