

## Why getting to yes is most vital journey we face

JOHN STURROCK

GETTING to Yes is the seminal work on negotiation by Fisher and Ury. First published in 1983, it has been read by millions of business people, diplomats, lawyers and others around the world and is standard fare in universities in the United States and elsewhere. Recently, General Sumbeiywo, the man at the centre of the Southern Sudanese peace agreement, was asked what one book he would recommend to negotiators. Getting to Yes was his swift reply. These days, there is increasing talk of generating consensus, of building dialogue rather than seeking confrontation. As we face the challenges of creating a wealthier, healthier, smarter and more open society, it seems essential to find constructive ways to resolve the important issues of the age. This will enable us to address political differences, tackle ongoing poverty and debate scientific research. More widely, it will help us to face up to apparently random acts of terror and the potentially dramatic changes in global climate.

Often, getting to yes will involve a change of habit and, admittedly, changing habits is not easy. The symptoms of our more traditional antagonistic behaviour remain. Posturing and positional language still dominate our headlines while point-scoring and taking sides continue to prevail.

Gore Vidal captured this drive to beat our opponents as: "It is not enough for me to succeed. My enemies must fail."

A different view was expressed by Gandhi, Martin Luther King and more recently by Nelson Mandela as he reflected on his release from Robben Island: "To make peace with an enemy one must work with that enemy, and the enemy must become one's partner."

Might we follow Mandela and progress to a new way of resolving difficult disputes? If so, what do we need to do in practice?

Fisher and Ury – and many others – offer practical proposals which could help us. The following list of benchmarks may be stating the obvious, but we might ask how often these are actually used in today's political discourse, public affairs, business dialogue and conflict resolution?

Take any number of recent headline stories – scientific research, devolution, local government finance, immigration, the US Presidential election – and ask who has demonstrated aptitude in:

- Trying to understand, the other side of the story, rather than simply asserting or exaggerating one's own point of view.
- Acknowledging that there is scope for differences of view rather than

denouncing those with contrary perspectives.

- Separating out issues from people rather than personalising debates.
- Focusing on how to improve the future by learning from the past rather than seeking to allocate blame.
- Apologising for mistakes or misunderstandings rather than engaging in face-saving self justification.
- Using language which is respectful and courteous rather than contentious and inflammatory.
- Identifying common ground and mutual purpose rather than that which separates people and sets them apart.
- Endeavouring to find out what is going on under the surface rather than engaging in superficialities.
- Trying to find as many options as possible for decision-making rather than adopting an unyielding position from the outset.
- Seeking to build useful relationships rather than knocking down those who are perceived as opponents.
- Understanding that to achieve success it is often necessary for the other players involved to have their interests addressed.
- Encouraging participation in meaningful, transparent discussions rather than posturing or bluffing, bullying or threatening.

Most of these are behaviours that can be learned. Perhaps we should award ratings using these benchmarks to assess our approach to political discussions, topical debates and dispute management. It could give a new meaning to the audit process.

In a commercial context, something similar has been done by global consulting firm Frost and Sullivan, who found in a survey that collaboration correlated strongly with overall business performance. In the States, they call it being "dispute-wise".

I recently came across a thought-provoking piece by American writer Brian McLaren who offered a suggested text for the speech President Bush might have given had he approached the aftermath of 9/11 in a different way by seeking to avoid escalation, to address underlying causes and to find creative solutions to build a new global community. When set against these benchmarks, the imagined text would score highly.

The recent tenth anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, provides us with an example of how apparently irreconcilable conflict can be overcome by

courageous and sacrificial changes in approach. Sometimes, even in business or politics, making a unilateral concession is a good strategy. The same techniques and attitudes can be applied daily in situations where differences exist. This is not a touchy-feely approach but involves taking responsibility and facing up to the tough complexities of modern life, with its infinite shades of grey and multiple layers of beliefs, values, aspirations and ambiguities. As President Kennedy once put it: "We should never negotiate out of fear, but we should never fear to negotiate."

Idealistic? Perhaps. Difficult? Of course. Changing any well-established behaviour is not easy, but the measure is not whether we can create a panacea but whether we can build a culture of collaboration which will achieve more effective results than has been the outcome of traditional ways of doing things. Perhaps we just might do so, and indeed, perhaps we might strive to achieve more than that.

- John Sturrock is a mediator and chief executive of Core Solutions Group.