



Cross Cultural Negotiations Skill Building in an Operational Environment

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Introduction

The U.S. Army's Culture and Foreign Language Strategy states that operational experiences in Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq have highlighted critical gaps in the Army's capability to influence and operate effectively within different cultures for extended periods of time. Battlefield lessons learned have demonstrated that language proficiency and understanding of foreign culture are vital enablers for full spectrum operations.

Negotiating in indigenous cultures adds new dimensions to the military's missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Operating in joint interagency, intergovernmental, multinational environments requires a new, more sophisticated set of skills that are very different than the traditional warfighting in a bipolar strategic environment of the Cold War era.

This new dimension is essential for winning hearts and minds of the populace of regions and countries which are of strategic importance to the U.S. and its allies. In this article we will consider the cultural considerations in negotiations and the factors which influence them in indigenous operating environment.

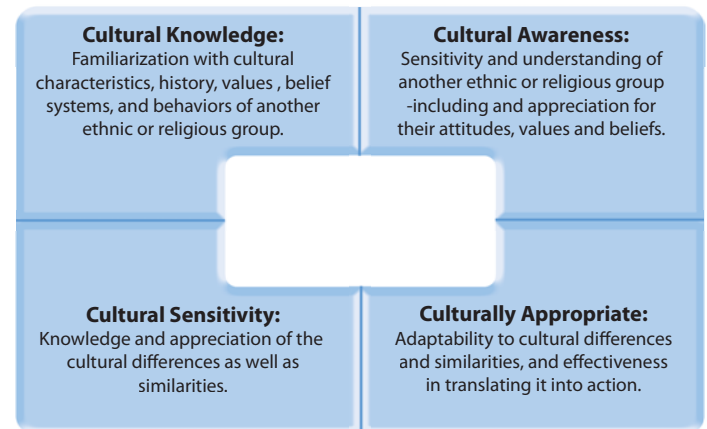
What is Negotiation?

Negotiation is derived from the Latin word "*negotari*." The root words *neg* (not) and *otium* (ease or leisure) together mean "not leisure," reflecting the uneasy nature of negotiations. Negotiation is a process in which two or more participants try to come to a mutual consensus through a process of interaction and communication by using different negotiation techniques and methods. There are five main elements of international negotiation:

- ◆ The players and the situation.
- ◆ The style of decision making.
- ◆ National characters.
- ◆ Cross cultural aspect.
- ◆ Interpreters and translators.

What We Need to Know about Culture

Culture (from Latin "cultura" to cultivate) is a combination of behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, and institutions passed down from generation to generation. It's the way of life for an entire society. It includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, and rituals. There are other cultural definitions that leaders need to be aware of when preparing for negotiations, these include cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural appropriateness.



Three Phases of Negotiation

Generally, negotiations consist of three phases. Phase I is the pre-negotiation phase. This is often the most critical phase. Each party identifies its strengths, assesses its interests, and works to find a balance between short term tactical gains and long-term strategic relationships. Phase II consists

of the actual negotiation process, and Phase III consists of post-negotiation efforts.

Phase I: Pre-negotiation. Just knowing definitions isn't enough; there are also several things that must be done prior to engaging in negotiations. They include learning as much as possible about the negotiating partners. This means knowing the players, their tribal affiliation, and their political and religious agenda. Leaders must also identify the initiator of the meeting. If the negotiation request comes from a local key or influential leader, it is imperative to identify their socio-economic, political, ethnic or tribal affiliation. Leaders must also determine an appropriate location for the meeting. If hosting, choose a quiet, private location away from possible internal and external distractions.

Finally, leaders must identify an appropriate translator. Choosing the right translator is very important. If they are local, they might have a biased agenda, tribal affiliation, or certain linguistic dialect which might not be well perceived by another negotiating party. Make sure beforehand if a female translator is appropriate, especially for high level negotiation. It is imperative that a translator be knowledgeable of languages and cultures to avoid possible misinterpretations, especially when it comes to proverbs, idioms, etc. and other cultural nuances. Misinterpretations might negatively affect the outcome of the negotiations. Lessons learned have shown that the very lack of cultural knowledge, education, and exposure usually leads to misinterpretations.

