Chapter 4. Role Negotiation

Introduction

This paper was written in Washington, DC during 1967, my first year as a freelance consultant. It continues the exploration of those issues of intervention depth and relevance to business issues that were introduced by me in "Choosing the Depth of Organizational Intervention." It was first published in the UK in *European Training,* under the rather awkward title (not mine!) of "When Power Conflicts Trigger Team Spirit."

The work was stimulated by two quite different team development experiences. The first took place in a weekend team development workshop for administrators of a school district in Southern California. I was asked by Jim Clark of the Graduate School of Business at UCLA to fill in for another consultant in the second in the series of workshops, and everyone in the group except me had been present in the first event. In those days I was always inclined to be a little critical of everyone's practice, including my own, and I was not too happy with the state of the group as we opened our weekend together. The members were edgy and ill at ease, and as we began, what came out was that they were nervous about repeating the "emotional bath" they had experienced during the first weekend. I saw in the situation an opportunity to practice what I had preached in "Choosing the Depth of Organizational Intervention," and I began by endeavoring to make the group a little more comfortable by setting some norms around self disclosure for our time together. I told them that I expected that they would be as open and honest about their work issues as possible, identifying the behaviors and conditions that helped and hindered them in doing their jobs. Noting that they were uncomfortable about getting into interpersonal issues, and emotions, I said that as far as I was concerned, they needn't express a feeling the whole weekend, if they didn't want to. What we were there to work on what people could do to improve their work effectiveness. If they wanted to express their feelings about that, it was all right with me, but it certainly wasn't required. After testing these groundrules a bit, the group settled down and worked constructively for the rest of the weekend. I went home feeling I was on to something important. It seemed to me that the participants in the workshop had settled down when I acknowledged and worked within their concept of what was *legitimate* in their organizational context: talking about the work, and how it was done. When we started with work issues, feelings that came up around these issues were fairly freely expressed.

The next experience I had that influenced this paper was in Puerto Rico, working with a group of mental health professionals at the University of Puerto Rico. I had worked with the group on a previous occasion, and I knew that they freely and easily engaged with one another around feelings and interpersonal issues. However, with all their processing, nothing ever seemed to change in their working relationships. It seemed to me that they "escaped into depth," as a defense against upsetting the role and authority relationships in the group. I thought I would experiment a little to see if I could get the group to agree to adopt some real changes in the ways they worked together.

I began by sharing my observations with the group, and asked if they really wanted to make some changes in their working relationships. They said they did, so I then took them through a rather elaborate process where they charted their mutual responsibilities to one another: who is supposed to communicate what to whom; who decides, who has to be informed, who reports back—that sort of thing. I then asked each member of the group to identify any aspects of their task relationships they wanted to change, and I suggested that the agreements they made might be more likely to stick if they found some *quid pro quo,* such that each person got something of value in return for what they were contributing or giving up to the other(s). They spent the remainder of the time we had together in serious work on their agreements, and they were pleased and excited by what they achieved. Again, I left the session excited by what I had learned. I felt I had discovered an approach which worked with both "underpersonal" and "overpersonal" clients, calming the fears of the former, and focusing the energy of the latter on the task.

Before publishing my discovery, I experimented with it some more, and I also shared it with anyone who would listen, including participants in NTL's Program for Specialists in Organization Development. One of these was Uri Merry from Israel, who took the method back home with him and ingeniously adapted it for the *kibbutz* in which he lived. Unfortunately, by the time he shared his experiences with me, I had already published my article, so was unable to incorporate his findings in it. The most satisfying thing about having written this article is the large number of people who have used it in creative ways and then shared their experiences with me. Following the article I have appended some thoughts about the method that have been stimulated by peoples' experiences with it. I know the approach continues to work for others, because I am constantly meeting people who tell me it has worked for them. I do not use it much myself, because it does not fit my style of consulting very well. It feels a little mechanical.

The need for safeguards against consultants' tendencies inappropriately to press teams to "get into feelings" probably has passed long since. The method remains a useful tool in a consultant's kit whenever it is appropriate for clients to renegotiate their ways of working together. It is particularly useful now, when such emphasis is being placed on working in teams. For example, the method seems admirably suited to the needs of self managing work groups. It is now of course much less radical to negotiate with colleagues, and even with authority figures, than it was when the method was developed. Now everyone negotiates everything, sometimes endlessly. It seems an inevitable result of the demystification of authority, and the advent of a more egalitarian organization cultures. In such a world, Role Negotiation should have a long and useful life!

