

## The best negotiators share common skills BY JOHN STURROCK

IN RECENT months, I have been fortunate to have opportunities to work as a mediator in central Africa, Switzerland and various places in the UK, in disputes that have been remarkably diverse.

Notwithstanding that diversity, I have been struck by how much in common there is among those who are good negotiators. What are some of these common elements?

**Willingness to listen:** Knowing they have two ears and one mouth, good negotiators will use them in that proportion rather than making assertions about their own position. They will want to know all they can about what concerns the other side, knowing that, if they can attempt to address these, they may well build a platform for getting a result that meets their needs also. They will ask very specific questions - and listen to the answers.

**Separating people from the problem:** often a dispute is personalised and the emotions and feelings of individuals, which inevitably arise, are mixed in with the issues which are present. Effective negotiators will be rigorous and robust about what needs to be addressed, while being respectful and courteous towards those involved, whatever they may think of them, and whatever their behaviour or values.

**Detoxifying language:** allied to showing respect, the prospect of antagonism and polarisation will be reduced by avoiding unnecessarily judgmental or inflammatory language, especially if tensions are high. Choosing words carefully and being precise, clear and specific will ensure the message gets across.

**Taking a break:** if there is a need to assess the situation, if tempers are getting frayed, if a proposal needs to be considered or if people are tiring, the wise negotiator will pause, take stock, reflect on what has happened and re-group before proceeding.

**Knowing the objective:** the only way to know if the negotiation is going well, or if an offer made should be accepted, is to identify benchmarks or goals in advance by which to assess how to respond. The key here is solid preparation and rigorous analysis of risks, strengths and weaknesses.

**Flexibility:** a firm "bottom line" can be detrimental if it disables the negotiator from acknowledging new information, revising his position or being open to new approaches. Those who want to make the best of a situation will ensure they have room to move - and will keep the big picture in mind.

Giving to gain: there is a notion that it is a mistake to make a unilateral concession and certainly that one should not do so first. Experience shows those who make a timely gesture by offering something of value to the other side unconditionally, will tend to influence the outcome in their favour and may well find the gesture is reciprocated and a logjam broken.

Looking for common ground: often, people have more in common than they think, especially when the adversarial world in which we live has emphasised the differences. Shrewd problem-solvers will work on what is not disputed and find mutual interests, to find sensible ways forward and narrow the scope of the dispute.

Saving face: there is usually no benefit in rubbing someone else's face in it: that may only exacerbate the situation and lessen the prospect of a successful resolution. Good negotiators remember the boot may be on the other foot on another occasion. Finding ways for your opponent to walk away with dignity is often critical.

Getting closure: an effective negotiation will cover all the bases, dealing comprehensively with the issues and ensuring that what is agreed is realistic, durable and can be implemented. At the end, wherever possible, the key players will acknowledge the hard work done by all. For they may need to meet again...