



Too Busy To Negotiate: Lessons For The Overloaded

Having breakfast together at the Westin, a long time negotiator friend shares with me; “Dave the interactive presentation you did at the Kelowna Conference was great. I am interested in Negotiation Mastery From the Inside Out. But, I have to tell you, I have absolutely no time to practice that. What do you do when you have thirty files each demanding your immediate attention?”

So there it is.

Are we too busy to negotiate? Are we slaves at our desks to busyness? Is this negotiation from the inside out just a nice thought that has no practical application? American author Fred Smith claims: “Busyness is the new spirituality”. Huh.

How does busyness relate to business? Me thinks; very poorly. There is good research on the effectiveness of our dealings when we are too busy; i.e. we are not effective, just busy.

When we are busy, we work like machines. At times, this gets us into a zone of great productivity and achievement. Rarely, when taken over a longer period of time, do we see the results of busyness as creative, ground breaking, long lasting or healthy for ourselves or our organizations.

So what is the reason for allowing the “thirty files each demanding my immediate attention” to rule our day? I believe a part of it is our mistaken belief that we will let down the team if we don’t attend to every idea, proposal and demand from within our organization. Am I a hero if I can do it all and more? I look like a dedicated member of the team if my desk, inbox, email in/sent boxes and calendar are full. Or is this organizational and self abuse?

About 12 years ago, my long time business partner, Bruce McIntyre, shared an insight from one of his early bosses; “What our shareholders really need from us is to create one great opportunity, to capture it and create significant cash flow and net present value from it each year.” Not hundreds or dozens, just one great deal or discovery or transaction. One great deal can double your share value. Everything else is just being busy.

In my thirty five years in the Canadian petroleum industry, I learned early that trying to do thirty deals at a time will almost always turn into a mistake that can burn me. I learned to focus on where the real value is and let the others be patient or go away.

In my current Negotiation Survey, I ask the question as to what you would do when faced with thirty files demanding your time. The results to date show;

Work on them all, it takes 30 to get to a few that will work out.	4.5%
Find where the most valuable 5 are and focus most of your resources on them.	52.3%
Meet with the other parties and figure out what has the greatest probability of success early.	31.8%
Work on the deals that include people you respect and trust	25.0%

A combination of the last three may be the most productive. As negotiators, we know the value of our personal and professional relationships in opening doors (or closing doors when the perception of us is negative). We also know the 80/ 20 rule which leads us to figure out which 20% of the potential deals can turn into 80% of the value.

I purposefully included the “Meet with the other parties and figure out what has the greatest probability of success early” option in the survey. A few years back, I founded and chaired the Company to Company Dispute Resolution Council (www.c2cadr.org). Coming from the wisdom of over 70 volunteers across our industry, a key recommendation in the resulting Let’s Talk Handbook was to conduct a Situation Assessment Meeting between the parties. The S.A.M. is not intended to resolve a conflict or make a deal. The S.A.M. is intended for the parties to get together to consider what the conflict really was, which dispute resolution route to choose, what parties should be involved, what resources and what schedule. If we took the S.A.M. concept into our pre-negotiations, strategic thinking and task prioritization, we may find that our eyes are opened as to the value and likelihood of our deals being realized. Think of the number of times you are told, “I need to review this with my team and I’ll get back to you in a week” and that week and several more delays turn into months then only to be advised, “our technical people like these lands and are not prepared to deal.” A solid and timely yes is best, a timely no is far better than a maybe that turns to a “no” over months. If we committed to meeting with the other Negotiator early and face to face to discuss the parameters, the options, each party’s business interests, the barriers, and how we as Landmen may negotiate together, we could create even better deals and greatly reduce the time wasters. We are not paid to be busy; we are paid to be great at creating, capturing and realizing significant value additions.

Another consideration on the question of busyness, productivity and value creation is the issue of the negotiations between you and your team/ organization. All too often there is a group think and “more is better” attitude within business units or management teams. Not very often are there clear and balanced debates as to the merits of committing resources to the ideas and proposals. We are adept at running economics on the risked net present value of a drilling program or an acquisition. I suggest we should be far better at doing the same on what we negotiate.

In Bill Ury’s excellent recent book, *The Power of a Positive No*, we are encouraged to say no most often. Say no to your organization, your team, the other company most often. When you say no most often, you allow space to set your boundaries, allow a wedge of awareness/ mindfulness, assert your interests, visions and targets, be clear and honor yourself and your company and then consider what yes you may offer should you value the relationship. What calls you to creativity and significant outcomes? And what distracts you?

More and more dynamic companies are embracing diversity of opinion. Microsoft now has a Creative Conflict program where they seek dissent and courageous “no’s” to keep them healthy.

Margaret Wheatley, author of *Leadership and the New Science*, told us recently in Calgary; *“We want organizations to be adaptive, flexible, self-renewing, resilient, learning, and intelligent – attributes found only in living systems. The tension of our times is that we want our organizations to behave as living systems, but we only know how to treat them as machines.”*

Let’s not be machines busily “doing” thirty files at once, let’s be innovators, creators and company makers.

So, what do you do when you have thirty files each demanding your immediate attention? What is your choice as negotiator? How will you answer my breakfast partner?

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