Role Negotiation

Getting people to work together in harmony is no easy task. Modern management techniques abound with new approaches to improving the working relationship between employees. In the United States, sensitivity training has had quite a vogue, and various techniques such as the T-group or the managerial grid have been brought forth to encourage managers to abandon their competitiveness and to create mutual trust and egalitarian approaches to decision-making.

Our managers have been urged to change their motivations from reliance upon monetary reward or punishment to more internal motivation based on intrinsic interest in the job and personal commitment to meeting work objectives. Examples are Management By Objectives, and programs of job enrichment. Still other practitioners have developed purely rational approaches to group problem-solving (for example, Kepner Tregoe in the United States, and Coverdale in Britain).

Running through these approaches is the tendency to ignore or explain away competition, conflict and the struggle for power and influence. They assume people will be cooperative and productive if they are taught how, or if the barriers to their so being are removed. These approaches may be called *tender minded* in that they see power struggles as a symptom of a managerial *mistake* rather than a basic and ubiquitous process in organizations.

The problem of organizational change is seen as one of *releasing* human potential for collaboration and productivity, rather than as one of controlling or checking competition for advantage and position.

However, consider the case of the production and engineering managers of a plant who had frequent disagreements over the work that was done by the latter for the former. The production manager complained that the engineering manager set maintenance priorities to meet his own convenience and reduce his own costs, rather than to make sure production targets were met. The engineering manager maintained that the production manager gave insufficient notice of jobs which could be anticipated, and the production operators caused unnecessary breakdowns by failure to carry out preventive maintenance procedures faithfully. The two men aired their dissatisfaction with one another's performance from time to time: but, according to both parties, no significant change has occurred…

Or take the case of the scientist in a development department who complains of overly close supervision by his section manager. According to the scientist, the manager intervenes to change the priorities he assigns to work, or to interfere with his development of promising lines of inquiry, and to check up with insulting frequency to see whether the scientist is carrying out the manager's instructions.

The scientist is actively trying to get a transfer to another section, because he feels he cannot do a proper job with so much hampering interference from above.

On the other hand, the section manager says the scientist does competent work but is secretive and unwilling to heed advice. He fails to let the manager know what he is doing and deviates without discussion from agreements the manager thought they had reached about how the work should be carried out. The manager feels he has to spend far too much time checking up on the scientist and is beginning to wonder whether his otherwise good work is worth the trouble required to manage him.

In both of these examples, the men are concerned with either gaining increased control over the actions of the other, reducing control by the other or both. And they know it. A consultant talking to them about communication problems or target setting would no doubt be listened to politely, but in their hearts, these men would still feel it was a question of who was going to have the final say, who was going to be boss.

And, in a way, they are more intuitively right than any outside consultant could be. They know where the power and influence lie, whether people are on their side or against them. They are aware of those with whom they can be open and honest and those who will use information against them. And these concerns are much more accurate and real than an outsider's suggestions for openness and collaboration.

Knowing Where the Power and Coercion Lie

Does this mean that most behavioral science approaches to business are too optimistic? What is certain is that they fail to take into account the forces of power, competitiveness, and coercion. In this article, I shall propose a method that does work directly with these issues, a method that gets tough with the team spirit.

This program is based on role negotiation. This technique describes the process that involves changing through *negotiation* with other interested parties the *role* that an individual or group performs in the organization. By an individual's or a group's role, I mean what activities he is supposed to perform, what decisions he can make, to whom he reports and about what and how often, who can legitimately tell him what to do and under what circumstances, and so on. Some people would say that a man's *job* is the same as what I have called his *role*, and I would partially agree with this. But what I mean by role includes not only the formal job description but also all the informal understandings, agreements, expectations, and arrangements with others which determine the way one person's or group's work affects or fits in with another's.

Role negotiation intervenes directly in the relationships of power, authority, and influence within the group. The change effort is directed at the work relationships among members. It avoids probing into the likes and dislikes of members for one another and their personal feelings about one another. In this it is more consonant with the task-oriented norms of business than are most other behavioral approaches.

