
Solving Global Policy Challenges: Five Lessons in Multilateral Negotiation

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Your community, business, or organization is facing a monumental policy challenge requiring a solution. Maybe it is a new regulatory need (or threat), an environmental concern, or a public health issue. There are multiple actors, myriad vested interests, and vast differences in perspective on the solution (or the need for a solution at all!). Radically different data sets and assumptions are cited by proponents on each side. A solution appears unattainable. But at least some of the stakeholders believe there is a problem, and everyone has an interest in the outcome, so something must be done.... This is the setup for a classic multilateral negotiation.

In a dynamic, interconnected world where climate change and human impacts are altering the equations of our daily lives in ways that interest every individual and entity in society, we will collectively face ever-more-difficult policy debates and decisions at the local, national, and

international levels.

How do we deal with these debates when there are conflicting interests? We can talk about the many issues—and their solutions—but we also need to institutionalize how to arrive at the right answers, how to develop the best policies, and how to do that in a way that makes them stick.

I spent close to 10 years negotiating at the United Nations, and I believe that multilateral outcomes—those that are truly inclusive of the perspectives of all stakeholders—offer the only workable policy solutions to our ever-expanding challenges.

The good news for those in the AAAS community is that a multilateral negotiation is not very different from science and engineering—step back from solving the problem your own way and instead develop an algorithm for a mutually agreeable resolution. I have found that, in difficult discussions of any kind, remembering the five tips below can help bring success.

Lesson One: Make friends. The other stakeholders in the discussion may, in reality, feel and behave more like combatants than friends. However, it is a mistake to view them this way. Better solutions come from listening and brainstorming, and creating an atmosphere that fosters these collaborative processes. The first thing to do in any negotiation is get to know your counterparts and understand them—all of them, not just those who appear to be more on your side. It is in everyone's interest to reach a good policy outcome.

Lesson Two: Think motivations. The next thing to do in any negotiation is assess your counterparts. Each individual representing a group or organization will likely have both a professional and personal agenda. This is especially true on issues like environment and health, where individuals—even those representing an organization—feel rightly that the stakes are personal. Further, even in the professional sphere, every “negotiator” will have both policy outcome goals AND more personal interests driving their behavior (i.e., catch the attention of that attractive industry rep, impress the new boss with a tough win, etc.). Differences in perspective on the problem—the hardest hurdle to overcome—are based on different underlying assumptions and can be rooted in these personal/professional goals and interests. It helps to try to view the issue from these other angles, as this will better enable you to lead your counterparts through the problem from your point of view.

Lesson Three: Remain calm and self-aware. While engaging in debate on the important issues under discussion, it is essential not to let emotion blind you or your counterparts' emotional theater to mislead you. Stay calm, listen to the underlying interests being conveyed, and hold your ground for a fair deal. As most of us learned in Psych 101 (or its equivalent), emotion leads to mistakes and poor decision-making.

Lesson Four: Be a creative problem-solver. Sometimes there is not a universally agreeable solution to a problem; often, however, there is at least a mutually disagreeable one. In a seemingly intractable debate, getting to a good outcome often just requires creativity—sometimes significant creativity, even to the point of actively redefining your idea of what a “good” outcome looks like. In being creative, protect the core interests of your position and maintain your bottom line, then find a deal that meets them while allowing the other parties to meet theirs. (Note: Do not erode your list of “absolute must-haves” unless it was unrealistic to begin with.) The resulting deal may not look anything like the outcome you expected, but if everyone's core interests are met, it is a winner.

Lesson Five: Protect the legitimacy of the outcome. For an outcome to be successful (and by that I mean be accepted and implemented by the parties), its legitimacy is paramount. For an outcome to

be legitimate, each participant needs to feel that the process was fair, that everyone won some/lost some, that their bottom lines were protected, and that they were not bullied or sidelined. Further, participants in the policy discussion are likely colleagues or neighbors, community players, or “future combatants;” you will negotiate with each other again. Therefore, it is essential that negotiators, especially powerful parties, avoid the “gorilla trap.” Bullying or betraying the trust built in a discussion may help one party (the gorilla) easily win its position in one specific debate, but this is a losing tactic in the long run. Each negotiator’s behavior helps set the tone not just for this debate but also for future discussions. Further, a deal made in bad emotion will mean a deal that may not work as well as it could, because its legitimacy is in doubt.

Lesson One is really the most important of these. In every negotiation, I have found that this is the key to a successful outcome. The other lessons show us the importance of each individual negotiator: you and your approach make all the difference in any policy debate. Each individual has power—power to impact the tone of the discussion, the terms of the debate, and the legitimacy of the process. She also has a responsibility, to herself, her position, and a workable policy outcome. That power and responsibility are increasingly important in public and international policy debates. Because this stuff is serious.

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