

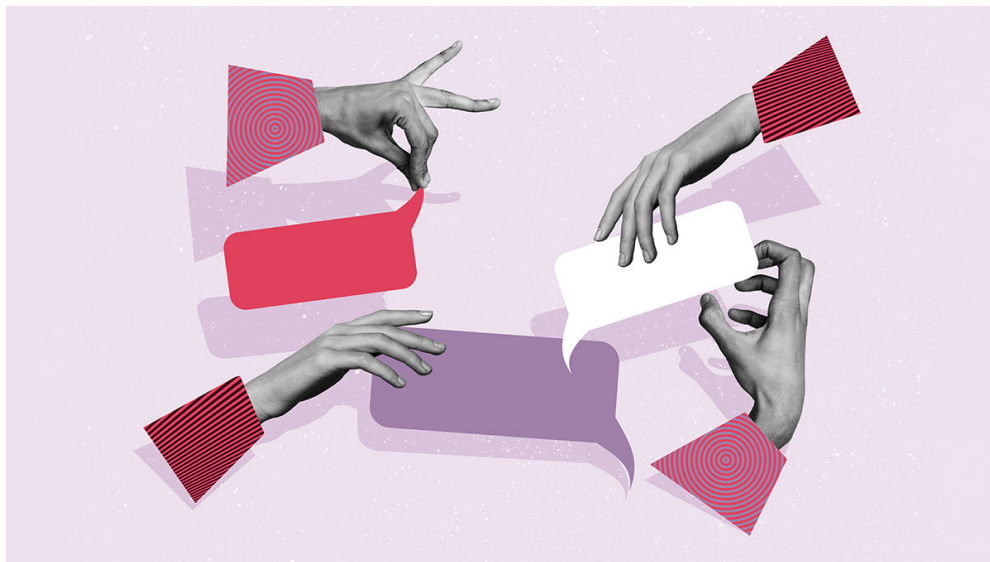


Digital Article / Negotiation Strategies

What Makes a Great Negotiator, According to Research

An analysis of 1,000 negotiations suggests that the longstanding debate between “hard” and “soft” negotiating styles misses the point.
by Remigiusz Smolinski and Peter Kesting

Published on HBR.org / October 23, 2025 / Reprint [H08Y42](#)



Deagreez/Getty Images

Negotiation is one of the most consequential yet misunderstood leadership skills. It shapes deals, partnerships, and careers, yet even seasoned professionals still debate what truly defines a good negotiator.

For decades, conventional wisdom has suggested a familiar trade-off: You can either claim value or build relationships, but not both. Push

too hard and you damage trust; prioritize harmony and you lose ground on substance. Classic frameworks such as *Getting to Yes* have reinforced this tension, contrasting “hard” positional bargaining with “soft” approaches that aim to preserve goodwill.

Our research shows this is a false choice.

The Data That Challenge the Tradeoff

To understand what truly drives negotiation performance, we analyzed thousands of negotiations conducted through The Negotiation Challenge, a global competition that has tested leaders and students from more than 50 countries since 2007.

This unique dataset, encompassing nearly 1,000 documented negotiations, offered a rare window into how goals, strategy, substantive outcomes, and relationship quality interact.

The results challenge the traditional view: Negotiators don’t line up along a single spectrum from hard to soft. Instead, they occupy a two-dimensional space: substantive performance (how much value they create and claim) and relational performance (the trust they build). Four distinct profiles consistently emerge.

1. Integrated achievers—effective and trusted. They secure strong results while strengthening relationships. Their balance of assertiveness and empathy allows them to advocate forcefully without eroding trust. Nelson Mandela exemplified this balance: Through empathy, discipline, and moral clarity, he negotiated South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy while transforming former adversaries into partners.

2. Competitive maximizers—effective but costly. They win big, but often at the expense of relationships. Their focus on victory

damages long-term partnerships and limits future collaboration. Margaret Thatcher illustrates this type: Her uncompromising drive delivered major economic reforms and political victories, but her confrontational approach often alienated allies and constrained long-term collaboration.

3. Accommodating harmonizers—well-liked but underperforming.

They build rapport easily but concede too much. Their desire for harmony leads to weak economic outcomes and strategic drift. Neville Chamberlain exemplified this type: His well-intentioned pursuit of harmony during the pre-war negotiations with Hitler earned temporary goodwill but sacrificed strategic advantage and long-term security.

4. Destructive negotiators—neither effective nor trusted. Their actions erode value and damage relationships. Lacking preparation and control, they turn potential cooperation into conflict and leave both sides worse off. Adolf Hitler epitomized this destructive type: Driven by domination, he systematically undermined trust, destroyed alliances, and turned potential cooperation into catastrophic conflict.

Interestingly, these groups appear in roughly equal proportions. There's no automatic drift toward the ideal type, and no necessary conflict between value and trust. The difference lies not in personality, but in competence.

The Person Across the Table Matters, Too

Of course, negotiation outcomes depend not only on one's own behavior but also on the counterpart's skills. What if the other side plays hardball or treats the negotiation as zero-sum?

Our data capture many such cases, and the pattern holds: Even when facing highly competitive opponents, negotiators who manage to stay balanced—assertive without being adversarial—tend to outperform.

Roughly 5% of participants in The Negotiation Challenge consistently achieve strong substantive and relational outcomes across all partners and contexts. They may not secure the single best deal in every round, but they consistently perform above average on every measured dimension.

The evidence shows that while counterparts matter, mastery matters more. The best negotiators adapt to the style across the table without mirroring it.

