The Devil in the Detail

Key conflict resolution strategies for negotiators

_Human Resources Director Bheki Sibiya gives a management perspective on handling bedevilled wage negotiations..._

American industrialist Henry Ford once stated: "Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probable reason why so few people engage in it." Conflict resolution is probably the second hardest work there is, and it requires thinking – the probable reason why so many conflicts remain unresolved.

A heartening and educational experience for me was the sugar industry's 1996 wage negotiations. It was the first year of a normal crop, after the most recent drought. The employees had very high wage increment expectations and the shareholders looked forward to good returns on their investments.

At the beginning of the negotiations, the parties were 50 percent apart. With the best intentions and efforts, they failed to negotiate an agreement. A meeting involving employer principals was called, and breakthroughs occurred. These included:

a. Recognising that our futures were inextricably linked Union leaders argued fairly convincingly that management tends to be too possessive both of the problems facing the industry and in thinking that they have all the solutions. Union leadership pushed for a "We are all in this together" approach – for teamwork.

b. Acting trustworthy regardless of our negotiating partner's behaviour The need for teamwork was acknowledged, which went a long way towards encouraging the joint problem solving which ensued. The employer principals engaged in this joint problem solving in spite of statements made by union leadership which could have been interpreted as provocative.

c. Working hard to move beyond the negotiating partner's demands, into interests During this meeting, union leaders did more than 70 percent of the talking. Management's role was focused on asking questions and confirming their understanding. The meeting ended with both parties recommitting themselves to finding a solution to the wage deadlock, and management undertaking to engage on various issues deemed urgent by the unions.

d. Structuring the best offer and using the whole mandate to meet the negotiating partner's needs

Subsequent meetings focused on structuring the best saleable offer. Although there were bouts of acrimony, these meetings generally operated in a problem-solving mode. An all-round good agreement was reached and industrial action averted.

The agreement was progressive in that it introduced objective criteria as guidelines for the negotiators on where the settlement area should be. It also covered 'business
transformation' at corporate and industry levels, and recommended that serious consideration be given to a regional and international benchmarking exercise. As always, the devil is in the detail, and when this agreement was applied during the 1997 wage negotiations, the wheels came off, resulting in a costly strike. Fortunately, the vehicle was repaired during the 1998 wage negotiations, which have been successfully concluded. I submit that among the key methods of resolving conflict are to act trustworthy to a hopefully trustworthy partner; to listen actively to one's partner to understand their real needs and interests; to negotiate with one's own principals should the mandate be restrictive; and then to structure the offer that best meets real needs and interests.

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