



Domination Is a Very Risky Negotiation Strategy

When negotiators refuse to consider others' objectives, they miss out on a much better outcome.

Negotiations scenes in Hollywood movies follow a typical order. There is always someone tougher or smarter and that someone wins at the expense of the other. This combative drama makes things more emotional and more entertaining. But with most things Hollywood, it's not very educational.

Harrison Ford epitomises much of what's wrong with this approach in a documentary I recently came across **on YouTube** where he's attempting to discover why so much environmental destruction is taking place in a famous Indonesian national park, Tesso Nilo.

He has good intentions. He wants to protect forests around the world and he has been dedicating his own time to make this a public cause. There are few causes I value more. But he doesn't seem to have any negotiation training and his all-guns-blazing interview with the Indonesian Forestry Minister leaves one feeling like he actually left with very little.

It is a perfect example of how a win-lose negotiation approach yields much less value than two parties working together for a win-win.

Assumptions

Before we examine Ford's first mistake, assumptions, let me also acknowledge that we are

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making some in this post. We assume that this was the extent of the interview, that nothing happened off camera and the whole thing could also have been edited for dramatic effect. We'll use it in isolation as a case study of some negotiation faux pas and how to avoid them as opposed to an absolute critique of Mr. Ford's negotiation approach.

First, he goes in armed with assumptions. Having spent a "few weeks" in Indonesia looking at the environmental damage of Tesso Nilo by illegal loggers clearing land for crops, palm oil plantations and settlements, he seems to have it clear in his mind that the Indonesian Forestry Ministry is responsible and must be allowing these practices to go on.

Meeting the Indonesian Minister of Forestry, the annoyed-looking Ford sits down and says, "We've been traveling around your country for the past couple of weeks. We have some questions." The minister seems visibly nervous, which is expected given the Hollywood celebrity and cameras looking at him, creating a power asymmetry (he is already the accused) and thus an unsafe space for him to negotiate.

I could imagine the Forestry Minister thinking to himself: "So you have been here a couple of weeks and you believe you understand what is going on? You have some questions? We all have some

questions. Why should I care about your questions? Why don't you bring some answers as well?" Mr. Ford could suggest some ideas, and then ask if the Minister also has some questions and ideas for the conversation. It would also be helpful to discuss the scope of the conversation as well as the intended output/product that they can both work towards together.

Granted, putting someone "on the spot" is what a good interviewer should do, but not a good negotiator. Ford's aim seems to be to confirm his assumptions, not find solutions. Ford was able to use his Hollywood status to gain access and open a negotiation channel, just to waste the opportunity with the wrong choice of approach.

Legitimacy

Ford has also failed to address a glaring question of his legitimacy. At no time does Ford acknowledge that there is no good reason for him to be granted an audience with a ministry. He does not represent anyone specifically and is not an authority on forests, apart from being an advocate for their preservation.

He could have been more specific about his appreciation, while creating a sense of interdependence and positivity, such as, "it is very kind of you to take time from your busy schedule to grant an audience to a foreigner. I am assuming you did so, because, like us, you care a lot about the environment and would like to find ways to improve it."

Aggression

Ford moves from adversarial to aggressive pretty quickly (again we're assuming this video is the extent of the interview). He kicks off his interview with a statement, rather than a question: "In the last 15 years, 80 percent of the Tesso Nilo forest has been commercially exploited. And when you ask many Indonesians why this has taken place, they say, sir, there is too strong a connection between business and politics in this country."

This statement could be true, but if I am on the other side of this conversation, I would be wondering: "So, where are you going with this? I fear you are going to blame me for all the environmental problems in my country and in front of cameras... I need to be very careful from now on to avoid looking bad or making my government look bad. I need to deny any accusations and defend myself." In generating this suspicious internal dialogue, Mr. Ford may have already raised some potential resistance, potentially framed the negotiation as a series of demands and accusations, and thus reduced his chances of generating any engagement

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or collaborative process.

The minister responds by extending a hand to Mr. Ford. "It could be true. You know that we have just started with a democracy. I believe that in the long term, we will be able to find that point of balance." By acknowledging that it could be true and that this is a young democracy, he shares that he is potentially open to suggestions to improve, while acknowledging that changes take time. Notice that he avoids, deliberately or not, asking antagonistic questions such as "How many environmental or humanitarian mistakes did the US make during its early democratic years?" Or "how about the connection between business and politics in your country, Mr. Ford?"

Instead of acknowledging what the Forestry Minister just said and appreciate that change takes time, Ford goes straight into what matters to him. "One project to preserve a peat land forest has been seeking approval for many years. The last step in the process is your signature, sir. Will you sign the paper that will allow them to preserve this critical natural resource?" Mr. Ford could have dovetailed on the Minister's previous comment and shared that he is there exactly to see if he can be of help in moving towards this point of balance when it comes to the environment. The disconnect seems to increase in the communication between them and they increasingly seem to be on opposite sides of a battle.

They haggle and Ford presses him to agree to granting protection for 50 percent of the peat land forest, but the conversation only deteriorates from here.

Mr. Ford does not ask what may be impeding the process, which may not have been the Minister's fault. Mr. Ford assumes that what he said before was true and that the only thing holding back the process is the Minister. It could be right, but it could also be wrong and thus create a fruitless and unpleasant conversation.

Seeming to drive his point home, Ford then moves on to describe his visit to Tesso Nilo, at which point the Minister laughs. Ford snaps back "it's not funny!". Ford immediately assumes his laughter was due to finding something funny. But he could have laughed out of embarrassment, awkwardness or even at Ford's attempt to pronounce Tesso Nilo in a western accent. It is well known that Indonesians are **shy in confrontational situations** and he may simply have been nervous.

He then asks what the minister has done to tackle the problem. The minister, again, trying to explain the challenges, says "we see this every day... this is not America. It is different. We have just started with

reform". Ford, now visibly angry simply asks "so you're willing to lose the battle?" The gulf of misunderstanding between the two of them has now widened towards what seems to be a negotiation death spiral. From here we can almost see that the end is near and that no deal will actually be closed. The minister nods and says "yeah", with another nervous laugh. It's clear that he's lost Mr. Ford's line of questioning now and just wants to yield to whatever he says. If he wasn't nervous before, he most likely is now.

If Ford had worked harder to understand the minister's constraints, his political challenges and the government's inner workings, he could have built solutions with the minister. He might even have offered some of his star power, partnering with the minister to make appearances on the issue or fight by his side. By waving his finger and assuming the worst, he threw cultural awareness to the wind and limited the outcome.

Later in the documentary, it emerges that the Forestry Minister makes good on his promise to protect half of the peat forest Ford had demanded. However, one has to wonder how much further they could have gone together if a less assuming, less aggressive and less combative negotiation had taken place.

*This article is an outgrowth of one of Horacio's recent blog posts to his **Negotiations group on Yammer**, where he follows trends in negotiations and shares his commentaries with the INSEAD student community for discussion and debate.*

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