

GAME, SET AND MATCH

THE TEN PITFALLS OF COMMERCIAL NEGOTIATIONS

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Purchasing alliances, price wars, pressure on the profitability of manufacturers and retailers... the conditions are in place ready for the next round of Olympic-level negotiations, which at times also has connotations of rodeo and karate.

This is because the exchanges will be taking place in a context of growing pressure, which means negotiation methods will have to see a step change in terms of professional skills.

Here, in the form of a primer, is a reminder on ten traps that negotiators on both sides should avoid falling into during commercial negotiations, drawing particular inspiration from the world of sport.

LACK OF PHYSICAL PREPARATION

Top athletes spend 90% of their time in training and only 10% in competitions. Why not the same rule for negotiators? Keeping documents up to date, building the negotiating strategy with its various scenarios, lists of positive gains and possible remedies or sanctions, rounds of «war games» . This is essential to anticipating the objectives and arguments of the other party, simulations in advance using role-play, etc.

Victory is to be found in anticipation; but, despite the high stakes and hardening expectations on both sides, the degree of improvisation shown by some players still remains too high... All big players in the sporting world work with coaches, preparers, and sparring partners; but do all purchasing structures or sales departments work like that?

« Victory is to be found in anticipation »

LIMITING THE CHRISTMAS LIST

Having been good, but especially sending a long wish list to Santa: the two key factors, for children, for a Christmas packed with presents.

If there is an iron rule, it's: «the more you ask for, the more you get.» The more threads there are in a negotiation (price, payment terms, promotion, logistics, deadlines, exclusivity, etc.), the greater its chances of success.

In addition, we all have an inbuilt mental brake on excessive aspirations, in the same way that some athletes are psychologically bedeviled by the glass ceiling of existing records. What will happen if we dare to aim high, and ask for three times more than usual? For an athlete, it means an increased chance of medals; for the negotiator, the likelihood of a successful deal.

CONSIDERING YOUR COUNTERPART AS AN OPPONENT

France has always favored a harsh and non-collaborative approach to negotiation; the upcoming discussions on the purchase price won't miraculously transform themselves from a kickboxing match into a post-match drinks party. However, there is nothing to be gained by cultivating excessive antagonism:

the individual across the table isn't the problem; neither are they the personification of the «dark side of the Force.» They are simply tasked by their organization to be an advocate for the interests of their company, and moreover, they are also defending their personal priorities. They might be a distant cousin of someone in the family.

You may not want to spend your vacation with your negotiating partner, but we must overcome our potential displeasure in meeting them, in order to gain the required relational proximity, and a fine understanding of their objectives - explicit or hidden - by establishing a level of trust; something that has served to salvage many situations that have reached an impasse.

FREEZING-UP UNDER PRESSURE

«Doing the deal» is, of course, a serious thing; in a saturated market, it involves a lot of money for both parties, and each meeting weighs heavily. Yet, much like in sport, there is no point in tensing up at the event just at the point when you go out into the stadium. On the contrary, it is essential to relax and, paradoxically, consider negotiation as... a fun and enjoyable activity.

To play their best tennis, a French Open tennis finalist frees their mind of everything else and focuses solely on the game, using, for



example relaxation techniques, meditation, «body scans», and mental projection... it is also instructive (and fun) to see the movie, *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, by Jim Jarmusch, before a round of negotiations: a form of relaxation for the modern samurai.

ASSUMING THE GAME IS LOST

A form of melancholy affects negotiations between certain key accounts and challenger suppliers, who have the impression of running the 100 meters in concrete boots, facing Usain Bolt—the purchasing manager—across the table. This constantly repeated experience still shows that we always have more power than we think we have.

It is precisely during preparation work that negotiators can sharpen their arguments, gain mastery of their files, stimulate each other, anticipate the movements of the counterpart, provide alternative solutions, and develop an iron will... While, at the same time, the dominant player in theory sometimes neglects the humility involved in rigorous training - and can then find themselves flat on their back on the floor of the dojo.

Conversely, if we don't try to influence the balance of opposing forces... they definitely won't be in balance.

NEGOTIATING BEFORE SELLING

The hour of the deal, the fray, the bar room brawl about prices: they will all come; but why start with these? First let's express in broad terms «the business idea»: the commercial proposition. It aims to reveal the main lines of the proposal, so that the other sees the best in it, and also explains how the proposal will meet the corporate and personal needs of the individual across the table.

This phase also requires individuals to put themselves, as sincerely as possible, in the shoes of their counterpart; to consider what is put to them in good faith, and the real or

feigned objections that might raise. This is easy to say, but it requires a real drive to put the usual mindset to one side and overcome the «us and them» stereotype.

STICKING TO YOUR GUNS

It is essential to keep your own fundamental interests constantly in mind along with the principles that underlie them. These are not negotiable, whatever happens, and whatever the level of intimidation experienced. Standing firm on the overall objectives, however, we can be flexible on how to get to them.

For example, if the discussion flounders on the number of products in the catalog, we can find other ways to overcome the obstacle, rather than making a hard-nosed point, that will lead to losing sight of the overall interests of both sides.

Mary Parker Follett tells the story of two sisters who are fighting for an orange, and eventually cut it in half. In fact, one only wanted to drink the juice, and the other needed the zest for a cake. Each could have benefited from what the whole fruit could offer, not just half of it, if they had expressed their complementary interests, rather than pursuing an untenable position (the possession of the entire orange).

