



Negotiation skills: a viable soft skills tool for LIS Professionals

Praveen Choudhary
Dy General Manager (Doc.),
Documentation Centre, DLF Cyber City,
DLF Ltd., Gurgaon (Haryana)
Email: pravinkrc@gmail.com

Rajesh Kumar Pandey
Head Library
LBS National Sanskrit University
Email: rajeshpandey@slbsrsv.ac.in

Abstract

The paper describes the significance of soft skills concerning negotiation skills for LIS professionals. It delves into various aspects of negotiation skills and emphasises why acquiring such attributes is essential for sustaining the profession.

Keywords: Soft skills, Negotiations Skills, Library Professional Development

Introduction

The ever-changing dynamics of information management have put parallel demands on developing and acquiring new competencies in LIS professionals. New competencies are felt indispensable amongst LIS professionals to cope with the rapid transformation in technological advancements and information handling, implications of information need and changing behaviours of information seekers. Domain-specific professional knowledge or hard skills are crucial for getting a job. Professionals acquire such skills by pursuing a particular course and curriculum. However, there has been an emphasis on developing specific skills considered essential for professionals to remain significant and viable. Such skills are referred to as soft skills. Soft skills encompass many personal attributes/traits like communication, interpersonal, social, negotiation, emotional intelligence, etc. (Chaudhary et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2016). All these skills are purely personal in nature but are very crucial these days. While such skills are essential for sustaining the profession, there is no formal education system to learn these traits.



Discussing various soft skills and their implication will benefit the budding and serving LIS professionals. Still, this paper confines only one such significant soft skill, Negotiation Skills.

Why Negotiation skills

People skills or soft skills (Wheeler, 2016) are primarily innate and almost guarantee a successful endeavour not only on the professional front but on the personal and social front. These personal traits help in effective interaction with humans, establishing fruitful collaboration. ‘Negotiations or interpersonal communications are traits that LIS professionals imply and practice throughout their careers. Changing dynamics of information management after infusing technologies have put more burden or dependence on negotiation skills. A professional must engage with the organisation’s stakeholders concerning decisions on various facets of management, initiation of different services or alteration in the ongoing services, and many others. On the other hand, these skills are required when procuring resources for the library, whether for the subscription of specialised databases or bulk purchase. If a professional is equipped with such competence, the outcome would be tilted mainly towards the organisation for which the negotiations were carried out. Lacking such competence could result in different outcomes and loss to the organisation regarding resources and future endeavours.

Enhancing negotiation skills has an enormous payoff,” says Harvard Business School Professor Michael Wheeler. He further says, *“It allows you to reach agreements that might otherwise slip through your fingers. It allows you to expand the pie and create value, so you get more benefits from the agreements you reach. In some cases, it also allows you to resolve small differences before they escalate into big conflicts.”*

How to Impart Negotiation Skills

Wheeler (2016) has stated that soft skills can be developed and improved with work, reflection and practice. Similarly, negotiation skills can be developed with practice, knowledge and confidence. Following are some of the essential skills that help master the art of negotiation-



1. *Communication*

This is one of the fundamental essences of negotiation. Effective communication skills allow positive engagement with other negotiators, and the probability of an agreeable solution remains high. The negotiation concerning specific deals may need to be improved or positively impacted with such skills. Therefore, it is essential to have commendable command over the language and the art of communicating facts. A good communicator remains articulate in effectively transferring his ideas and thoughts and actively listens to others' views and ideas. This leads to the retention of crucial components of the negotiations/deal intact.

2. *Emotional Intelligence*

Wheeler (2016), in his paper on emotional intelligence, quoted a definition of EI provided by Jack G. Montgomery of Western Kentucky University "Emotional intelligence is the ability to sense, understand, and effectively apply the power and acumen of emotions as a source of human energy, information, and influence". Emotions play a significant role in negotiation. A balance of emotions results in reaching a logical conclusion; however, a slight aberration may mar the negotiation. A high degree of emotional intelligence is needed to read other parties' emotions. This can enable you to more easily pick up on what they are implying rather than explicitly stating. In addition to understanding what you and others are experiencing throughout a negotiation, emotional intelligence can help you manage and use emotions advantageously. While positive and balanced emotions impart trust, negative ones may cause unproductive negotiations.

3. *Planning*

Planning with a clear idea of what you hope to achieve and where your boundaries lie is essential in any negotiation. Without adequate preparation, it is possible to overlook important terms of your deal.

