

∞ Epilogue ∞

Two to Tango?

*Ranse Howell & Lynn P. Cohn**

Editors' Note: Light of foot, light of heart? Not exactly: in an overture to a longer ballet next year, the authors contend that the appropriate way to use dance as an element in negotiation teaching starts with...fear!

Negotiation has often been described as a dance, though for many people negotiating is more like fencing than dancing. But what if we took the metaphor seriously? Would that help more people learn to be graceful and observant in negotiating? Would they benefit from that?

Just as you cannot learn to paint by reading about it, learning the dance of negotiating should be experiential. Dance is unencumbered by words or the need to play an instrument. Because dance uses the body as an instrument and form of communication, dance can be used to understand how to actually “feel” something – perhaps, a negotiation. Dancers, like negotiators, often improvise and frequently display unconscious competence. In many, if not most, of the world’s cultures, dance is an integral way for people to connect and share feelings and moods. Messages can be transmitted from subtle movements of the body and understood by both the participant and an observer. When negotiation teachers talk about the need to understand body language, they are already part of the way toward dance, and not just as metaphor.

In Istanbul, we began experimenting with taking negotiating-as-dance more seriously in our training. We have reached conclu-

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sions about some basic elements; dance used as a teaching tool should:

- Not be overly complex;
- Not have too many rhythms;
- Appeal to a cross-section of potential participants, and
- Not require too much space.

Salsa is an ideal choice within these parameters, and readily fits within a negotiation exercise. Salsa is easy to learn (the basic structure consists of three movements which are then repeated); has a good rhythm; has wide appeal; and can be danced in a small area (with chairs and tables moved aside, most training rooms will probably provide sufficient space).

We would start such an exercise with no advance explanation, but by getting all the participants to stand, facing the same way (a large group can form several shorter lines). Only at this point would we reveal that they are going to learn a dance, the salsa. There will be an immediate reaction – we promise. The reaction itself is the beginning of the learning obtainable from dance.

Teacher's Notes/Questions



STEP ONE

How do trainees feel when they do not have key information, in the dance or in a negotiation? (e.g., uncomfortable, excited, curious, impatient?) What does this reveal? (e.g., importance of establishing authority and providing rules/framework). What do the different trainees' responses to learning salsa suggest? (some may find it fun, while others may think it stupid. It is important to note the individual level of discomfort, and refer back to this either in open session or in a side conversation).

We might begin the exercise with everyone marching in place, and then introduce the rhythm, asking the participants “dancing is like –

what ?” (We can hint, if necessary: “it’s movement, it has a rhythm and you use one foot after the other....”) – “Hey, it’s like walking!”

Teacher’s Notes/Questions



STEP TWO

Walking can be compared to negotiation, as something that is done every day, often without thinking about it. To reinforce the core concepts of negotiation, we already know – from various writers in this volume and elsewhere – that we need to increase awareness through reflection. Awareness provides individuals with the confidence to become more flexible and responsive negotiators.

And we might intentionally withhold information from the participants so that they will begin to feel the disorientation and discomfort of the unknown. The specific impact, however, depends entirely on the personality types among the trainees. This not only provides a time-efficient entry point into discussion of personality and its effects on different students’ negotiating; the feeling of authentic discomfort in negotiation (probably varying among the students from almost-none to severe, and including both feelings related to the unknown, and to being left behind by others who are visibly more adept) is often very hard to replicate in role-play simulations. We think that even ignoring the other potential learning elements, the raw feelings that will be accessed as part of this exercise are hugely valuable, and will provide the trainee with a greater understanding of “self.”

Teacher's Notes/Questions



STEP THREE

Different personality types cope with stressors in a variety of ways, depending on the amount of information and the importance of the outcome. How do the trainees cope with this new requirement, and how do they cope with the stressors they encounter in a negotiation?

And perhaps that is enough for just now. Having 1) made the students thoroughly uncomfortable, 2) revealed people's different reactions to stress and 3) begun to analogize to something they are more comfortable with, how do we resolve the tensions and suggestions thus created? What does the use of dance look like on the second day, or the third? By the end of the course, can we really use this strategy to help trainees become more elegant negotiators (and perhaps, to fall over their feet less often on the dance floor, into the bargain)?

All will be revealed – but only after the next dance in Beijing. Stay tuned: our answers are for a longer article, now in preparation. We invite you back for another spin round this topic in the successor volume.