



Stanford eCorner

Communication and Negotiation

Stan Christensen, *Stanford Technology Ventures Program;*
Arbor Advisors

October 31, 2007

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/1878/Communication-and-Negotiation>

Stan Christensen believes that communication is a key element in negotiation. He stresses the fact that communication is about convincing the other side that you can hear them and that they are being heard. He illustrates it with anecdotes and his personal experiences in negotiating deals.



Transcript

One notion to just think about is, rather than communication as listening and talking and hearing, think about communication as convincing the other side that you can hear them, and that they are being heard. I was talking to someone that used to work with Bill Clinton, President Clinton. And she said, "You know, the thing about Clinton was, he was an amazing listener. I mean, he would just focus, and he would make eye contact, and you could just tell that he was internalizing things. And the fact that he was listening was the most important thing in the conversation." And she referred to him as the 'aerobic listener'. And that ended up making him very very persuasive in negotiations, his ability to listen. I was doing a mediation in New York, with the Pequot, the Native American tribe, the Pequot Indians. Years ago, they were looking to expand their casino efforts. They were one of the first tribes to put casinos on their reservations. And the city council was opposed to it, and we came in as the mediators.

And we're at the table, there were several representatives from the tribe, several representatives from the city council, and it wasn't going very well. And there was this one gentleman on the city council who was particularly difficult. I mean, just cut people off constantly, didn't listen, and hard as we tried to facilitate, he was just one of those guys who was going to speak his mind and not be productive. And it was really hampering our process. And in one particular instance, a native woman was talking, and he just cut her off, pretty brutally, and pretty rudely. And then a woman on the city council - so same side of the table as him on the team - cut him off and said, "John, you're just not listening to them. Can you just take a step back and listen to what they have to say?" And so that just changed the whole tone of the negotiation. And we focused at about 15 minutes after that happened. And I went off with the native folks, and the folks from the city council went off with the other mediator. And what the person on the native tribe who'd been interrupted said, "Hey, you guys, there's this one woman on the city council side who seems to get it.

She gets that the guy on her side is kind being a jerk. And I think she's kind of reasonable, and I think we can deal with her. Maybe there's a way we can kind of use her, to leverage her good will towards us." So as the neutral party, what we thought is, "Gee, let's exploit that. And let's maybe reduce the size of the group, and get them off on a side bar, and see if they can make some progress," which we did and ended up leading to solving the dispute. So that sort of single intervention, that sort of showing that there was an air of communication on this side, and listening to the other side ended up being very persuasive. So, listening isn't just a nice touchy thing to do, it can be extremely, extremely persuasive in negotiations.