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## **SPOTLIGHT ON COACHING INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS NEGOTIATORS**

*Coaching can help intercultural business negotiators make a success of a tough role. Jean-Claude Usunier reports*

It is extremely useful for junior intercultural business negotiators to be coached, especially when it is a “double first time” for them (their first negotiation and their first intercultural setting).

The basic role of coaches supporting those involved in intercultural business negotiations (ICBN) is to help the client avoid cultural misunderstandings and be better able to rationally respond to pressure, threats, and intimidation. The coach can also help the client to understand and appropriately react to tactical moves made by the other side.

For instance, Chinese negotiators deliberately adopt a fairly passive attitude, taking care not to show enthusiasm, concealing any feeling of impatience, playing their game impassively so as to force their opponents to be the first to show their hand. They do not shy away from appearing very manipulative with a view to disconcerting the other side and in the ultimate hope of obtaining further concessions, they will attribute an exaggerated importance to minor details, which in reality are of no consequence to them, or return to discuss points where full agreement seemed to have previously been reached. The Chinese are quite sensitive to the relational aspects of negotiations, which are prioritized. They try to maintain long-term, harmonious personal relationships whereas deal-oriented American negotiators value objective information exchange and competitiveness. Beyond stereotypes, the coach will decode and debrief the ICBN process.

ICBN coaching must be adapted to both the client’s culture and the partner’s culture. For example, American clients are susceptible to becoming irritated by negotiating parties who are more interested in general principles or even pure logical reasoning. Their coach must warn them that they may erroneously interpret the seemingly abstract or non-linear style of

their negotiating counterparts as delaying tactics and advise them that package deal, global negotiation is not necessarily a way of reconsidering what has already been decided.

A strong positive emphasis is placed on frankness and sincerity by Americans who often show willingness to make the first move by disclosing information in the hope (sometimes unfulfilled) that their opponent will do likewise. The ICBN coach must advise them not to adopt the “John Wayne Style”, by pushing frankness to the bounds of arrogance. This can be resented by negotiators from cultures where outspokenness and self-assertion must be contained within strict limits.

### **Pitfalls to avoid**

There is a potential contradiction between *intercultural* coaching (which stresses empathy towards the culturally-alien opposite party and may result in yielding or judgement biases) and *negotiation* coaching, in which the US-Western knowledge base is the dominant normative behavioural pattern, emphasizing keeping firm on the basic interests of one’s team. For example, a deal-oriented party, constantly comparing the present outcome with the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA), always ready to leave the negotiation table, may be misled if the other party is oriented towards relationship-building. Therefore the ICBN coach should constantly balance advice and guidance between empathy/relationship building (soft factors) and the defence of the basic interests of the client’s team.

ICBN coaching requires a significant degree of adjustment by contextualizing the particular negotiation at hand. For instance, negotiation history (previous negotiations between the same parties), people (e.g., their age, gender, cultural and professional background), and type of contract (one shot versus repeat business) should be carefully examined, especially at the homework stage.

However unlike formatted sports rules, no single negotiation resembles another. For example, coaching a female negotiator negotiating in Saudi Arabia is incomparable to coaching a male negotiator with a lawyer’s training in a country where contracts and courts are not often used. In any case, the ICBN coach should adopt a non-judgemental style and always avoid sending stereotyped messages. As with other clients, when analyzing their behaviour and its outcomes with their coach, ICBN clients should be encouraged to be open to feedback, flexible, and self-reflective, avoiding self-centered defensive attitudes.

When it comes to coaching those involved in business negotiations, the coach needs to be more than a coach, they need to also be a consultant, trainer, counsellor, and motivator. Coaching may be provided by a senior member in the same team, however at the risk of hierarchy biasing the coaching relationship, or by an external coach, with the caveat that his/her possible presence at the negotiation table should be acceptable for the other camp.

For the best chance of success, the coach should be a trained international negotiator and be familiar with and experienced in different cultures, as well as speak – or at least have some proficiency – in at least one major foreign language.

The following issues have to be addressed: Should the coach participate in the negotiation sessions? Should the coach be an insider of the other camp's culture or at least well informed and attuned to their culture and negotiation style? A "Coach-in" (present at the negotiation table) directly involved, however covertly, is not necessarily the best solution. If "in", the coach should be presented to the other party as a team member (at the risk of a minor lie) or as being in a participant-observer role, and should receive the agreement of the other (adversary or partner) side.

### **Benefits of coaching**

An ICBN coach can help the junior intercultural negotiator:

- Establish and manage communication efficiently despite sometimes widely different communication styles (e.g., exchange of high-context/implicit messages versus low-context/explicit messages). Virtually everything in the negotiation process is based on communication, verbal or non-verbal, oral or written, in face-to-face meetings, or relying on phone calls or e-mail. The coach will brief the client on the advantages and drawbacks of each communication media and explain how they can be jointly used.
- Debrief negotiation sessions based on the listening and analytical skills of the ICBN coach. Effective questioning techniques will provide the client with performance feedback.
- Avoid a number of judgement biases (e.g., ethnocentrism, overconfidence, over-optimism, illusion of control, deceptive sense of superiority, possibly cultural hostility magnified by language and communication problems).

- Establish a balance between intercultural empathy and the defence of the basic interests of one's camp in a *win-win* perspective, even when the other camp has a *win-lose* orientation.
- Understand and shunt manipulation, which is quite frequent in ICBN. For instance, the noted patience of Chinese negotiators is used by them for developing time-based manipulation tactics by slowing down the process and by making additional demands when their Western, economic time-minded, partners are under strict pressure to respect deadlines.
- Manage emotions and deal with time-related issues (planning, agenda, etc.) Ideally, ICB negotiators must be active listeners, calm, and able to master personal emotions. Courtesy and respect for the other party's cultural codes, as well as intercultural communication skills should be added to this list. Authority should be shown without being commanding or pushy; role authority as well as personal empowerment can be displayed, however the display of a misplaced hierarchical stance, which is at odds with the horizontal, egalitarian setting of negotiation, should be avoided.
- Develop both *cultural* intelligence and *emotional* intelligence. Emotional intelligence involves not only the awareness of one's own and the other party's emotions, but also the ability to empathetically understand how emotions on both sides interact and combine together. Emotional intelligence feeds the ability for active self-control (i.e., not only pure emotional restraint) and the capacity to regulate one's own mood and behaviour in a way which will positively transfer to the other side's capability to regulate their own emotions. While related to emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence is somewhat different. Cultural intelligence relates to the ability to delay judgement, possibly suspending it for some days, and actively retrieving new cues for understanding, persistence when facing hostility or incomprehension, and thinking before acting.

### ***Conclusive remarks***

A balanced self-orientation in ICBN requires reflexivity, moderation, patience, and prudence. It requires clients to be themselves, try to remain sincere and genuine, however prudent and impartial. Clients should not try to be someone else. This may imply difficult trade-offs between being oneself and wearing a mask, which may be to some extent necessary in some social situations. The world of ICBN is far from irrational. Rather, there are broad differences

between a Western calculative, economic, and utilitarian rationality and a non-Western relational, group and identity-based rationality. A major challenge for an ICBN coach is to infuse the client with a down-to-earth sense of how both styles of rationality combine in intercultural business negotiation practice.

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