

Introduction

On a cross-country train trip from Washington, D.C., to Seattle, I met Nick, a chatty young man in his twenties. Over microwaved dinners in the dining car, Nick asked about my new job at the University of Baltimore, where I would soon teach negotiation.

“What are you gonna teach ’em?” he asked.

I told him a bit about my curriculum, which integrated the classic negotiation literature and lessons that I had learned through more than a decade of business experience.

“Yeah, that sounds cool,” he said, “but it’s not real. I can teach people what they need to know to save their lives.”

Nick then shared stories from his childhood. When, for example, at the age of nine, his drug-addicted parents disappeared, he stole food to feed his siblings. He then talked about the physical violence he later navigated using his street-savvy negotiation skills.

“Wow,” I said. “That does sound pretty different.”

As the semester approached, I thought more about my conversation with Nick. Would my curriculum be appropriate for similarly street-wise graduate students from Baltimore? How different were our worlds? My experience was diverse, but in such a different way from theirs. I had spent a decade negotiating contracts all over the world. Based first in Manhattan and then in Paris, I had negotiated in French, Spanish, and English with companies in twelve countries, including in the Middle East. I had survived negotiations in small windowless rooms at

Googleplex and at a leading Chinese data company in Beijing, among many others. I hoped that having studied negotiation in the Key Executive Program at Harvard Business School and having a doctorate in conflict resolution would fill the gaps. But I worried, did I have the right preparation?

No, as it turned out, I didn't.

When it came to negotiation, Baltimore felt more foreign than Beijing. Most cities have at least one neighborhood struggling with poverty, crime, and drugs. But I had not spent much time in those areas. I wondered whether classic negotiation approaches might fail, or get people into more trouble, in these environments.

Baltimore turned out to be the perfect place to consider Nick's critique of my approach and the negotiation field more broadly. With just six hundred thousand residents, Baltimore has the second-highest homicide rate in the United States and ranks in the top ten U.S. cities for drug use. It also leads in overdoses, failed infrastructure problems, ongoing racial discrimination, and high incidence of excessive police force.¹ The vortex of problems seems to know no depths. In April 2019, federal agents raided then mayor Catherine Pugh's house while the FBI and the IRS searched her office for ill-gotten gains. By May of that year, the mayor was ousted. In June, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra members were locked out of their performance hall and denied health insurance while the management grappled with bankruptcy. By July, sports commentators joined in, questioning whether the Baltimore Orioles might be the worst team in baseball history.²

It's too easy to blame Charm City's challenges on those holding the guns, needles, and wads of ill-gotten cash. As in most struggling communities, however, the problems originate in multigenerational government policies and business practices. Baltimore's human history began with Indigenous tribes (namely the Susquehannock people) who hunted in the area. Later, colonists built the city to serve mainly as a fort. After a short period of coexistence, fighting broke out, resulting in the colonists claiming the land and ousting the original inhabitants.

Then came slavery. By 1808, the city had become the largest transfer point for slaves and cotton on the Atlantic coast.³ The arts, hospitals, religious organizations, and schools flourished with the money that slavery made possible. Postwar share cropping and segregation deprived Black families, though liberated from slavery, of a livable wage and quality education.⁴ Post-segregation discriminatory practices such as redlining prevented home ownership and access to the capital needed to

launch businesses. While cities like Oakland and Detroit struggle with slavery’s legacies, the slave trade does not define their historical landscape the way that it does in Baltimore.

The hundreds of groups and institutions continuously striving to pull Charm City from this cyclone of problems led *Baltimore Sun* columnist Dan Rodricks to christen it “Our City of Perpetual Recovery.”⁵ I wondered what, if anything, traditional negotiation strategies might contribute to this recovery.

TRADITIONAL NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES IN BALTIMORE

My concerns about the potential poor fit between my planned curriculum and my students’ needs were confirmed immediately. The first week, Nevaeh asked me how to negotiate with the courts to get her kids back. She also wanted to know how to reduce late fees imposed by the IRS. Later that semester, Cornell asked how, as a six-foot-four, 240-pound Black man, he could avoid intimidating white people during negotiations. I had no idea what to say. The questions kept coming:

“How do I convince my brother not to use drugs before family dinners?”

“How should I reconnect with my birth father’s family?”

“How can I get Geico [car insurance] to replace my stolen car?”

I had little personal experience with these problems, and the examples given in our class readings on negotiation discussed corporate deals, hostage crises, and debates between couples over how to spend their extra income. While the authors promised real-world solutions for “all readers,” by the end of that first term, neither the students nor I were convinced. Matila said in class one night, “I just can’t relate to these examples. I’m sorry they’re having trouble with their million-dollar deal, or SUV, or whatever, but I’m not sure this advice works in *everyone’s* world.” Others nodded.