My experiences throughout the years in different cultural settings point to that pattern. For example, during a negotiation a Middle Eastern delegation member used the following Arabic proverb, "*min kasratil mallahin gariqat as safina.*" During the discussion, the interpreter literally translated the meaning as, "there were too many sailors on the boat and it sank," when in reality it should have been translated as "too many cooks in the kitchen." Because the interpreter did not have a clear sense of the Western cultural realities, he could not translate the nuances of one culture into another.

Another example where literal translations can cause confusion comes from past negotiations between Western oil companies in the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. An Azeri member of the delegation used the popular Turkic proverb or idiom,

"*manim gozum sandan su ichmir,*" which actually means, "I am suspicious of you or I do not trust you." The interpreter on the scene translated the proverb literally to mean, "My eye does not drink water from you."

In another incident which took place in Moscow in the 1980s, a Russian negotiator used a very popular, old Russian traditional saying, "*vipyem na pososhok,*" while addressing the departing Western delegation. This saying is usually used by Russians to wish each other "safe travel." Once said, everyone would normally sit for a moment, raise their glasses of vodka, drink, and wish everyone a safe trip. However, this phrase is very difficult to translate word for word. The interpreter struggled and could not give an English equivalent. Because the meaning was not clear, the Western delegation was not entirely sure of what was actually said.

In all three cases, the culturally and linguistically incorrect translations caused major confusion and even laughter and were not obviously helpful for the outcome of the negotiations. These experiences show misinterpretations, either deliberate or because of ignorance of cultural, linguistic, political, ethnic or tribal affiliations, can cause miscommunication.

Cross-cultural negotiation training is an important element of the pre-negotiation phase. Negotiators must understand cultural etiquettes as well as cross cultural differences in negotiation styles and techniques when dealing with a Middle Eastern partner. In a cross-cultural setting all leaders need to consider cultural factors impacting the negotiation process, which can include different historical, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, possible emotional perceptions, political systems, and their socio-cultural origins.

Phase II: Negotiation. During this phase your cross-cultural training is no less important. Some cultures adopt direct, simple methods of communication, while others prefer indirect, more complex methods. Middle Eastern cultures fall into the latter category. When communicating with Arabs, pay attention to body language, eye movement and hand gestures. Any negotiation should begin with greetings.

In the Middle East, negotiators usually prefer longer, less formal sessions, insist on addressing counterparts by their titles, and are given to expressing

philosophical statements that are often more important to the negotiation process than the technical issues of the problem. In an indigenous culture it is extremely important to be culturally sensitive and to show your respect and understanding of the culture of the negotiating partner.

When communicating with Arabs, pay attention to body language, eye movements, and hand gestures. The knowledge of the following basics can be helpful:

- ◆ Shake hands with the right hand and use the left hand to grasp the other person’s elbow as a sign of respect.
- ◆ In close, friendly relationship, a hug and a kiss placed on both cheeks upon greeting are a normal occurrence—if the Arab initiates it.
- ◆ Placing a hand on the heart with a slight bow is a sign of respect while greeting a person.
- ◆ If a Middle Easterner touches you it is a positive sign, it means that he likes you (not a sign of homosexuality.)
- ◆ Rise to show respect when a respected or elderly person enters the room.
- ◆ You will be on the safer side if you always rise while greeting people.
- ◆ Usage of common Arab greetings, however few, such as “*As Salam Aleykum,*” or “Peace be with you” accompanied with or instead of “hello” are very much appreciated. See Figure 1.

| Gesture | Meaning |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Palm of the right hand on the chest, bowing the head a little and closing one’s eyes. | Thank You. |
| A quick snap of the head upwards with an accompanying click of the tongue. | No. |
| Placing the right hand or its forefinger on the tip of the nose. | It’s in my head to accomplish. |
| Grasping the chin with the thumb side of the right fist is a sign of wisdom. | I am thinking. |
| Holding fingers in a pear shaped configuration with the tips pointing up moving the hand up and down. | Wait a little bit. |
| Right hand out, palm down, with fingers brought toward oneself in a clawing motion. | Calling someone to come. |

Figure 1: Appropriate Gestures and Body Language.