Skill, Not Style, Defines Success

The longstanding debate between “hard” and “soft” negotiating styles misses the point. The real distinction lies in competence: between negotiators who can align assertiveness with empathy and those who cannot.

The best negotiators combine strong substantive outcomes with high-quality relationships. The quality of a negotiation relationship is not determined by how much is claimed, but by *how* it is claimed. Fairness, transparency, and respect do not weaken a position—they strengthen it.

Poor outcomes rarely result from being “too nice.” They arise from weak preparation, rigid tactics, or limited ability to create and claim value. High-performing negotiators combine discipline with empathy, knowing when to cooperate, when to compete, and how to balance both without losing trust.

The implication is profound. The long-standing debate between “hard” and “soft” negotiating styles misses the point. The real distinction is between negotiators who are skilled and those who are not—between those who can align assertiveness with empathy and those who cannot.

The belief in a necessary tradeoff between results and relationships is outdated and counterproductive. It discourages negotiators from developing the full range of competencies that make both possible: the ability to create value jointly, claim it assertively, and build durable trust at the same time.

Our ongoing research identifies the competencies that allow the integrated achievers to thrive across both dimensions, and they cluster into four overarching meta-competencies that define master negotiators everywhere.

The Four Meta-Competencies of Master Negotiators

If negotiation performance can be observed, taught, and improved, what exactly should we train for?

Our data reveal four broad meta-competencies that, together, form a blueprint for negotiation excellence. Each represents a distinct yet complementary dimension of performance.

1. Language and emotionality—the visible layer of performance. A negotiator’s language and emotional presence shape their counterpart’s first and lasting impressions. This meta-competency includes clarity of expression, active listening and questioning, and emotional regulation.

Top performers communicate with precision and logic, frame demands constructively, and listen for meaning rather than for rebuttal. They manage emotions—both their own and others’—turning tension into

productive energy. Research consistently shows that well-regulated emotions and empathetic communication correlate with higher joint gains and stronger relationships.

2. Negotiation intelligence—the cognitive engine. Negotiation intelligence is the ability to recognize the structure of a negotiation and apply the right tactics at the right time. It integrates a broad toolkit: preparing by understanding interests and best alternatives to a negotiated agreement (BATNAs); setting the stage and agenda; making and defending first offers; managing concessions; creating and claiming value through tradeoffs and creative options; and using objective criteria.

High-performing negotiators demonstrate strategic adaptability—the capacity to adjust between cooperative and competitive tactics as conditions evolve. In complex, multi-party deals, they also excel at team performance, coordinating roles and maintaining unified strategy under pressure.

3. Relationship building—trust as a strategic asset. Trust and relationship building are not “soft skills”; they are measurable predictors of success. Effective negotiators deliberately invest in rapport, structure discussions transparently, and follow through on commitments.

They are culturally attuned, able to read and respect diverse norms and adapt their behavior accordingly. These habits foster openness, facilitate information exchange, and ultimately expand the value that both sides can capture. Trust, once built, becomes a renewable source of bargaining power.

4. Moral wisdom—the hidden compass. At the deepest level lies moral wisdom—the ethical and empathetic orientation that guides decision-making. It governs how information is shared, how promises are kept, and how fairness is balanced with firmness.

Ethical transparency and genuine empathy do more than create goodwill; they shape long-term outcomes. Master negotiators pair assertiveness with empathy, showing that effectiveness and integrity are not opposites but mutually reinforcing virtues.

What Great Negotiators Do Differently

Negotiation excellence is a leadership discipline—one that can be measured, taught, and scaled across teams. For leaders and their organizations, the message is clear: Negotiation excellence is not a matter of personality but of deliberately developed and continuously measured skills.

Build negotiation skills, personally and organizationally. Many organizations still underestimate how vital negotiation is to their performance. Deals, partnerships, and internal alignment all depend on how effectively people negotiate. Experience alone isn't enough—mastery requires deliberate, structured training.

The most effective approach goes beyond individual learning: plan systematically which negotiation skills are needed where in your organization and ensure that teams across functions are equipped to deliver. Leading firms, including Deutsche Bank and Siemens, are building dedicated competence centers to professionalize negotiation and raise the quality of outcomes enterprise-wide.

Measure what matters. Improvement begins with measurement. Regularly evaluating negotiation skills helps identify strengths, close

gaps, and track progress. Structured negotiation competitions make capabilities visible and create a shared language for learning. (One of us, Smolinski, has also developed a tool, the [Negotiation Competency Model](#), that lists a set of negotiation competencies as well as how to measure them when assessing dealmakers).

Redefine strength. Too many negotiators still mistake toughness for aggression. The data from our competitions show the opposite.

The most successful negotiators across countries, industries, and styles are friendly, respectful, and connecting. They project confidence through fairness and empathy, not intimidation. Roughness doesn't build respect—it erodes it.

...

Great negotiators are not defined by style but by skill—the ability to achieve superior substantive outcomes while fostering high-quality relationships. They are disciplined thinkers, fluent communicators, trustworthy partners, and principled actors, able to create value without sacrificing values. That, ultimately, is what makes a good negotiator.

This article was originally published online on October 23, 2025.



Remigiusz Smolinski is a professor at HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management. He is the founder of The Negotiation Challenge and cofounder of Discurso.AI. His research explores negotiation, leadership, and innovation.



Peter Kesting is an associate professor of Strategy and Organizational Behavior at Aarhus University, Denmark. He is a cofounder and advisor of The Negotiation Challenge and the International Negotiation Teaching and Research Association, focusing on the intersection of innovation, leadership, and negotiation.