

An Exercise in Role Reversal: Four Steps to Effective Negotiation

Do not judge your neighbor until you have walked two moons in his moccasins.

– *Native American Proverb*

It is often surprising to discover that the primary block to a successful negotiation is not that the other person lacks intellect or integrity, but that he or she bears a different set of experiences and challenges that create a very different set of priorities and values on the issues that you think are so clear. "Walking in another's shoes" and "seeing through another's eyes" are ways of seeing the world and the opportunities for mutual benefit through the same lens. This is an essential skill in resolving conflicts, whether they are as minor negotiations of selecting a restaurant for dinner or as major as a negotiation over principles of corporate merger. The Role Reversal exercise is a technique that allows you to practice taking the perspectives of the other parties in the negotiation. You will need a partner who is willing to give you honest, specific feedback.

Prepare the case: Take about 15 minutes to consider an upcoming negotiation or an ongoing unresolved negotiation that is particularly challenging for you. This exercise works best if the negotiation is with only one other person.

Set the stage: Set up the "practice stage" with three chairs. Label one chair with your name and one with the name of the negotiating party; label the third chair with the name of your "helper". As you move through the different roles of each party, you should move to sit in the chair labeled with that person's name.

Step One: Your helper interviews you for the details of the case and the way that you tend to act in this type of situation.

Step Two: You move to sit in the other negotiating party's chair. The helper stays in his or her own chair. The chair with your name on it is now empty. You now take on the role of the negotiating party to speak in his/her voice, to see the situation as he/she might see it. Your Helper now interviews you as the Negotiating party. It is useful for the Helper to ask general questions about the position to help you "get into role" before moving into more specific questions about the issue under negotiation. Remember, you are now the negotiating party. The seat with your own name on it is empty.

Step Three: The Helper now moves to sit in the chair with your name on it. You remain in the chair, and you continue to speak from the perspective of the Negotiating Party. Begin the negotiation. If you feel you must break role, because your partner is presenting your usual position unrealistically, or because you are "stuck", then "freeze the action", have a brief exchange, then resume the negotiation. In this situation, Practice and Perspective, not Perfection, is the goal.

Step Four: Prepare your own negotiation based upon your new insight into the other party's perspective.