Managing Perceptions in Conflict Negotiations

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The art of negotiation is a unique academic subject. While many subjects have proven formulas, definitions, and courses of actions for specific scenarios, negotiation is quite the opposite. A negotiator has no predetermined equation on which to rely on when faced with a certain type of problem. Instead, a negotiator must study past problems and rely on his or her own experiences and knowledge to reach an agreement. Although there are no set equations or approved solutions to a negotiation, a negotiator can utilize principled negotiation as a system to conduct negotiations. Principled negotiation focuses on relationships and communications to discover interests, create options and maximize legitimacy to ultimately reach a commitment or exercise an alternative. However, there are many moving pieces to any negotiation. Perceptions between the involved parties in a negotiation are one of these pieces that can make a negotiation even more difficult and complex. We propose that face to face interactions between groups in conflict and the effective use of a legitimate police force, which involves the community in policing, can help to minimize perceptions and allow for peaceful negotiations between groups in conflict.

Partnering relationships, like those that an Army platoon leader would need to develop overseas, are much different that an ordinary “transactional business relationship” (Weiss, 2001). While a business relationship may be easy to enter or exit, discrete and founded on contracts, partnering relationships are much more intimate, open-ended, and are founded on mutual trust and respect (Weiss, 2001). Since a partnering relationship is more personal, it is more complex. More risk is involved in a relationship when people’s emotions come into play, and the actions
taken potentially have long term impacts. Most importantly, partnering relationships have a strategic purpose, while transactional business relationships have a tactical purpose. In other words, a transactional business relationship’s goal is to achieve short term goals such as selling a product and making a profit, while partnering relationships, on the other hand, seek to achieve long term goals such as building trust and working relationships. Conflicts amongst different groups from varying ethnic backgrounds are very common in countries where the Global War on Terror is being fought. Therefore, tactical level leaders must be ready to deal with this conflict while they are deployed. A helpful tool in preparing oneself to deal with a specific situation is by analyzing a similar occurrence from the past. The history of Northern Ireland is one such situation which provides a great deal of insight into managing perceptions in conflict and thus, an understanding of this conflict can be useful to tactical level leaders who will need to manage similar situations while deployed.

The history of violence in Northern Ireland spans almost nine centuries. In 1170, the Earl of Pembroke led England’s first military expedition into Ireland. His victories over the Gaelic defenders were supported by the English King Henry II who arrived in Ireland in 1171 and declared himself its ruler and proceeded to install a feudal system and destroy the Gael’s own communal practices (Kelley, 1982). The invasion by England began a long struggle over the independence of Ireland. The emergence of the Irish Republican Army after the Easter Rising in 1916 would eventually lead to the southern twenty-six counties of Ireland gaining their independence, while England decided to keep the six most northern, and predominately Protestant, counties under the crown. All modern problems in Northern Ireland are rooted in this division (McKittrick, 2001).
Negotiations among communities and amongst the police in Northern Ireland have been a source of tension and rivalry but, more recently, also of hope and rebuilding. There have been many cases, especially during more violent times when it was impossible to even get two representatives from rival communities in the same building. Now, there is more willingness to talk rather than to resort to violence, and the result is more partnering relationships, and therefore, more progress. Dawn Purvis, the former leader of the Progressive Unionist Party, stated that one of the biggest problems faced when negotiating between two parties was that neither side would move away from their positions for fear of losing followers. In other words, neither party sought to discover the other party’s interests and, therefore, little progress was made (Purvis, 2010). The result was the use of bilateral discussions and the use of third parties to negotiate. Dawn Purvis felt that this was a huge step backwards in the negotiation process and is an adamant believer that negotiations during conflict are about recreating human images and relationships and, therefore, must be conducted face-to-face. Likewise, Martin McGuiness, the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, discussed the lack of face-to-face discussions with other political parties being detrimental to negotiations (McGuiness, 2010). In one instance, a Unionist party refused to stay in the same hotel as a Republican party while in a foreign country during peace talks. Sir Reg Empey, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, also recognized the importance of face-to-face interaction to build relationships. He acknowledged that negotiations could become very emotional but compared the talks to a boxing match: at the end of the round, both boxers need to be standing to continue the fight (Empey, 2010). He noticed that as talks went on, people who were once sworn enemies began to realize that they have more in common than they may think. These examples all speak to the fact that negotiations, especially during times of conflict, are extremely emotional and the emotional issues must be addressed in order
for any progress to occur. While it is very easy to become fixated to one’s positions, it is a necessity to have face-to-face discussions to build relationships and break perceptions amongst groups. This is extremely applicable to small unit Army leaders overseas. No matter where you are deployed, local nationals, police and other militaries will have perceptions of what the U.S. Army is and does, whether for better or worse. The same groups will also have perceptions of one another and how each group helps or hurts the community. As a tactical level leader, it will be your job to manage these perceptions in order to create working relationships so that progress can be made.

