

Chapter 7.4

Negotiation skills

Benefits of this chapter

Many think that negotiation is reserved for high-powered executives or lawyers sitting in the board room figuring out what big decision to make next. But the truth is, professionals at all levels can benefit from developing stronger negotiation skills.

Negotiation skills are useful in all aspects of a national sports federation. Executives must negotiate sponsorship agreements and departmental budgets. Managers have to negotiate conflicts within their departments and often negotiate staff salaries. And staff must negotiate with vendors to secure competitive rates and work with media to negotiate the terms of interview requests and access to athletes.

This chapter is designed to help you strengthen your negotiation skills and become more comfortable with the idea of negotiating. By practicing these skills and integrating them into your professional skill set, you can gain a competitive advantage over those with whom you are negotiating and advance the interests and development of your federation.

Introduction

Negotiation is typically required to settle some form of conflict. And not all forms of conflict are negative or adversarial in nature. Rather, when two (or more) sides have unique interests – in other words, the interests of the two sides are in conflict – coming to a resolution will likely involve negotiation.

And conflict is simply unavoidable. As a national aquatics federation, what is best for you, your staff, your members and your federation's development will not always be what is best for other relevant groups. This means that learning effective negotiating skills can help your federation represent its interest with as much influence and impact as possible.

Of course, the most desirable outcome of negotiation is a “win-win” resolution. So how can your federation use negotiating skills effectively so that everyone feels like their interests are understood, appreciated and represented in the final outcome? This chapter provides some fundamental strategies and hints that can take your negotiating skills to the next level.

Topics covered include:

- What is the key to effective negotiation?
- How should negotiations be structured to promote a “win-win” outcome?
- What does a successful negotiation outcome look like?

Negotiation is about more than simply solving a problem or a dispute – it is also an opportunity to understand your partners more thoroughly, prioritise the interests of your federation and strengthen your trust in and relationships with important audiences. By learning a good balance between “give” and “take,” your federation can advance its interests while staying mindful of the interests of other groups important to your federation's development.

What is the key to effective negotiation?

As mentioned, the goal of negotiation is a win-win resolution. This is particularly true for sports federations because they want to ensure their interests are being served, yet they do not want to alienate important partners in the process.

Effective negotiation depends on one key ingredient: clear communication. Both parties in a negotiation want to feel that they have fully expressed their position, that the other party has listened carefully and that the other part understands the basis of their position. Once the parties feel that these three conditions have been met, both parties can begin to consider mutually-beneficial solutions.

So, effective communication requires three essential skills: speaking, listening and understanding. Each of these skills is dependent on the others, which means you cannot achieve an effective negotiation without each one. Let's take a look at each skill and consider ways that you can demonstrate competence with each one.

Speaking

Each party in a negotiation wants to speak their mind, and sometimes the desire to be heard can become more important than the final outcome. Fortunately, there are some helpful hints that can make the speaking component of a negotiation organised and productive.

These include:

1/ Plan ahead

Planning your thoughts and remarks in advance can help the process run more smoothly. Waiting until the moment of negotiation could make you feel unprepared, which could make you defensive and a less effective negotiator.

2/ Agree on what the issue is

At the beginning of any successful negotiation, both parties should be able to agree a clear, concise statement that summarises the core issue. Verbally confirm that both sides understand and keep focus on that core issue.

3/ Prepare an opening statement

Before negotiating a resolution, both sides should present their position in an opening statement. No interruptions should occur during this time.

4/ Use “I” statements

During opening statements and throughout the negotiation process, use “I” statements – I feel, I think, I believe – that keep focus on what your position is. Using “you” statements – you didn’t, you wouldn’t, you seem – can be perceived by the other party as blaming, which will distract both sides from the goal of resolving the problem.

5/ Emphasise shared concerns

Shared concerns – not individual issues – should be the focus of the entire negotiation. This will keep resolution in mind and make the tone of the negotiation more cooperative and less combative.

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Listening

Active listening is a necessary skill for any successful professional, especially during negotiations. It is simply defined as concentrating all your attention of the other person when he or she is speaking. By listening actively, you can generate goodwill and understanding, which can drive discussions to a mutually desirable outcome.

Here are some helpful hints to demonstrate that you are actively listening during negotiations:

1/ Don’t interrupt

The fastest way to show that you are not listening is to interrupt. It shows the other party that you are only thinking about your own position and trying to defend it. Even if the other side says something that frustrates you or is factually inaccurate, just wait. You will have a chance to respond.

2/ Encourage the other side to share their thoughts

You can show interest and make the negotiation more like a conversation if you engage the other side with genuine questions about how they feel about certain issues and points you have made.

3/ Give feedback

Once you listen closely and completely to what the other side says, feel free to share how you feel. Just remember to present your feedback in a polite, diplomatic way. Do not become defensive or make accusations. Instead, make the dialogue a conversation that gets everyone moving toward a resolution.

