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MBA 245 Paper #3 – Movie Analysis

For this paper, I have chosen to analyze the conflicts and negotiations in the movie “Sing”. “Sing” is an animated comedy featuring anthropomorphic animals who sing popular music. There are several minor conflicts and negotiations throughout the movie, and all would require different strategies to achieve the optimal outcome for the characters involved. I will focus on those involving the story’s main character.

The main protagonist in the movie is a koala named Buster Moon. Buster owns a theater which is performing poorly. During the opening of the movie, Buster engages in two incidents of conflict avoidance. First, his stage crew is at his office door wanting to be paid for working the previous show. Buster asks his secretary Ms. Crawley to tell the crew he will talk to the bank to get the crew paid. Ms. Crawley then informs Buster that the bank representative, Judith, is already on the phone. This leads to the second incident of conflict avoidance. Buster tells Ms. Crawley to tell Judith he is out to lunch, and he leaves the theater through the back exit. Rather than deal with the stage crew and be honest that he is currently unable to pay them, he leaves. Instead of dealing with the bank regarding his financial issues, he lies that he is out of the office.

This type of conflict avoidance breeds distrust. In the case of the stage crew, they clearly have a preexisting relationship with Buster since they have worked with him before, and while it is unfortunate that he is unable to pay, he should be respectful of them and the relationship. If I were Buster in this situation, I would meet with the stage crew and explain the situation. I would then offer to set up a payment schedule to ensure that they would be made whole as soon as possible. Finally, if I truly valued the relationship with the crew, I would offer them continued employment and bonuses when they worked future shows that were more successful. This

negotiation reminded me some of the Viking Investments negotiation where Sandy was unable to cover the costs he needed to, but we were still able to reach a resolution. In this negotiation, it may seem like Buster does not have power since he owes the crew money, but in Making Negotiations Predictable, the authors discuss the power to reward and the power to coerce. By ignoring his crew, Buster has effectively used the power to coerce to deny the crew the pay for the job they have already done. The negotiation would have gone much better if Buster had tried to reward the crew through creative thinking and discussion.

Another factor in play in this situation is leverage. By ignoring and refusing to pay his crew, Buster is using negative leverage and souring the relationship since he is not giving the crew a chance to reach an outcome that could be satisfactory to them. He has taken away their ability to find a zone of possible agreement. Alternatively, by going into a conversation with the intention of trying to work with the crew, Buster could have used positive leverage to make the crew satisfied with the situation going forward.

Buster decides that he needs to make more money for his theater and eventually comes up with the idea to hold a singing competition. He wants to have a cash prize to get more participants in the contest and is able to round up \$1,000 from his office. He asks Ms. Crawley to make posters advertising the contest and she accidentally types \$100,000 instead. She then drops all the flyers out the window, so neither of them was able to catch the error. Once Buster selects participants for the show, one of the contestants, Mike, asks to see what \$100,000 looks like. Buster has brought a chest which is supposed to hold the prize money. Buster realizes that Ms. Crawley made an error on the flyer, but rather than admit to the participants that the prize is only \$100,000, he tells them he does not have the key to open the chest.

In this situation, Buster is being deceptive. Rather than admit to the participants that the prize is only \$1,000, he explains that he does not have his key and that they should go home and get some rest because they have a big day of rehearsal the next day. He did not lie to them by telling them there was \$100,000, he simply started talking about something else and redirected their attention. This is unethical behavior on Buster's part because he knows that all the participants believe the prize value to be much higher. He is now starting a relationship with these new individuals in a negative way instead of working to build trust for their future work going forward. The participants had a misplaced trust in Buster in this situation and did not press to see the \$100,000. Through this class, I have learned that not all negotiation partners are upfront during initial negotiations, and I may have to ask more questions to get at the answer I need. Even then, it is possible the negotiation partner could still be deceptive. The contest participants were likely so excited to be selected that they did not realize Buster was avoiding the question about the money. An astute negotiator would have insisted to verify the prize money was there. Buster could have said that the chest did not contain the full prize (which would have been true) and that he was working on sponsorships or something to make up the rest.

