

***Getting to Yes*, by Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton,**
Reviewed by Lisa Abbott

The authors present a framework for “principled negotiation” as an alternative to the common tendencies to either play hardball or simply give in during difficult negotiations.

According to the authors, the goal of a negotiation isn’t simply to win, but to develop a wise, fair and lasting agreement that satisfies the interests of opposing sides and takes into account the interests of the larger community.

Successful negotiations focus on the important interests of each side – rather than their firmly stated positions – and work to develop creative options for satisfying common and conflicting interests. The two sides should then search for objective criteria to help evaluate and select proposed options.

The authors stress the importance of separating the people from the problem. A principled negotiator is “soft on people and hard on the problem.” Active listening, affirmation and other steps can be used to engage even a hostile party in the process of mutual problem solving.

Before entering into a negotiation, the authors suggest that leaders should know their own “best alternative to a negotiated agreement” (BATNA) and know as much as possible about the BATNA of other side. Power in negotiation comes from strengthening your own BATNA and weakening the options available to the other side. As grassroots organizations know well, this may involve include organizing, media campaigns, legal action, building alliances, or developing solutions that don’t depend on agreement from the other side.

This book is rich in insights and tools that can help grassroots leaders gain the confidence and skills necessary to negotiate with each other, their families, and coalition partners, as well as with opposing parties.

The framework for principled negotiations is relatively simple to understand, although much harder to put in practice. Training leaders and staff in these skills could significantly improve the quality of dialogue and disagreements within community based organizations. Without these skills, many groups avoid important and hard discussions or have them in ways that lead people to splinter rather than pull together.

The book’s central message can be hard to align with some of the conflict-oriented tactics and strategies of direct action community organizing. At its core, organizing involves developing clear community positions, making demands, and putting public pressure on individual decision-makers. The different approaches can be reconciled, I think, by understanding that organizing is a way for groups to build power in order to enter into successful negotiations. *Getting to Yes* reminds us to be mindful that the tactics used in organizing can create a climate that makes negotiated agreements harder to achieve.

“A wise agreement can be defined as one that meets legitimate interests of each side to the extent possible, resolves conflicting interests fairly, is durable, and takes community interests into account.” (p. 4)

“Your position is something you have decided upon. Your interests are what caused you to so decide.” (p. 41)

“We tend to assume that because the other side’s positions are opposed to ours, their interests must also be opposed...In many negotiations, however, a close examination of the underlying interests will reveal the existence of many more interests that are shared and compatible than ones that are opposed.” (p. 42)

“To invent creative options, you will need (1) to separate the act of inventing options from the act of judging them; (2) to broaden the options on the table rather than look for a single answer; (3) to search for ways of making their decision easy.” (p. 61)

“In response to (greater) power, the most any method of negotiation can do is...first, to protect you against making an agreement you should reject and, second, to help you make the most of the assets you have so that any agreement you do reach will satisfy your interests as well as possible.” (p. 97)

“It is often said that the cheapest concession you can make to the other side is to let them know that they have been heard.” (p. 34)

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