4/ Maintain eye contact

Always look at the other party while they are talking. Looking down or around the room can suggest that you are not fully engaged and that you are not even considering what the other side is saying. Eye contact says that you care and that you are interested in working together to resolve the issue.

Understanding

No two people ever agreed on anything without having a common understanding of what the problem is and what the solution should be. Both sides need to feel understood before a resolution can be reached.

In addition to the listening skills listed above, consider these hints as other effective ways to promote understanding during negotiations:

1/ Ask for clarification

Once you have listened closely and completely to the other side, be sure to ask for any clarification that you may need. Questions such as “I understood you to say (insert summary of comments here) is this correct?” Doing so shows the other side that you are genuinely interested in understanding their perspective, which can also give you an opportunity to clear up any misperceptions, factual details or simple misunderstandings.

2/ Watch body language and facial expressions

Sometimes we are not conscious of our body language or facial expressions when we are talking to others. However, during negotiations, it is critical that you think about how you are being perceived. Blank expressions, poor posture, wild hand gestures and folded arms can suggest an unwillingness to listen and cooperate. Instead, nod your head, look alert and stay calm.

3/ Act on observations

If you feel like the other party is getting frustrated or having a hard time expressing themselves, reassure them that you want to be helpful. Comments such as, “You seem strained. Is there something I can do to help?” or “Would you like to take a five minute break?” can ease the tension in the room. They also indicate your desire to be helpful and reach a solution.

How should negotiations be structured?

Clear communication may be the key to effective negotiation, but the way negotiations are set up and conducted is also important to facilitating a timely, agreeable resolution. There are some basic guidelines that you can follow to make sure negotiations are fair, well organised and comfortable.

These guidelines include:

1/ Plan ahead

Make sure negotiations take place at a mutually agreed time and place. Negotiations can be biased even before they start if one side feels rushed or unprepared.

2/ Choose a neutral setting

Agree to a location that does not favour one side over the other. For example, if your federation is negotiating with a potential sponsor, neither organisation's headquarters would be a wise choice. Instead, agree to meet at a hotel conference room or other quiet, neutral location that is comfortable and convenient.

3/ If necessary, use a mediator

If the conflict is substantial and emotions are strong, you may consider using a non-biased mediator to oversee the negotiations. This person should have no financial, political or personal interest in the outcome of the negotiation. However, both sides should agree that he or she is the best person to do the job.

4/ Recognise and define the problem

As mentioned, allow both sides to make opening statements. From there, identify common areas of concern instead of focusing solely on selfish interests.

5/ Identify a variety of solutions

There is no "perfect answer" to a negotiation. Rather, the goal is that each side feels he or she has a role in the outcome and that his or her interests are represented adequately. By coming up with multiple solutions, both sides can find "pros and cons" in each scenario to create an outcome that is the most fair and most comprehensive.

6/ Collaborate

Working together to resolve the problem does not mean you are giving up or giving in. Effective negotiators can acknowledge that disagreement exists and put aside their anger, frustration and ego to advance an agreeable outcome. For the negotiation to succeed, you must acknowledge at the beginning that you will have to give something up in order to gain a common benefit.

What does a successful negotiation outcome look like?

Now that you have considered the essential elements of effective negotiation, how will you know if your negotiations have been successful?

The following list highlights some of the key components of a successful negotiation:

1/ There are no winners and losers, just winners

Both sides can leave the negotiating table feeling satisfied that their voices were heard and the outcome achieves most of their interests.

2/ Both sides surrendered something

Each party should have given up something in the process of negotiation to gain a common benefit. Doing so actually strengthens the outcome because both sides understand that each other had to sacrifice to make it work.

3/ A plan of action is in place

Successful negotiations often end with a plan of action, meaning certain parties will be responsible for fulfilling certain commitments.

4/ Commitments are kept

Be sure to honour your commitments. Not only is it the professional thing to do, it also gives you credibility as a negotiating partner in case you find yourself negotiating again in the future.

5/ The relationship is still strong, if not stronger

Negotiation should not be seen as adversarial or conflict-based. Instead, negotiation should be seen as cooperative and results-oriented. It is a “meeting of equals” where mutually-desirable outcomes can be achieved. Preserve (and strengthen) the relationship by separating personality from the issue being discussed and putting your ego aside to focus on the task at hand.

6/ Show your appreciation

It is never easy to give up certain elements of your self-interest to advance a larger goal. As such, be sure to recognise all parties involved and express to them your appreciation for their time, understanding and cooperation.

Useful tips

Keep in mind these useful strategies in order to develop your negotiating skills:

- By being respectful, open-minded and collaborative, your federation can build a reputation for being a cooperative partner dedicated to the growth and well-being of aquatics sports.
- Taking a seat at the negotiating table shows how much you care about your sport.
- While passions may run high at times, remember that your ability to negotiate calmly and professionally can have a positive impact on the future of your federation.