

Perspectives in Negotiation

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Adam D. Galinsky, Harvard and Princeton graduate, Morris and Alice Kaplan Professor of Ethics and Decision Management at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and speaker for two sessions at the APS 20th Annual Convention, stopped mid-speech, looked at a nearby photographer and confidently took a B-Boy stance (see photo to the right). "I'm getting inside his head for taking a good shot," he added.

Galinsky's move certainly sparked laughter, but it also set the stage for his presentation on perspective-taking in strategic interactions, "Why It Pays to Get Inside the Head of Your Opponent." Galinsky's talk was part of a symposium on "Hearing the Other Side: Increasing Receptiveness to Counter-Attitudinal Information" that addressed several ways to improve mutual understanding in a negotiation, a critical element in achieving success, especially if both parties hold counter-attitudinal, or opposing, beliefs.

"[Perspective-taking] is a particularly important and valuable skill in negotiation...because you have to understand the other party's interests [in order to obtain] good outcomes, not only for other people but for oneself," according to Galinsky, drawing on his research with William Maddux from INSEAD, Debra Gillin from St. Mary's University in Halifax, and Judith White from Dartmouth College. Simply defined, perspective-taking is the ability to understand another's motives to the point of anticipating their behavior in a specific situation.

By using this important skill, Galinsky said, participants actually were inclined in a role-playing study to invent their own creative solutions for negotiating the hypothetical sale of a gas station. The outcome of the sales in the perspective-taking group tended to include everyone's interests, not exclusively the seller's or buyer's side of the deal, and overcame a seemingly intractable impasse. He indicated that his studies show the importance of understanding an opponent's intentions rather than just sympathizing with him or her — an essential strategy when attempting diplomatic action. Indeed empathy tended to have a negative effect on both creating and claiming value at the bargaining table.

But what happens if either party is unable or unwilling to understand the other's point of view? David Sherman from the University of California, Santa Barbara referred to a specific and common political encounter in "Reducing Ideological Bias: Self-Affirmation and the Acceptance of Threatening Information" to address this question. He investigated the "liberal versus conservative" dichotomy, as well as the topics of abortion, affirmative action, and immigration restrictions.

"In terms of negotiation, you can see that if you were faced with an opponent you assumed had these really strong, divergent beliefs, it could undermine the process," said Sherman.

To illustrate this point, Sherman cited research he conducted with Leif Nelson of the University of California, San Diego, and Lee Ross of Stanford University, in which participating students were

presented with a description of a hypothetical tuition allotment for minority students. Participants read over the proposal and took a survey to measure their liberal versus conservative views. They also filled out the same survey as if they were a member of the opposing group. When the actual and assumed scores were compared, Sherman and colleagues found that the participants' actual scores on both sides were relatively similar and moderate, but the assumed scores tended to fall on extreme and opposing poles.

It seems that the students automatically overestimated the severity of the other party's beliefs — and we all know what happens to you and me when we assume. According to Sherman, it also makes us biased.

So how is negotiation ever going to work if people hold assumptions about our views before a discussion even begins? When, if ever, are people receptive to alternative viewpoints? Two possibilities were suggested in the symposium. First, Sherman discussed how bias could be reduced and negotiation prospects facilitated when partisans have the opportunity to write about their important values prior to the negotiation. In research conducted with Geoffrey Cohen of the University of Colorado, Boulder, Anthony Bastardi and Lee Ross of Stanford University, they found that pro-choice abortion advocates were more likely to view an opponent as being fair and made greater concessions in a negotiation when they had such an opportunity to affirm themselves on another important dimension.

A second possibility was discussed by Julia Minson from Stanford University, who suggests that asking clarifying questions could be the best way to meld even the most impassioned differences. Her remarks were part of her talk "The Inference of Interest: The Effect of Asking Clarifying Questions on Actual and Perceived Receptiveness to Counter-Attitudinal Information."

"Parties in conflict often vent frustration during dialogue, not only because they are expressing their different views on the position, but also because they have the feeling they have not really truly been heard," Minson said. One way to indicate that you are listening, she continued, is to ask questions — this causes the other party to feel as though you are genuinely paying attention.

In research that led to this conclusion, Minson and her colleagues Frances Chen, Zakary Tormala, and Lee Ross invited Stanford students to chat online with an experimenter posing as "Participant 12," who argued for comprehensive exams as a graduation requirement ("As you might imagine this was unpopular with a vast majority of our participants," Minson said.). The group that was asked a single, clarifying question, as opposed to the control group who did not receive any questions, rated "Participant 12" higher in open-mindedness and warmth.

"Clarifying questions could be used in real world negotiation because when a person asks a clarifying question, they are not committing to any viewpoint — it's merely an attempt at gathering additional information and potentially achieving a greater understanding of another's point-of-view," said Minson.

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