The Fear of Touchy Emotional Confrontations

When I first developed the technique, I tried it out on a client group which was proving particularly hard to work with. They were suspicious and mistrustful of me and of each other, and said quite openly that talking about their relationships was both "irrelevant to our work problems" and "dangerous--it could split the group apart." When I introduced them to role negotiation, they saw ways they could deal with issues that were bothering them without getting into touchy emotional confrontations they could not handle. They dropped their resistance dramatically and turned to work with a will that surprised and delighted me.

I have used role negotiation successfully with top management groups, project teams, even between husbands and wives. The technique can be used with very small or quite large groups—although groups of over eight or ten should be broken down.

The technique makes one basic assumption: *most people prefer a fair negotiated settlement to a state of unresolved conflict*, and they are willing to invest some time and make some concessions in order to achieve a solution. To operate the program a modest but significant risk is called for from the participants: they must be open about the changes in behavior, authority, responsibility, etc., they wish to obtain from others in the situation.

If the participants are willing to specify concretely the changes they desire from others, then significant changes in work effectiveness can usually be obtained.

How does this program work in reality? First of all, the consultant must have the participants' sufficient confidence in his motives and competence so that they are willing at his behest to try something new and a bit strange. It also stands to reason that the consultant should know enough about the people, their work system and their relationship problems to satisfy himself that the members of the group are ready to make a real effort towards improvement. No technique will work if the clients don't trust the consultant enough to give it a fair try or if the members of the group (particularly the high influence members) devote most of their effort to maintaining the status quo. In the description that follows I am assuming that this confidence and readiness to work have been established. Although this is a rather large assumption, these problems are universal in consulting and not peculiar to role negotiation. If anything, I have found that role negotiation requires somewhat less preparation than other team development techniques I have used.

Let us say we are working with a group of five to seven people, including a manager and his subordinates, two levels in the formal organization. Once basic assumptions of trust are established, I try to get at least a day with the group away from the job location to start the role-negotiation process going. A two-day session with a commitment to follow up in three to four weeks is best. If the group is not felt to be quite prepared to undertake serious work, the session may be made longer with some trust building and diagnostic activities in the beginning, working into the role negotiation when and if the group is ready for it.

No Probing into People's Feelings

The first step in the actual role negotiation is *contract setting*. Its purpose is to make it clear between the group and the consultant what each may expect from the other. This is a critical step in the change process. It controls and channels everything that happens afterwards.

My contract is usually based on the following provisions, which should be written down, if only as a first practice step in the formal way of working which I try to establish.

- It is not legitimate for the consultant to press or probe anyone's *feelings*. We are concerned about work: who does what, how and with whom. How people *feel* about their work or about others in the group is their own business, to be introduced or not according to their own judgment and desire. The expression or non-expression of feelings is not part of the contract.

- Openness and honesty about behavior are expected and essential for achieving results. The consultant will insist that people be specific and concrete in expressing their expectations and demands for the behavior of others. Each team member is expected to be open and specific about what he wants others to do *more* or *do better* or *do less* or maintain unchanged.

- No expectation or demand is adequately communicated until it has been *written down* and is clearly understood by both sender and receiver, nor will any change process be engaged in until this has been done.

- The full sharing of expectations and demands does not constitute a completed change process. It is only the precondition for change to be agreed through negotiation. It is unreasonable for anyone in the group, manager or subordinate, to expect that any change will take place merely as a result of communicating a demand or expectation. Unless a team member is willing to change his own behavior in order to get what he wants from the other(s), he is likely to waste his and the group's time talking about the issue. When a member makes a request or demand for changed behavior on the part of another, the consultant will always ask what *quid pro quo* (something for something) he is willing to give in order to get what he wants. This goes for the manager as well as for the subordinates. If the former can get what he wants simply by issuing orders or clarifying expectations from his position of authority, he probably does not need a consultant or a change process.

- The change process is essentially one of bargaining and negotiation in which two or more members each agree to change behavior in exchange for some desired change on the part of the other. This process is not complete until the agreement can be *written down* in terms which include the agreed changes in behavior and make clear what each party is expected to give in return.