GIVING IN TO MANIPULATIVE TACTICS

Authority, anger, deceit, ploys of all kinds, «anchoring», «salami strategies», «yes, but...», etc. ... the list of manipulative maneuvers is vast for negotiations - the equivalent of a questionable tackle.

The antidote is to identify well in advance the gamut of pressure tactics, then, during the meeting, maintain a permanently-on internal radar to detect and reject, using humor, these tactics, right from the start. Otherwise, once the dubious routine has been tacitly

accepted, discussions become much more complicated.

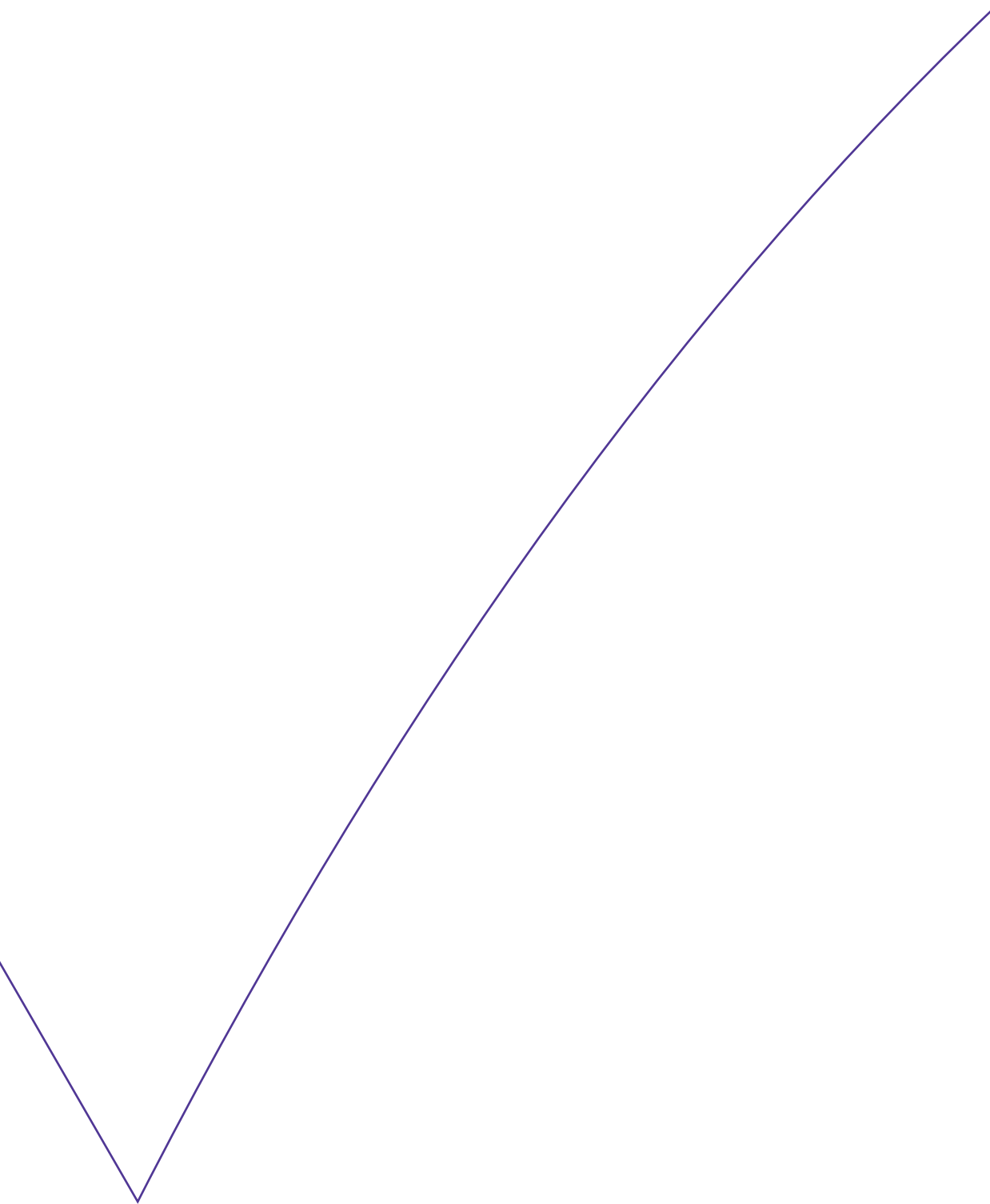
BEING PRONE TO NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

«We cannot not communicate » as family therapist, Paul Watzlawick, used to say. Whether we do it voluntarily or not, we give out multiple signals as a result of all kinds of non-verbal communication, and these signs are decoded in real time by the opposing negotiator.

Athletes learn to control their entire bodies, to relax tight muscles wherever they occur, to connect the workings of the head, lungs, organs, and members to give the best of themselves when the starting gun fires.

Gestures and posture, clothing and appearance, space management («proxemics»), look, voice, breathing; the many communication channels must be fully understood, and are too often ignored in our Western culture, which is based on rational presentation, centered too much on the issues, and not enough on relationships.

« We cannot not communicate » Paul Watzlawick.



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