
“Were we fully to understand the reasons for other people’s behavior, it would all make sense.”

SIGMUND FREUD



SEEKING WISE COUNSEL

Clare Burlingham

Until such times when negotiators are replaced with robots, algorithms or indeed something else, the act of negotiation is very much an exercise in psychology. People negotiate with people and the higher the level of emotional intelligence of each party, the greater the chance of a successful outcome. A focus only on the numbers is unlikely to achieve the greatest value because the truly skilled negotiator needs to also understand the arguably more complex element – the human dimension of their negotiation.

The ability to step inside someone else's shoes and view a problem from another's perspective is often more difficult than you might think. Being able to separate your own take on a subject, identify your own bias and objectively review a set of circumstances requires time and a real will to succeed.

Could a greater understanding of how people respond to one another and in particular how they develop, maintain and repair relationships, bring further insight into our performance as negotiators?

It was with this thought in mind that I spoke with Julie Humphries, Director of Studies with Tavistock Relationships.

Human relationships and negotiation

Established 71 years ago, Tavistock Relationships is a registered charity internationally renowned for delivering and developing advanced practice, training and research in therapeutic and psycho-educational approaches to support couples.

Working from two London bases, as well as operating a nationally available online service, Tavistock Relationships has over 100 professionals providing an effective and highly regarded form of couples counseling and psychotherapy.

Julie has been a member of the Tavistock Relationships faculty since 2011. Before this she was a senior lecturer in Sociology. "As a sociologist, I did some research on how our childhood affects our adult relationships, and that's when my interest in couple relationships started. I realized that it's important, not just to our own happiness but to our children too, and that good relationships can have very positive impacts, and bad

relationships can bring a lot of unhappiness."

While discussing with Julie the transformational work Tavistock Relationships undertake, I posed the question - can one draw any parallels between a couple whose relationship is in difficulty, and a negotiation heading towards deadlock?

Is there a 'Third Position' in negotiation?

"One of the key roles of couples therapy is to help the couple understand what we call 'the third position'. Frequently, when couples first meet with a counselor, they arrive with what they feel is a problem relating to their partner. We try to help them find the third position i.e. we help them to see each other from another point of view, not just their own; and to see their relationship as something they have created between them. A relationship is more than the sum of its parts! The ability to stand outside of yourself and see how things might look different from another perspective is so important to successful relationships and some people

lack this ability and might need help to develop it.”

As negotiators, it is similarly important to be able to get inside the head of our counterparty. We too need to actively seek that ‘third position’. Approaching a collaborative, long term negotiation with a grasp of only our own perspective risks leaving significant value on the table.

What lies beneath

Julie continues, “We also find helping a couple to focus on looking beyond what the problem seems to be on the surface to what is underneath. Is a problem with disagreements about money really about something else? Maybe the couple are actually unhappy about an unequal sharing of responsibility or decision making but this is manifesting itself as constant arguing about money.”

This reminds me of the importance of understanding all the variables that are in play during a complex negotiation. Is the key to unlocking an inability to agree on one variable, the exploration of other related variables that can allow things to move forward?

Julie explains, “As counselors, we must also be mindful of how much each individual can take in from each other. Not just from a brain capacity level but also the consideration of other people’s feelings. We typically work with couples for a minimum of six months because it is a lengthy process working through these types of areas. It’s really important for couples to be able to clearly show to their partner that they have listened and heard and understood their position.”

This is also true of our collaborative negotiations. In long term commercial relationships, the building of trust is very important and the use of verbal and non-verbal cues to show that we have understood our counterpart’s position helps to build that trust. It helps to build a strong foundation upon which we can begin to progress to satisfaction on both sides.

As well as conducting counseling with thousands of people with their relationships, Tavistock Relationships also train people to become couple counselors.

Just before we finish our conversation, I ask Julie what she thinks is the key quality required of a counselor. “A real interest in people and what makes them tick; and a curiosity in understanding relationships” is her answer. Not all that different to a negotiator really...

Tavistock Relationships offers training programs in Counseling, Psychotherapy and Psychosexual Therapy, ranging from introductory and specialist programs to masters and doctorate level. Training takes up to four years, depending on qualifications on entry and is part-time, so it can be done alongside family and work commitments.

To find out more about the training offered by Tavistock Relationships, go to <https://www.tavistockrelationships.ac.uk/> or call +44 (0)20 7380 8288.

For more on this topic, visit <https://www.thegappartnership.com/insights>