Other “Do’s” and “Don’ts” cultural basics during the negotiation process are extremely helpful as well. See Figure 2.

| DO | DO NOT |
|---|---|
| Speak slowly using short sentences; speak in the first person. | Rush right to the point of the business. |
| Start conversation with small general talk and pleasantries, such as “How are you?” and then follow the Arab’s conversational lead. | Move away from the Arab negotiator if he gets too close to you during the negotiations. |
| Talk to an Arab as an equal partner. | Try to convert a Muslim to your faith. |
| Place your feet flat on the floor (if you are sitting in a chair) or fold them under you (if you are sitting on the floor.) | Talk about religion or politics. |
| Maintain eye contact. | |
| Address the most elderly and senior in the room. | |
| Take Notes. | |

Figure 2: Basic Do’s and Don’ts during the negotiation process.

Each culture also has contrasting views of negotiating. Gaining an appreciation for the contrasting views is vital. Goals reflect the purpose or intent of the parties in a negotiation. In business, American negotiators typically regard the signing of a contract between the differing parties as their primary goal. They consider the contract a binding agreement that outlines the roles, rights, and obligations of each party. Americans prefer detailed contracts that anticipate all possible circumstances. These agreements or contracts are usually binding and not subject to further negotiation or debate. This is known as the “Western Tradition of Legalism.”

However, Middle Eastern negotiators tend to begin negotiations by establishing general principles that become the framework on which to build an agreement. They usually seek sustainable relationships rather than contracts and “prefer to leave things vague.” This is known as the “Middle Eastern Relationship of Trust.” Middle Easterners prefer an agreement in the form of general principles rather than detailed rules. They regard an agreement as being relatively flexible and symbolic of the relationship established, rather than a binding legal document.

A Western negotiating team typically organizes itself using a deductive process. Essentially, the group will organize in culturally specific ways that reflect and affect how the group makes decisions. A negotiating team usually will have a designated

leader who appears to have complete authority to decide all matters. See Figure 3.

| American | Middle Eastern |
|--|--|
| Timetables and schedules are important. | Unbound by time for negotiating. |
| Get down to business quickly. | Exchange pleasantries at great length. |
| Avoid silent intervals. | Employ silent intervals. |
| Tend to focus on future. | Tend to focus on past. |
| Contractual agreements. | Value well-established relationships of trust. |
| Favor quick decisions and avoid slow deliberation. | Favor consensus-based decision making. |

Figure 3. Contrasting viewpoints, American vs. Middle Eastern.

An Arab negotiating team typically uses the inductive process. In the Middle East, a hidden authority rests with the group, and decision making often occurs through consensus. Thus, negotiating teams may be relatively large due to the greater number of personnel thought to be necessary to the decision making process.

In Arab and Middle Eastern cultures, ‘saving face’ is strategically important. Face has to do with a person’s reputation and the respect in which others hold him. In negotiation, although compromises are reached, they must be done in a manner that allows the Arab partner to maintain dignity or prestige and not appear weak. To an American, losing face may be embarrassing, but to an Arab, it is devastating. Losing face is the ultimate disgrace, and an Arab will go to almost any length to avoid it. U.S. leaders must keep the concept of “face” in mind when conducting negotiations in the Middle East. Failure to do so could freeze or kill a negotiation. Face and the allied concepts of honor and shame are important in the Middle East.

There are other aspects of culture to consider with respect to negotiations. Some cultures are more risk-averse than others. In general, Middle Easterners seek to avoid uncertainty. This proclivity affects their willingness to take risks in a negotiation. Different cultures also have different views about the approach-

ness of displaying emotions. Arab negotiators, in a high-context culture, are more likely to display emotions than Americans. However, in Afghanistan, specifically in the Pashto culture, displays of emotion such as impatience, anger, etc. are considered signs of weakness. Finally, in addition to attaching high importance to creating bonds of friendship and trust between negotiators, Arabs believe it is imperative that negotiating partners respect each other’s honor and dignity.

Phase III: Post-negotiation. End negotiations with a strong stance. Once objectives have been achieved, summarize what has been agreed to and confirm the key points. Do not allow the negotiating partners to do so, this places them in power. Use common courtesy and tact in an effort to not offend the partners. Try not to rush or push; it might postpone or kill the agreement. It’s important to maintain control of the negotiation throughout the entire process, including the closing.

Negotiating is a way of life in Arab cultures. Apply these cultural and negotiation strategies and any mission will reap the benefits. ✨

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