First, consider the zone of possible agreement (ZOPA) between you and the other negotiating parties. ZOPA, sometimes called the bargaining zone, refers to the range in a negotiation in which two or more parties can find common ground. A positive bargaining zone exists when the terms that both parties are willing to agree to overlap. On the other hand, a negative bargaining zone exists when neither party's terms overlap.



Next, it is beneficial to understand your best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA). If your discussion lands in a negative bargaining zone, your BATNA is the course of action you plan to take if the negotiation is unsuccessful. Knowing your BATNA can help ensure you have a backup plan if an agreement cannot be reached and avoid leaving the table empty-handed.

4. Value Creation

This is another important aspect of negotiation. It is always a commendable idea to create more value during negotiation so that mutual benefit can be parted to a great extent for both negotiators. Every negotiator will try to achieve maximum value on their side. This results in discontentment, among others. The good idea is to add maximum value to the concept on which the negotiation is being done. It develops good rapport between negotiators and establishes trust for future discussions.

5. Strategy

Every negotiation warrants a specific strategy to be impactful. A thorough planning and suitable strategy must be implemented for every forthcoming or proposed negotiation. It enables the negotiators to have the know-how in every aspect of negotiation. To build a feasible negotiation strategy following steps may be considered by a negotiator-

- The exact role of the negotiator
- Understanding your value as a negotiator
- Understanding the vantage point of your counterpart
- Check in with yourself

A precise formulation and understanding of all these aspects will enable a negotiator to have practical discussions and deal. By understanding the roles of those involved, each party's value, and your counterpart's advantages, you can better prepare to work toward a common goal. Checking in with yourself throughout the discussion can also help ensure you stay on the path to success.

6. Reflection

As an effective negotiator, it is always recommended to understand the strengths and weaknesses reflected during past negotiations. At the same time, it reflects what went wrong during past negotiations and identifies areas that require improvement. Such reflections help



a negotiator comprehensively evaluate and understand the tactics that could result in an effective deal in favour and eliminate weaknesses. After evaluating strengths and weaknesses, a negotiator must identify areas to work on, create a plan of action, and find new ways to create value. A timely review of ZOPA and BATNA could also help achieve the desired goals.

Barriers to Negotiation Skill

Negotiation is an art, and command over this art is indispensable for a good discussion, deal, or bargain. While there are specific skills which assist in developing and imparting this art, there are specific barriers as well that need to be looked into. Some of the barriers to successful negotiation are illustrated below-

1. *Trying to Win at all Costs*

As a negotiator, one should not emphasise getting a lucrative deal always at any cost; instead should try to ensure a mutually beneficial deal. Such intent builds trust and benefits both parties for a more extended period. The intention of getting a lucrative deal may only sometimes reap better yields in future. Therefore, negotiation should not be observed as a contest but as a mutually beneficial process.

2. *Getting Emotional*

It is a common practice for some negotiators to get emotional during negotiation. A negotiation filled with pure emotion may result in a less controlled and impactful deal and discussion for the negotiator and the concerned organisation. Overcoming such barriers is essential to strike a balanced deal.

3. *Not trying to understand counterparts*

Negotiation is a process where both parties are involved in reaching a conclusion. Lacking abilities to understand counterparts' needs, positions, and emotions will not help in a fair and effective deal.

4. *Focussing on Personalities, not issues*

It is an issue which must be looked into during negotiation. However, it is a common practice to get distracted sometimes by counterparts' personalities, appearances, and other attributes. A deviation from central issues of discussion results in a less impactful solution.



5. Blaming the other person

A failure or less impactful negotiation motivates some negotiators to pass the blame on their counterparts. Such a situation results in an atmosphere of distrust. A good spirit and proper understanding of cooperation be practised to avoid such a situation.

Conclusions

Mastery of negotiation skills enables a LIS professional to engage in impactful and mutually beneficial discussions; as a LIS professional, one has to negotiate on various issues. The success or failure of negotiation is highly dependent on the negotiation abilities of LIS professionals. No formal education or degree programme is available to get mastery of negotiation skills. However, one could learn and develop such skills through a personal approach and practice over time. Structured learning opportunities, books on such skills, resources that explicitly real-life scenarios, etc., can equip someone who wishes to master such skills. A consistent evaluation of strengths and weaknesses concerning various skills required to pursue learning the art of negotiation will develop this soft skill. While hard skills or core skills will enable one to get a job, learning such art is mandatory for a successful career and sustaining in the LIS field.

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