

Starting Point

A mobile phone base station antenna, which had been built by a telecommunications company right next to a school and a kindergarten, was met with strong opposition from the parents of the children concerned. According to the company, the antenna was in conformity with all environmental, construction and telecommunication related rules and regulations. From the perspective of the parents however, it represented an unacceptable interference with the living space of their children. Several unsuccessful attempts were made over a period of two years to resolve the controversy. The local health and environmental protection authority then suggested another try. In this framework, the two partners who later created Symbiosis LLC were asked to provide assistance to the parties involved in the negotiation (the two parents' councils, one for the school and the other one for the kindergarten, the telecommunications company and the local authorities).

Our Role

Several hurdles must be overcome at the outset of such a negotiation:

- The relationship between the parties is characterized by distrust, prejudice and blames. Actually, the parties are often reluctant – if not unwilling – to come to the negotiating table.
- The parties live in different "worlds" (as a matter of fact, the "world" of a mother who is worried about the well-being of her children is quite distant from the one of an engineer working for a large company or from the one of a civil servant employed by the local government).
- The positions taken by the parties are diametrically opposed ("The antenna must stay where it is" vs. "The antenna must go"). It seems impossible to find a solution which may bridge the gap.
- etc.

Our role as negotiation managers is not to suggest a solution, but to make it possible for the parties to negotiate together in the first place – i.e.: to create the conditions which enable them: (a) to sit and talk together, (b) to have a meaningful dialog and (c) to take well-founded decision efficiently and jointly.

In this case, the first goal to be achieved was to establish a functioning working relationship between the parties. To this end, the frame of the negotiation and its purpose (i.e.: "to find jointly a consensual solution to the controversy created by the mobile phone base station antenna") as well as time limits and some fundamental negotiation principles were laid

down in an agreement which was signed by all participants during the first meeting. Ground rules were also adopted during this meeting.

During the second meeting, the parties described and discussed their own perceptions of the controversy and its history, their standpoints, their underlying interests and needs. They also elaborated on their understanding of a notion ("caring") which played a key role in this case. And most importantly, they formulated the question which would serve as a basis for their further deliberations ("If the antenna would not be where it is today, how and where would we try to locate it?").

The method for identifying possible alternative sites and for collecting the data which would be required to make informed decisions was defined already during the third meeting. The participants then distributed tasks among themselves, everybody being obviously ready to accept one's own fair share of work. In addition, the parties selected the criteria according to which alternative sites would later be assessed and selected for further consideration.

During the fourth meeting, the parties made a first joint assessment of alternative sites which had been found in the meantime and distributed some more tasks among themselves.

The assessment of all possible alternative sites was completed during the fifth meeting and the parties agreed to select one of them as the preferred option and a second one as a fallback solution (in case the preferred option would later on prove to be unfeasible). Asking themselves the question "who must talk with whom with which goal in mind and in which sequence?" they finally drew a detailed action plan designed to implement the option which they had chosen.

For each meeting we did prepare an agenda, which we sent in advance to the participants. After each meeting we distributed a summary of its results. This document was not like the usual minutes of a meeting: it only contained the points which were necessary for the continuation of the work to be done, as well as the draft agenda for the next meeting. In this way, a kind of "rolling" organisation process was put in place.

Results

In no more than five meetings over a period of less than two months the parties directly involved were able to reach a positive result in a negotiation which seemed at the beginning to be very difficult. (The implementation phase however proved to be much more complicated and lengthier. The preferred option had to be dropped and it took seven months for the parties to reach an agreement on a meanwhile improved fallback solution, which then took two more years to be realized.)

The negotiation itself was rated very positively by the parties:

- The obstacles to dialog, which were high at the beginning, could be cleared.
- The parties developed a working relationship which functioned remarkably well. Despite considerable differences in the way they perceived the problem, they were able to develop solutions jointly and to take decisions by mutual agreement.

- The organisation and structuring of the process by the negotiation managers proved its worth. Despite new hurdles and difficulties, the negotiation process never collapsed.

In our view, the efficiency of the negotiation process and the resulting collaboration between the parties were outstanding. This shows that good planning and structuring can move even the most difficult negotiations forward.

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