Many of my students lived in precarity. One, I later learned, had spent the winter term without heat or electricity. Several others struggled with post-incarceration challenges, and many carried significant debt. More than half could speak firsthand about domestic violence, homelessness, drug use, or life-threatening illnesses facing their families. Such urgent challenges needed—and deserved—better support from those who understood their lives, so I started having the students coach each other. One night, the class teamed up to help Aiysha with verbal

harassment by her boss. Marsha suggested that Aiysha simply approach her boss directly and tell him that the situation was unacceptable. Aiysha thought about the suggestion and then said, “Well, maybe a white woman can say that, but not a Black woman.” Aiysha was right to consider this difference. Research shows that if you are Black in the United States, your boss (Black or white) may hear a request differently than if it came from a white person.⁶

Learning this, I wondered about the ethics of teaching traditional negotiation pedagogy in Baltimore. The word *negotiate* derives from the Latin verb *negotiarī*, which means “to do business” but whose roots mean “to give trouble to someone.” Negotiations can be good trouble when people transform difficult encounters into opportunities for relationship building and shared problem solving. Might traditional negotiation advice, used in the wrong setting, set my students up for bad trouble? What if advice designed for white middle-class corporate environments could get my students fired or, if deployed in the streets, could lead to dangerous altercations? I turned to local experts for advice. Nawal Rajeh, named Baltimore’s 2018 Peacemaker of the Year for the peace camp she cofounded, confirmed my suspicion: “I can’t train [the kids] to be like me and my world. It might backfire for them. They have a different reality.” To illustrate this point, she recalled a camper who complained about not getting her turn on the jump rope. Nawal said to me, “Now, I would have just asked the teacher to come fix it, but for these kids—out in life—there’s often no one they can turn to. So, I told her ‘Go get your turn. I don’t know how you’re going to do it but go get it.’” Sure enough, she did.

Context matters. The mismatch between worlds became increasingly apparent that first semester. The role-plays included with our textbook became almost comical as students negotiated for Pakistani prunes and pandas for a new zoo. They did not complain. They said they were used to this mismatch throughout their education. As a field, I thought the field could do better. No one suggests that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict might be resolved with tactics useful when purchasing an SUV, so why assume that negotiation tips useful for acquiring pandas for a zoo might help those emerging from cycles of poverty and disempowerment? Unless you teach negotiation from the perspective of the panda, I cannot see the connection. Neither could the students.

In addition to unrelatable examples, the existing literature often discusses people with New Testament names like John, Paul, Matthew, and Mary, whereas our students have names like Shakia, Le’Nesa, Deja,

Teisha, Kolby, and Enechi. The literature's prevalent examples refer to corporate contexts, whereas most of our students work in institutions that tend to be more hierarchical and rigid, such as government administration, social services, education, law, security, transportation, or healthcare. A student working for the military chuckled one night at the reading's suggestion to just ask for a raise.

Between terms, I continued to solicit feedback from students and other local experts. Students from California State University, Dominguez Hills, and Georgetown University broadened my perspective. These conversations sparked a curriculum revision that developed into a participatory action research project and, ultimately, this book.⁷ Their lively stories and hard-won wisdom enable this book to achieve its four primary goals:

1. Help individuals move from precarity to stability.
2. Address significant blind spots in the negotiation field.
3. Introduce a new approach to negotiation that disrupts, rather than perpetuates, oppression.
4. Teach those with power how to use their power to create more equitable futures.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

With these broad goals in mind, this book reaches several audiences. First, it is for anyone seeking social mobility toward a better life for themselves and loved ones. Anyone struggling with discrimination or marginality due to socioeconomic class, ethnicity, language, disabilities, non-cisgender identities, religion, precarious finances, incarceration history, or any other disadvantaging attribute will also find support here. While many of the examples emerge from Baltimore, anyone operating in volatile or fragile environments will find parallels in their own lives. People struggling in places as disparate as Appalachia, Tijuana, the *banlieues* of Paris, the lands of the Cree communities in Northern Manitoba, or even Sonapur migrant camps in the United Arab Emirates often have more in common with one another than with executives navigating corporate boardrooms just miles from where they live.

This book supports social change leaders from these communities. People who successfully rise from the margins can often handle the heat that leadership requires. CEOs, world leaders, and the ultra-wealthy can often get away with emotional outbursts and other behaviors that

would cause many of us to lose our jobs or be thrown out of public spaces. Marcetta, who raised twelve children (not all her own), says no tantrum stops her from getting the job done. She has proof. One of her trainings as a correctional officer involves someone screaming horrible things in her ear while she completes a task. She has no trouble with it.

Not everyone can operate in these volatile environments. Negotiation books, however, often overlook these audiences, focusing instead on those in the middle who are bound by codes of civility. Will they be prepared to handle the intense emotional storms at the highest altitudes of leadership? Rosalind says she will be. A mother at age fourteen, she successfully graduated from college with an accounting degree. Unfortunately, she first used her accounting skills to help a drug lord and landed in prison. Now graduating with a master's degree, she says: "Those from challenging environments have the potential to be world leaders because we're flexible, civil, yet have the ability to be dog-get-down-and-dirty with the best of them." This book supports their ascent.