In this situation, it would have been ideal for Buster to be upfront and say that the prize value is only \$1,000. Because he was not open with the participants, he did not bother to learn their motivation for being in the contest. If he had, he would have learned that all of them, except for Mike, really just love to sing and would most likely have participated in the contest anyway. He could have also offered that all of them could have roles in future shows to sweeten the deal. Throughout the class, I have learned that it is better to get to know the people involved in a negotiation or business relationship rather than just assume my own opinions to be true. I finally put that into practice in our most recent negotiation that involved a Chicago theater where we

discussed the best pizza to try. Taking the time to learn the motives of partners in a negotiation makes it far more likely the negotiation will come to a favorable conclusion for all parties. By deceiving the participants who signed up, Buster has now created a situation where he must scramble to come up with the amount of money he promised.

Next, Buster is confronted by Judith from the bank. He had been avoiding her for some time, so she finally showed up to his office. By avoiding Judith and lying about where he was, he already had started the negotiation off on the wrong foot. Judith was so frustrated with Buster not being upfront or trying to work on paying his bills that she finally resorted to negative leverage. If Buster did not settle his account by the end of the month, the bank would repossess his theater. Buster tried to argue that his new show was going to be a big hit, but Judith countered that none of the shows had ever been hits and ended the negotiation reiterating that the bank would take his theater if not paid in full. The problem Buster had with this negotiation is that he had never established trust when working with Judith. He had either lied or avoided her, so it was difficult for him to make any progress in a negotiation with her except to make more promises he may not be able to keep. To have improved this negotiation, perhaps Buster could have offered a payment plan including details of projected ticket sales and what percentage would be going to the bank instead of a big promise he would be able to pay everything all at once. The bank just wanted their money back and may have been receptive to that, especially if Buster had been trustworthy in other negotiations. This highlights the importance of being honest and ethical in interactions. By establishing a relationship where negotiations have been positive in the past, it is far more likely that a negotiation partner with more power (in this case, Judith) will be more likely to help reach a beneficial conclusion for all parties instead of use their power to run the negotiation in their favor.

For his next negotiation, Buster met with an old star of the stage, Nana Noodleman. By this point, Buster clearly needed to have the prize money to make his show as successful as possible. Nana is the grandmother of one of Buster's good friends, so he was able to sneak in with his friend to meet Nana. He tried to start the meeting on the right foot by complementing Nana, but he managed to insult her instead by saying she did not look a day over 90. Nana was not impressed with this. He then jumped into asking her to sponsor the show. She laughed at him and declined. Buster tried to salvage the meeting by describing how impactful it was to see Nana performing when he was young. He talked about how seeing her shows made him want to be in the theater business. This softened Nana's attitude and allowed the two of them to reminisce about the quality of the theater. Buster was eventually able to get Nana to agree to come see a rehearsal of the singing competition. There was an unspoken feeling that if Nana were pleased with the current quality of the theater and singing competition, she may be willing to sponsor the prize.

This was the first negotiation where Buster was successful. He started out wrong by being insulting and asking for too much. Nana was offended and quickly turned Buster down. When Buster switched his strategy to try to relate to Nana, he was able to soothe the hurt feelings and recover the negotiation. As I have mentioned before, a very important part of a negotiation is establishing the relationship or some type of common ground with the negotiation partner. By reflecting on the memories of the theater when Nana was a star, Buster was able to make that connection with Nana. In Getting to Yes, the authors discuss the importance as seeing people as people instead of adversaries or someone to get something from. This negotiation with Nana is the first time Buster has really treated a negotiation partner as a person (even though technically

Nana is a sheep) instead of a means to an end. Considering the human aspect of the negotiation is so important and is something I have been working on this semester.

Getting to Yes also discusses how part of successful negotiation is listening to the negotiation partner and actively responding to their concerns. Buster can hear the nostalgia in Nana's voice and appeal to her memories of her time in the theater. This is the first time he has truly listened to someone he was interacting with because he respected her as an actress, not just because he wanted her to give him money. This is a critical aspect of negotiations. When negotiating, it is important to not only hear, but to listen. This reminded me of the "Who Lives?" negotiation we did where we needed to really listen to the volunteer to understand them and how we could get them to participate in the process. If a negotiation partner feels as though they are not being heard, it is far more likely they will disengage and not be willing to reach an agreement.

