Principled Negotiation - Getting to Yes

Many people see negotiation as a contest: one side wins and the other side loses. In 1981, Roger Fisher and William Ury of the Harvard Negotiation Project described a different way in their book Getting to Yes, and Bruce Patton joined them as co-author in later editions. They called it principled negotiation: deciding issues on their merits, not through a contest of will. The method has four principles and one safety net, called the BATNA. It works for a large business deal and for a small family decision alike.

1. Separate the People from the Problem

Negotiators are people first, with feelings, values and different points of view. When emotions and the problem get mixed, a comment about the deal can feel like a personal attack. Principled negotiation deals with the relationship and with the problem separately. We listen actively, acknowledge feelings, and try to see the situation as the other side sees it. The aim is to be soft on the people and hard on the problem.

Example: Two neighbours argue about a noisy party, and the talk turns into insults. One neighbour separates the people from the problem: he says that he values their friendship, then asks how they can solve the noise together. The talk becomes calm, and they agree on a time limit.

At work: Sami, a purchasing manager, meets a supplier who wants to raise prices, and the supplier starts by blaming Sami's company for late payments. Sami separates the people from the problem: he thanks the supplier for years of good service and suggests that they look at the facts together. The tone of the meeting changes.

2. Focus on Interests, Not Positions

A position is what someone says they want; an interest is why they want it. Behind opposed positions, there are often interests that can both be met. To find interests, we ask why, and we listen carefully to the answers. Talking about interests opens solutions that a fight over positions hides.

Example: Two colleagues argue over the last free meeting room, and both say that they need it. Focusing on interests, they ask why: one needs a big screen, the other needs a quiet place. One takes a small room with a screen, and the other works in a quiet corner.

At work: The supplier's position is a higher price. Sami focuses on interests and asks why: the supplier's real worry is the rising cost of transport. Now they can discuss transport, not only price.

3. Invent Options for Mutual Gain

Many negotiators look for the one right answer too early. Principled negotiation first creates many possible options, and only then decides. It helps to separate inventing from judging, so that people can share ideas freely. The best options give each side something it values and cost the other side little.

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Example: A couple wants different holidays: one wants the beach, the other wants a city. They invent options for mutual gain and find a coastal city with both a beach and museums. Each person gets what matters most.

At work: Sami and the supplier invent options for mutual gain: larger orders less often, a longer contract, or shared delivery with another customer. Fewer deliveries cut the supplier's transport costs, and Sami keeps a stable price.

4. Insist on Objective Criteria

When interests still clash, the decision should rest on fair standards, not on pressure. Objective criteria are standards that do not depend on either side's will, such as market prices, expert opinion, law or common practice. Both sides first agree on which standard to use. Then neither side gives in to the other; both follow a fair rule.

Example: Two people disagree about the price of a used car. They insist on objective criteria and check the market value of similar cars. They agree on a price close to that value.

At work: The supplier still asks for a price increase. Sami insists on objective criteria: they agree to link the price to a published index of transport costs. If costs rise, the price rises; if costs fall, the price falls too.

5. Know the BATNA

BATNA stands for the Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement. It is what we will do if this negotiation fails. Knowing our BATNA protects us from accepting a deal that is worse than our alternative, and from rejecting a deal that is better. It is wise to improve our BATNA before the meeting, and also to think about the other side's BATNA.

Example: Someone selling a used car already has a written offer from a dealer. That offer is the seller's BATNA, so any buyer must offer more. The seller negotiates calmly, without fear.

At work: Before the meeting, Sami asked two other suppliers for quotes. These quotes are his BATNA, so he knows when a deal no longer makes sense. He does not need to bluff, and the final agreement is better than both quotes.

Conclusion

In summary, principled negotiation rests on four principles: separate the people from the problem, focus on interests, invent options for mutual gain, and insist on objective criteria. The BATNA tells us when to say yes and when to walk away. The method aims at a wise agreement that lasts and keeps the relationship healthy. It replaces a contest of will with a joint search for a fair solution.

Sources

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