- Threats and pressures are neither illegitimate nor excluded from the negotiation process. However, group members should realize that over-reliance on threats and punishment usually results in defensiveness, concealment, decreased communication and retaliation, and may lead to breakdown of the negotiation. The consultant will do his best to help members accomplish their aims with positive incentives wherever possible.

The Process of Influence Bargaining

Each member has power and influence in the group, both positively to reward and collaborate with others, and negatively to resist, block or punish. Each uses his power and influence to create a desirable and satisfying work situation for himself. Most of the time this process is gone about secretly. People use a lot of time and energy trying to figure out how to influence another person's behavior covertly, but since they rarely are aware of others' wants and needs, their attempts fail.

Although in stable organizations, employees can learn what works on others just through trial and error over long periods of time, nowadays the fast personnel turnover makes this primitive process obsolete.

Role negotiation tries to replace this old process with a more efficient one. If one person knows because it has been made public what another's wants or intentions are, he is bound to be more effective in trying to influence that person. In addition, when someone tries to influence him, the *quid pro quo* put forward is more likely to be one he really wants or needs. I try to show my clients that by sharing the information about desires and attempts, *role negotiation increases the total amount of influence group members have on one another.*

The next stage is *issue diagnosis*. Each member spends some time thinking about the way business is conducted between himself and the others in the group. What would he change if he could? What would he like to keep as is? Who and what would have to change in order to improve things? I ask the participants to focus especially on the things which might be changed to improve their *own effectiveness*, since these are the items to be discussed and negotiated.

After he has spent twenty minutes or so thinking about these matters and perhaps making a few notes, each member writes a message for each other member, listing those things he would like to see the other person

1. do more or do better
2. do less or stop doing
3. keep on doing, maintain unchanged.

All of these messages are based on the sender's increasing his own effectiveness in his job.

These lists are exchanged so that each person has all the lists pertaining to his work behavior. Each member makes a master list for himself on a large piece of paper itemizing the behavior which each other person desires him to do *more* or *better*, *less* or *continue unchanged*. These are posted so that the entire group can peruse and refer to each list. Each member is allowed to question the others who have sent messages about his behavior, querying the what, why, and how of their requests, *but no one is allowed a rebuttal, defense or even a yes or no reply to the messages he has received*. The consultant must assure that only clarification is taking place; argument, discussion and decision making about issues must be engaged in at a later stage.

Controlling Defensive Responses

The purpose of the consultant's rather rigid and formal control on communication is to prevent the group from having a negative problem-solving experience and members from becoming polarized on issues or taking up extreme positions which they will feel impelled to defend just to save face. Communication is controlled to prevent escalation of actual or potential conflicts. Channeling the energy released by the sharing of demands and expectations into successful problem solving and mutual influence is behind this strategy of control.

The consultant intervenes to inhibit hostile and destructive expression at this point and later to facilitate constructive bargaining and negotiation of mutually beneficial agreements.

This initial sharing of desires and change goals among group members leads to a point at which the team development process is most vulnerable. If sufficient anger and defensiveness are generated by the problem sharing, the consultant will not be able to hold the negative processes in check long enough for the development of the positive problem-solving spiral on which the process depends for its effectiveness. It is true that such an uncontrollable breakthrough of hostility has not yet occurred in my experience with the method. Nevertheless, concern over the negative possibilities is in part responsible for my slow, deliberate and rather formal development of the confrontation of issues within the group.

The Influence Trade

After each member has had an opportunity to clarify the messages he has received, the group selects the issues for negotiation. The consultant begins this phase by reemphasizing that unless a *quid pro quo* can be offered in return for a desired behavior change, there is little point in having a discussion about it. *Unless behavior changes on both sides the most likely prediction is that the status quo will continue.*

If behavior changes merely as the result of an exchange of views between men of good will, all the better. However, one cannot count on it.

Each participant is asked to choose one or more issues on which he particularly wants to get some changes on the part of another. He is also asked to select one or more issues on which he feels it may be possible for him to move in the direction desired by others. He does this by marking his own flip chart and those of the other members. In effect, *each person indicates the issues upon which he most wants to exert influence and those on which he is most willing to accept influence.* With the help of the consultant the group then goes through the lists to select the "most negotiable issues," those where there is a combination of a high desire for change on the part of an initiator and a willingness to negotiate on the part of the person whose behavior is the target of the change attempt. The consultant asks for a group of two or more persons who are involved in one such issue to volunteer for a negotiation demonstration before the rest of the group.