As the Global War on Terrorism continues, Army units in-theater find themselves in less conventional, kinetic warfare and more often adopting a role as a police force. In addition, the Army has the task of training foreign armies and police forces to continue operating after the Army withdraws. In Northern Ireland, police found themselves in a very similar situation. Perceptions, both positive and negative, can form very quickly. While the arrival of the British Army in Northern Ireland was originally welcomed by many as a peace keeping force, negative perceptions were quickly formed and the Army was viewed as an oppressive occupying force. The police were then viewed as an extension of the British Army’s authority and as a biased organization. Presently, the Police Services of Northern Ireland constantly battle to fight perceptions among communities in Northern Ireland. One way they have attempted to bridge the gap is by holding public meetings to discuss problems with the local community leaders, government officials and NGO’s. Each meeting new issues are raised, and updates are given on the progress of past problems. The police obviously cannot solve every issue which is presented, however, these meetings serve as a venue for people to be heard. The police believe this is essential to building a working relationship within communities. As shown by these meetings,
the Police Services of Northern Ireland believe that communication is one of the biggest tools in managing perceptions and bridging the gap between communities and police. The Chief Superintendent of the Operations Branch of the Police Services of Northern Ireland, Gary White, summed up this view best when he said the police will “talk to anyone, anywhere, anytime” (White, 2010). In some cases, known leaders of dissident republican groups such as the PIRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army), contacted police and talked with them under the title of a “community leader.” In one situation, a “community leader” wanted to protest a parade and talked with police in order to make sure it could be done without violence breaking out.

Various ethnic groups exist in both Iraq and Afghanistan and make the area in which a platoon may operate in very diverse and potentially problematic. An understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland, tactics used, and what resulted in positive progress in negotiation will allow leaders to enter similar situations with knowledge and confidence. We presented two points which we believe are important lessons which can be drawn from the conflict in Northern Ireland and applied to negotiations by leaders in the Global War on Terrorism in order to effectively manage perceptions: the use of face to face interactions to build relationships and break perceptions and the employment of an open and approachable police force which allows the community to be involved in policing. These may seem like fairly simple ideas but can be rather difficult to employ. The use of face to face interactions allows groups to see the human side of what they potentially see as an unforgiving enemy. Principled negotiation focuses on communication and relationships in order to get into the circle of value. Face to face interaction is the only way which groups can truly build meaningful relationships and communicate effectively. Any other mode of communication, like the use of an intermediary or third party may increase communication, but does nothing to manage perception which is the root of the
problem which we proposed. Additionally, the Army finds itself playing the role of a police force more and more often. Due to this, you must think of a platoon as a tool box with various instruments to complete the mission, rather than a fighting force whose sole mission is to kill the enemy. By allowing local participation in the policing in Northern Ireland, the Police Services of Northern Ireland were able to gain legitimacy and break their perceptions as a tool of the English government for controlling Northern Ireland. Likewise, Army units must listen to local communities and involve them in the peace making process. This allows units to gain legitimacy for themselves and manage perceptions that people might have of them. Managing perceptions is vital in communicating and building relationships while overseas. By putting an emphasis on face to face interactions between different groups and involving communities in the policing process, tactical level leaders will be better able to manage perceptions and build relationships while deployed.
Works Cited


