**The science of the deal**

[…]

A good debate is not a war. It’s not even a tug-of-war, where you can drag your opponent to your side if you pull hard enough on the rope. It’s more like a dance that hasn’t been choreographed, negotiated with a partner who has a different set of steps in mind. If you try too hard to lead, your partner will resist. If you can adapt your moves to hers, and get her to do the same, you’re more likely to end up in rhythm.

In a classic study, a team of researchers led by Neil Rackham examined what expert negotiators do differently. They recruited one group of average negotiators and another group of highly skilled ones, who had significant track records of success and had been rated as effective by their counterparts. To compare the participants’ techniques, they recorded both groups doing labor and contract negotiations.

In a war, our goal is to gain ground rather than lose it, so we’re often afraid to surrender a few battles. In a negotiation, agreeing with someone else’s argument is disarming. The experts recognized that in their dance they couldn’t stand still and expect the other person to make all the moves. To get in harmony, they needed to step back from time to time.

One difference was visible before anyone even arrived at the bargaining table. Prior to the negotiations, the researchers interviewed both groups about their plans. The average negotiators went in armed for battle, hardly taking note of any anticipated areas of agreement. The experts, in contrast, mapped out a series of dance steps they might be able to take with the other side, devoting more than a third of their planning comments to finding common ground.

As the negotiators started discussing options and making proposals, a second difference emerged. Most people think of arguments as being like a pair of scales: the more reasons we can pile up on our side, the more it will tip the balance in our favor. Yet the experts did the exact opposite: They actually presented fewer reasons to support their case. They didn’t want to water down their best point. As Rackham put it, “A weak argument generally dilutes a strong one.”

The more reasons we put on the table, the easier it is for people to discard the shakiest one. Once they reject one of our justifications, they can easily dismiss our entire case. That happened regularly to the average negotiators: they brought too many different weapons to battle. They lost ground not because of the strength of their most compelling point, but because of the weakness of their least compelling one.

These habits led to a third contrast: the average negotiators were more likely to enter into defense-attack spirals. They dismissively shot down their opponents’ proposals and doubled down on their own positions, which prevented both sides from opening their minds. The skilled negotiators rarely went on offense or defense. Instead, they expressed curiosity with questions like “So you don’t see any merit in this proposal at all?”

Questions were the fourth difference between the two groups. Of every five comments the experts made, at least one ended in a question mark. They appeared less assertive, but much like in a dance, they led by letting their partner step forward.

Recent experiments show that having even one negotiator who brings a scientist’s level of humility and curiosity improves outcomes for both parties, because she will search for more information and discover ways to make both sides better off. She isn’t telling her counterparts what to think. She’s asking them to dance.

Adam Grant, *Think Again, The power of knowing what you don’t know* (London: WH Allen, 2021): 104-106.

Tasks:

1. Summarize the differences between a successful and an average negotiator.

2. Comment on the significance of “humility and curiosity” (line 41) in education and learning.