While Buster is desperate for the money to sponsor the prize, when talking to Nana, he has a zone of possible agreement that does not involve him having the money right away. He is satisfied with her coming to see a rehearsal of the show so she can decide for herself that it is worth sponsorship. This is the first negotiation where Buster was able to accept a compromise. When going into a negotiation, it is not realistic to think that someone will get everything they want, no matter how strong their position seems at first. In class, this was like the "Viking Investments" negotiation where I thought there was no way I would have to make any concessions to Sandy, but I did end up having to reach an agreement and maintain the relationship. Buster's willingness to give up the immediate satisfaction of the money for the opportunity to demonstrate he was deserving shows his growth as a negotiator.

Buster did however make some missteps in this negotiation. He told Nana that the theater was just as magnificent as she had remembered, even though there were issues with some of structural components (e.g., the stage was falling apart). He was able to fix those issues and make a great backdrop before Nana came, but he took a very big risk by lying to Nana. If she had arrived and found the theater in a state of disrepair, she very likely would not have stayed to watch the show. While the risk paid off, I do not think this is a good strategy for negotiation. During our very first negotiation in class, “Comparative Advertising”, our group lied to get the benefit in the negotiation. We did “win”, but it was not ethical. In the real world, we would have burned the relationship with our negotiation partners and likely would not have been able to work with them again. Even though it is entirely possible, or maybe even likely, that negotiators can get away with a lie, it is not advisable because the liar is not behaving ethically and could be caught in the lie, ruining the process and the relationship. This is the part of the negotiation I would have done differently. I would have told Nana we were going to remodel the theater and she could see our new stage and the rehearsal of the show when she came to visit. That way I would have been ethical in the negotiation and would have been at less risk if she had come to the rehearsal before the renovations were completed.

The final negotiation Buster engaged in was trying to convince a shy elephant, Meena, to participate in the competition. During the initial audition process, Meena was so shy she could not even bring herself to sing. She eventually got the courage to approach Buster and ask about being in the show. He offered her a position as a stagehand instead and offered to teach her everything he knew about running shows. Even though she wanted to sing, she agreed to be a stagehand. One participant was injured, and Buster asked Meena if she wanted to step in instead. She was wavering because of her nerves, so Buster said he would put her down as a maybe. By

the time Nana was going to come and watch the rehearsal, Meena was still afraid to participate in the show, even though she told Buster how much she wanted to. Buster really wanted her to perform so he gave her a speech about how it was fine that she was afraid and that she could maybe overcome that fear by actually singing. Meena was not convinced, so Buster asked her if she truly loved to sing. She said absolutely and Buster told her that if she loved doing it, she would be great. Meena agreed to sing for Nana.

During this negotiation, Buster also started out rocky. When Meena first asked to reaudition, Buster talked over her and did not listen to what she was asking for. Instead, he asked her if she wanted to be a stagehand. Meena was too shy to clarify what she wanted. When they discussed the issue again, Meena still was not vocal about her desire to sing in the competition. In a negotiation, as I discussed before, it is critical to listen to the negotiation partner and really understand what they are saying. At the same time, Meena needed to make sure that she spoke up for herself and clearly stated what she wanted. When I first signed up for this course, one thing I was afraid of was speaking up and being confident in what I was saying. I realized that really everyone in the course was feeling the same way, so that helped me feel more confident in class negotiations. I am working on still incorporating the confidence into my real-world negotiations as well because that skill of clearly and confidently communicating my position will be critical for my success.

When Buster finally started listening to Meena and heard her concerns, he was able to convince her that she really could be successful. Buster spending the time to consider what the situation required helped both parties reach a satisfactory conclusion. Overall, through the course of the movie, Buster improved how he interacted with others and started being more honest about his intentions. This allowed others to trust him and help him achieve the results he wanted.

Buster's negotiations throughout the movie demonstrate the importance of relationship building in having successful negotiation processes.

When thinking about this assignment, I was originally going to pick some other piece of media with obvious negotiations, like a legal movie. However, I kept coming back to "Sing", partly because it is my daughters' favorite movie, but also because I have learned from this class that many conversations and interactions in the real world are negotiations, even if they are not formal. I negotiate every day in my interactions with others so analyzing less formal negotiations seemed to have more relevance to building my skills in becoming a strong negotiator. I appreciated watching Buster's growth as a negotiator because I can use the strategies that made him successful to improve my own negotiations. I also think the story will help my daughters learn best practices for communication and negotiation, although I hope they are not quite as good at them as I am.