This book serves instructors of negotiation as well as of sociology, leadership, urban studies, and related courses. Negotiation instructors can now address some of the glaring gaps in the field. Instructors oriented toward social transformation and leadership will find actionable approaches that students can test out immediately. Instructors who assign the activities at the end of the chapters will have students returning to class with new insights and often surprising results. Many of my students paid for their semester with raises, new jobs, discounts, and newfound financial wisdom. Others repaired relationships with children, parents, friends, or exes. Students in their twenties had results, but so too did students in their sixties. It's never too late to start asking for what you need and want.

Current and aspiring managers who want to attract, train, and retain diverse talent will want to read this book as well. Many know the research showing that diverse teams tend to be more profitable.⁸ But how does one keep these teams happy? Understanding the challenges faced by employees from historically marginalized groups prevents what psychologist David Ross called a "fundamental attribution error." This happens when we blame individual behavior on a personality defect rather than the context.⁹ For example, when Karim stopped coming to class, I could have written him off as lazy or disinterested. Instead, I reached out every week, saying that we missed him and wanted him back. Two months later, he appeared in my office, hugged me, and said, "Thanks for not giving up on me." He described how he had been carrying the weight of

his community and its problems. We found a way to get him back in school. Today, he draws on what he learned in class to increase the presence of youth voices in police training, create inclusive city monuments, and revitalize Baltimore's Black Arts District. Of course, managers cannot spend weeks chasing employees like I chased Karim. This book will help managers find approaches that work for their contexts.

When negotiating, for example, managers want to make sure they properly promote the diverse employees they hire. Business professor Paul Ingram notes that “workers who come from lower social-class origins in the United States are 32% less likely to become managers than those who come from higher social-class origins.”¹⁰ Those not being promoted suffer, but so do the organizations and nations. Ingram's research shows that countries with more managers from the lower classes have higher gross domestic product per capita. Ingram also refers to a U.S. military study showing that those with lower-class origins can be better leaders, in part because they are less self-centered, and a study of lawyers in the United Kingdom in which those from lower-class groups proved more proficient and had greater drive. Why would organizations want to miss out on these extraordinary people? My experiences in Baltimore lead me to agree with Ingram that those rising through conditions of socioeconomic adversity show tremendous “grit, courage, and a deep human understanding.”¹¹ Value this grit in them and understand their challenges, and your organizations will thrive.

Public-sector leaders neglect these individuals' struggles at our collective peril. Many people from historically marginalized communities end up working in government or for various social service agencies. Michael Lipsky's seminal book *Street-Level Bureaucracy* urges us not to overlook the lower-level bureaucrats who collectively determine and deliver agency policy as well as decide who is a “criminal” or who is “mentally ill.” They have tremendous discretionary power.¹² In Baltimore, graduate students help decide whether parents get their kids back; serve as recovery coaches, security officers, and halfway-house workers; and hold many administration positions. Our graduates have gone on to work for the Air Force, FBI, and National Security Administration, or pursued law degrees.

Those in positions of power will want to read this book for several reasons. First, being powerful does not shelter anyone from feelings of marginality. Yale University law professor Kenji Yoshino writes about how we all cover marginalized identities in our personal and/or professional lives.¹³ Some of the pragmatic lessons may also be useful. A large

salary does not necessarily equate to personal financial savvy, any more than having an email account means that we use email well. The book supports leaders who wish to generate equitable futures, serving the living as well as the unborn.

Finally, this book teaches the powerful about their power. Wharton negotiation professor Stuart Diamond finds that “the more powerful people are, the less attention they pay to the other side’s needs.”¹⁴ If you want to understand your power, you will want to study those on the brunt end of it.¹⁵ In other words, you may learn more about power from those working in Amazon’s distribution centers than from those working in its corporate offices.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEGOTIATION

Today, if you want to learn about negotiation, you will find trainings offered through business and law programs. Bookstore staff slot negotiation books among the business-success literature, some by business school professors and others by independent trainers who boast of their sales or litigation experiences. Occasionally, a government or conflict program will offer a course in negotiation, but many do not. Most negotiation training resides in the business and law sectors. Here’s why. At the end of World War II, those committed to preventing future wars, including the very real threat of nuclear war, believed in negotiated solutions.¹⁶ Trainings influenced by game theory and mutual deterrence became the tactic of choice for long-term peacebuilding and de-escalation during the Cold War. Negotiations between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev ended the Cold War between the United States and the USSR. The world exhaled a sigh of relief, but instead of bringing peace on Earth, the 1990s brought genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda and several African civil wars. Negotiation tactics alone could not halt the ethnic warfare. Those interested in interrupting these conflicts turned away from traditional negotiation techniques and studied the roles of culture, tribalism, values, identity, trauma, history, memory, religion, and gender in violence. These considerations informed the theory that supports practices of mediation, diversity education, problem-solving workshops, truth and reconciliation commissions, and local-level peacebuilding processes. Many scholars and practitioners interested in peacebuilding left negotiation strategies behind, finding them too static, thin, and impersonal to respond to entrenched, large-group hatred and conflict.