

## Article Summary of "Negotiating in a Complex World" by Michael Watkins

Watkins argues that negotiations are innately complex. Many current models of negotiation are overly simple, sterile, or static, and so inadequate and unhelpful for practitioners. Watkins offers ten propositions that describe the key elements of negotiation complexity, and suggest ways of dealing with that complexity.

First, negotiations are rarely purely win-win, or purely win-lose, situations. Most negotiations involve a combination of common and conflicting interests, and so call for a combination of integrative and distributive negotiation strategies.

Second, uncertainty and ambiguity are unavoidable in negotiation. "Skilled negotiators seek to learn and shape perceptions through orchestrated actions taken at and away from the negotiating table." (p. 250) The goal of every negotiator is to make the other side believe that agreeing is a better alternative than either breaking off or perpetuating the negotiations. Ambiguity and uncertainty make it possible for negotiators to frame and revise their perceptions in order to reach agreement.

Watkins' third proposition is that most disputes happen in a context of existing or potential "poisonous" sources of conflict, that is, sources of destructive or escalating conflict. Negotiators generally face a two-fold task. They must negotiate the specific issues in contention, while also managing "poisonous" issues or mediating pre-existing conflict.

Proposition Four observes that negotiation interactions are basically chaotic. Still, such interactions reliably follow certain nonlinear dynamics, including sensitivity to early interactions, irreversibility, threshold effects, and feedback loops. Skilled negotiators learn to recognize these dynamics, and use them to influence the negotiation process.

Proposition Five notes that, despite their chaotic appearance, negotiations often have similar underlying structures. Important elements of the overall architecture of negotiations include the structure of the issues, information, timeline, processes and linkages. Negotiators must be able to recognize underlying structure, both in order to choose appropriate negotiations strategies, and so that they can make helpful changes in the structure. "Structure shapes strategy, but skilled negotiators work to shape the structure." (p. 256)

Sixth, negotiations are usually linked to other negotiations, either concurrent, past or future. Past negotiations set precedents for future negotiations. All negotiations affect the relationship between the parties. Skilled negotiators learn how to identify, create and neutralize such linkages.

Proposition Seven states, "negotiations are fragmented in time and movement occurs in surges." (p. 259) Negotiators must learn to manage this irregular movement to create and sustain momentum toward an agreement. Tactics include use of phased agreements, and of action-forcing events such as deadlines.

Because negotiators often represent some group, they are also leaders. Proposition Eight describes the two-fold role of negotiator and leader. Negotiators must "sell" agreements both to their opponents and to their constituents, while maintaining credibility with both. They must manage decision-making within their group, as well as with their opponents.

In his ninth proposition, Watkins observes that organizations are often represented by many negotiators over time. In such cases, skilled negotiators must focus on building and preserving organizational knowledge, and on managing team learning processes. Negotiators must share knowledge. They must learn to integrate their separate experiences, and to distill useful information from complex, multiparty events.

Finally, Watkins argues that negotiation skills can be learned and taught. Key skills include pattern recognition, mental simulation, reflection-in-action, and process management. These skills are best learned through a combination of formal training and structured on-the-job training.