

40 years of negotiation skills training according to the Harvard method

The negotiation training offered by DECP in Vietnam, Peru and Indonesia has a long history. At the beginning of the 1980s, the Dutch employers' association AAVN began these trainings, based on the so-called Harvard method. The relationship-oriented bargaining turned out to be successful in all countries, regardless of culture.

In 1981 the book *Getting to Yes* was published, in which Harvard professors Roger Fisher and William Ury present five rules of thumb to negotiate more effectively. They showed that by paying more attention to the relationship between the negotiators and their interests and by broadening the 'cake' that is being negotiated people will usually be able to come to win-win situations. The negotiator must have an open attitude from regarding his interests and those of others.

At the same time, in the Netherlands the character of collective bargaining negotiations changed. Until that time there was a guided wage policy and many agreements were recorded centrally. But in 1982 employers and trade unions agreed on measures to help recover from the severe economic crisis. Trade unions would moderate wage demands in exchange for shorter working hours, which would enable the creation of jobs for the younger workers. These agreements had to be worked out in the regions and sectors, not at the central level. That meant that the collective labour negotiations suddenly became far more complex.

Relationship-oriented bargaining

The Dutch employers' organisation AAVN believed that the Harvard method could be used to conduct collective bargaining differently. "A relationship-oriented negotiation method in which you are open about your intentions and interests is ideal for negotiating labour relations", says senior AAVN advisor Lars Doyer. "With trade unions – or at least your employees – you meet again and again; you must continue with them. Negotiation results that are satisfactory to all parties are therefore of great importance."

An AAVN team developed a course based on the Harvard philosophy, which was offered to the members. "The adage to open everything up was not only revolutionary for many members, but also for AAVN colleagues, who were used to keeping their cards close to their chest", says Dirk Jooze, one of the members of the AAVN team that developed the method and who now works as a trainer for DECP. Initially AAVN organised open training courses, and later there was also in-company training for negotiating delegations from branches and companies.

Opportunities to enlarge the cake

The Harvard principles are now frequently applied in collective bargaining, says Doyer. The focus is on the subject, not on the person. Nowadays negotiators think in terms of interests. They also see more opportunities to involve more subjects in the negotiations and thus enlarge 'the cake'.

Over the years, the AWWN method has been developed further. An important innovation concerns the attention for negotiation styles. These styles can vary per person, but also per situation. The better you are able to recognize this, the more effectively you can negotiate.

At the end of the 1990s, Joesse took a number of training courses in Harvard. “It struck me that the Americans are mainly focused on structure and mapping interests. In the Netherlands, we tend to look more at the relationship and the feeling.”

Strong internationalisation

Meanwhile, the context has changed. For example, the business world is now highly internationalised. Many companies in the Netherlands have an American, Japanese or Chinese parent company, and therefore cultural differences play a role. Doyer: Western European companies are accustomed to real fighters on the trade union side. They have to get used to the idea that in the Netherlands employers are willing to cooperate with trade unions.”

Nevertheless, Joesse has noticed that the principles of AWWN’s negotiation skills training have universal validity. In the 1990s, he went to the former Eastern Bloc for the International Labour Organisation (ILO). For DECP, Joesse now trains employers’ organisations in countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. He was recently in Peru, where he trained not only employers, but also people from the Peruvian trade union.

The training appears to be working in all those countries. Joesse explains, “Cultural differences are sometimes put forward as an excuse, but as soon as you get deeper into people, you notice that we do not differ much from each other. Everyone in every country wants attention and respect. Nobody likes to be ignored.”

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