The negotiation process consists of the parties making contingent offers to one another such as "If you do X, I will do Y." The negotiation ends when all parties are satisfied that they will receive a reasonable return for whatever they are agreeing to give. The consultant asks that the agreement be formalized by writing down specifically and concretely what each party is going to give and receive in the bargain. He also asks the participants to discuss openly what sanctions can be applied in the case of non-fulfillment of the bargain by one or another party. Often this involves no more than reversion to the status quo, but it may involve the application of pressures and penalties as well.

After the negotiation demonstration, the members are asked to select other issues they wish to work on. A number of negotiations may go on simultaneously, the consultant being involved at the request of any party to any negotiation. All agreements are published to the entire group, however, and questioned by the consultant and the other members to test the good faith and reality orientation of the parties in making them. Where agreement proves impossible, the consultant and other group members try to help the parties find further incentives (positive or, less desirably, coercive) which they may bring to bear to encourage agreement.

This process is, of course, not as simple as it sounds. All kinds of difficulties can occur, from bargaining in bad faith, to refusal to bargain at all, to escalation of conflict. In my experience, however, group members tend to be rather wise about the issues they can and cannot deal with, and I refrain from pushing them to negotiate issues they feel are unresolvable. My aim is to light the sparks of team development with a successful experience which group members can look on as a fruitful way of improving their effectiveness and satisfaction.

The Consultant Withers Away

The cycle ends here. Each group must then try living with their agreements. There is always, of course, the occasion to meet later with the consultant to work out new agreements or re-negotiate old ones.

Ideally, the group should learn this process so thoroughly that the consultant's role withers away. To do this, though, they must be so fully aware of the dangers and pitfalls involved in the negotiation process that a third party's arbitration is no longer needed.

So far this has not occurred in my experience. The positive results are expressed mostly in terms of less backsliding between visits than has occurred in groups where I have applied more interpersonal behavior change methods. Role negotiation agreements have more teeth in them.

What are the advantages of role negotiation? First of all, participants seem more at home with problems of power and influence than other interpersonal issues. They feel more competent and less dependent on the consultant in dealing with the problems and so they are ready to work sooner and harder.

Furthermore, the consultant's or "referee's" amount of skill and professional training which is required to conduct role negotiation is less than for more sensitive approaches.

That does not mean that role negotiation poses no threat to organization members. The consultant asks participants to be open about matters that are often kept secret in everyday life. This requires more than the normal amount of trust and confidence. If not, these matters would have been talked about before the group ever got to the role negotiation.

There also seems to be some additional discomfort involved in *writing down* the changes one would like to see another make in his work behavior. Several times participants have questioned the necessity of doing this, because one feels so *exposed* when his concerns are written out for all to see, and there is the fear that others will think them silly, childish or odd (though this never seems to happen). If the matter comes up, I point out that one need not write down *all* the concerns he has, but only those he would like to work on with others at this time.

Of course, role negotiation, like any other process that changes relationships, does pose a threat to the participants. The members are never sure they will personally be better off after the change than before. In the case of role negotiation, most of these fears arise around losing power and influence, or losing freedom and becoming more controlled by others. Particular resistance to talking openly about issues occurs when someone is trying to manipulate another person to his own advantage, or when he feels that he might want to do this in the future. I think this is the main reason participants in role negotiation so often try to avoid the step of writing down their agreements. If things aren't down in black and white, they feel, it will be easier to ignore the agreement later on if it becomes inconvenient. Also, writing down agreements seems to dispel the aura of trust and good fellowship which some groups like to create on the surface and below which they engage in quite a lot of cutthroat competition.

Role negotiation is of course no panacea for power problems in groups and between people. People may bargain in bad faith; agreements once reached may be broken; circumstances and personnel may change so that the work done becomes irrelevant. Of course, these problems can exist in any group or organization. What role negotiation *does* is to try to deal with the problems directly and to identify and use constructively those areas of *mutual* advantage where both sides can benefit from discussion and agreement. These areas are almost always larger than people think they are, and when they find that they can achieve something *for* themselves by open negotiation which they could not achieve by covert competition, then the more constructive process can begin to grow.

