
Win-Win Myths

By Lothar Katz

If you never heard of the concept of win-win, you're either eight years old, or you must have spent the past quarter-century living in a desert. Roger Fisher and William Ury's *Getting to YES*, one of the best-selling business books of all time, originally defined this principled approach to negotiating, now taught by trainers all over the world. "Negotiate agreement without giving in," "Focus on interests, not positions," "Make sure both sides feel good about the deal," "Explore creative options that maximize the value for everyone" – the key messages of this negotiation philosophy appeal to universal values of fairness and mutual respect.

If only it worked better...

To be sure, some of the underlying principles of win-win are very powerful. We all are more effective when we focus on our counterparts' intentions (what they really want) instead of their positions (what they say they want). Similarly, the idea of inventing options for mutual gain, that is, leveraging creativity to introduce aspects into the negotiation that both sides benefit from but neither had considered, proved hugely beneficial to the field.

Alas, win-win has its limitations. What most people remember about the concept are rules such as "Make sure you both win," "Give a little, take a little", or "Remember you're negotiating the deal and the relationship." While all of these rules have their place, none of them are particularly helpful when negotiating with someone who does not focus on win-win. Even when both sides share the spirit, each may be disappointed with the negotiation outcomes, feeling they "left something on the table" – a frustrating, yet frequent experience in the United States and one that is even more common when doing business around the globe.

Experienced international negotiators consider the influence of two aspects that Fisher and Ury largely seemed to ignore:

Competitiveness

In the U.S., a highly competitive culture, many negotiators secretly admit that "I want my counterpart to win – but I want to win more!" Consequently, they are more assertive and less cooperative, often seeing the other side's gain as their own loss. Such a competitive spirit, which does not align well with the "joint problem solving" philosophy of win-win, is common also in cultures like Brazil, China, Russia, South Korea, and many others. Appeals to a competitive negotiator's sense of fairness probably fall on deaf ears: most see nothing wrong with one-sided negotiation outcomes, taking them only as evidence of superior negotiation skills.

When dealing with a competitive counterpart, negotiators need to decide when to employ a win-win approach and when to take a firmer stance, at the risk of appearing less collaborative. In certain situations within negotiations, building "counter-pressure," while continuing to focus on intentions and look for creative options, may be the most effective strategy.

The 'Joy of the Game'

Most businesspeople in Western countries like the U.S., Canada, Britain, France, Germany, or the Nordics, do not really enjoy negotiating. They view negotiations a necessary but rather cumbersome step in the process of doing business and strive to complete them as quickly and effectively as possible.

In contrast, members of many other cultures, such as Arabs, most Latin Americans, or many Asians see negotiating as a game that they play skillfully and enjoy profoundly. Though the object of this game is no less serious to them, they view extended negotiations as opportunities to have fun, learn more about the other side and build the necessary relationships. They tend to take their time and draw out negotiations "needlessly," at least in the eyes of a rushed foreigner, haggling endlessly before considering realistic options. Making matters worse, the process of exchanging information in these regions and countries may include elements, such as misinformation, deceit, or outright lies, that others view as unacceptable 'bad-faith negotiating.'

Conducting negotiations across cultural borders with a strict expectation that both sides follow win-win principles is little more than naïve and can put deals in jeopardy. Great negotiators understand win-win principles and leverage them where appropriate, but they remain flexible, adjusting negotiation styles and tactics as required to achieve the best possible results.

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