Avoiding the Consulting Fees

One other likely advantage of role negotiation is the ease and economy with which it can be introduced into the firm.

One disadvantage of most behavioral approaches to team development is that the consultant's level of skill and experience must be very high indeed. Managers themselves are not confident in dealing with these issues, and because they feel uneasy in this area they reasonably want to have as much safety and skill as money can buy. This demand for skilled consultants on interpersonal and group processes has created a shortage and a meteoric rise in consulting fees. It seems unlikely that the supply will soon catch up with the demand.

The shortage of highly skilled workers in team development argues for deskilling the requirements for effective consultant performance. I see role negotiation as a way of reducing the skill requirements for team development consultation. Preliminary results by internal consultants using the approach have been promising.

For example, one Management Development Manager teamed up with a colleague to conduct a successful role negotiation with his own top management. He reported that his main problem was getting up enough confidence to take on the job. The team development session itself went smoothly. Although I cannot say whether this experience was typical (I suspect it was not), it does lead me to hope that role negotiation will prove to be practical for use by internal consultants without professional training in the behavioral sciences. What then are the main points about role negotiation? Firstly, role negotiation focuses on work relationships: what people do, and how they facilitate and inhibit one another in the performance of their jobs. It encourages participants to work with problems using words and concepts they are used to using in business. It avoids probing to the deeper levels of their feelings about one another unless this comes out naturally in the process.

Secondly, it deals directly with problems of power and influence which may be neglected by other behavioral approaches. It does not attempt to dethrone the authority in the group, but other members are helped to explore realistically the sources of power and influence available to them.

Also, unlike some other behavioral approaches to team development, role negotiation is highly action-oriented. Its aim is not just the exposing and understanding of issues as such, but achieving changed ways of working through mutually negotiated agreements. Changes brought about through role negotiation thus tend to be more stable and lasting than where such negotiated commitments are lacking.

In addition, all the procedures of role negotiation are clear and simple if a bit mechanical, and can be described to participants in advance so they know what they are getting into. There is nothing mysterious about the technique, and this reduces participants' feelings of dependency upon the special skill of the consultant.

Furthermore, role negotiation actually requires less skill from the consultant than some other behavioral approaches. Internal consultants can suitably use the technique without lengthy special training in the behavioral sciences. It can therefore be a moderate cost approach to organization change.

It's important to understand that role negotiation does not necessarily replace other "soft" behavioral approaches to organization change. Work groups can be effective and achievement-oriented and at the same time allow open and deeply satisfying interpersonal relationships.

However, resolving conflict successfully at the interpersonal level can only be done by first attacking the ever-present issues of power and influence among members. Role negotiation does this and provides a sound and effective base upon which to build more satisfying relationships.

If role negotiation is an effective first or “basic” approach to team development, it goes without saying that employee growth means moving beyond this stage into a deeper exploration of integrating work and relationships.

Afterthoughts on Role Negotiation

Many of the innovations that others have made using Role Negotiation have been in the direction of putting more flexibility and openness into the process. For example, Uri Merry (Merry, Personal Communication) found that with *kibbutzim* in Israel, it was offensive to insist on a *quid pro quo* for everything, because people felt they should be motivated to contribute to the good of the community without thinking of a concrete return. In my own subsequent work with the method, I provide for each participant to indicate his or her response to a request for change, using the following hierarchy:

Double plus (++):	"I'll be glad to do it—I didn't know you cared."
Single plus (+):	"I will do as you request, if you can show me how it contributes to the whole."
Open (O):	"I am willing to negotiate a fair exchange for what you want."
Negative (-):	"What you ask is very difficult for me. I suggest we work on something else."

The method has been widely adapted, and it seems quite forgiving of mistakes. Clients sometimes refuse to play, but I have never had anyone tell me they used it and had a disaster. The most ambitious application I know of was a company-wide project Richard Hill conducted in Diamond Shamrock, for which he developed a Role Negotiation workbook. I no longer have my copy of the workbook, and I have lost track of Richard Hill, but his work is reported in (Louis, 1976). I found it interesting that in that project there was a strong emphasis placed on sanctions for failure to keep agreements.