

**OPINIONS & THEIR PHILOSOPHICAL
PLACE IN NEGOTIATION**

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“Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, our truth, that may or may not be the truth of others.” **Marcus Aurelius, 2nd Century AD**

Whilst the quote is old, the meaning it conveys is timeless, since it speaks to a truth about human beings. People naturally form opinions on a whole variety of things, and following on from that often feel the need to share their opinions with others. Moreover, there is an intrinsic human drive to *convince* others of our opinion, to get them to see things from our perspective.

Where this creates a problem in negotiation is not the sharing of an opinion *per se*, but rather when one party seeks to impose their opinions on others without considering the outcome required from such an imposition - or indeed, what the opinion is of the other party is in the first place.

Research has revealed some interesting influences on the formation and strength of an opinion. For example, that opinion becomes cemented and stronger where friends and family support and confirm. The 1961 Bobo Doll experiment, conducted by Stanford professor Albert Bandura, demonstrated that children will interact with others in the precise manner that was modelled for them by significant adults in their lives. Furthermore, a more recent study published in the British Journal of Political Science in 2014, found that parents who are insistent that their children adopt their political views may inadvertently influence their children to abandon their beliefs once they become adults. We may conclude from the research that whilst development of opinion is stronger where we have confirmation from valued others, forcing an opinion may be counterintuitive and could lead ultimately to the formation of a strong opposing opinion.



The reason people have many differing opinions is because they have different life experiences, perspectives, morals and values, and strong or weak opinions are created depending on the environment around. To quote Terence: *“quot homines tot sententiae: suo’ quouique mos”* – *“many men, so many minds: to every one of them, his own way”*.

Indeed, no two people are seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling the same thing at exactly the same time, so each person is forming opinions based on their own unique and unreplicable sensory input of information. There is also confirmation bias to take into account, which is the tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses. For example, during an election campaign most voters already instinctively know how they will vote, and they cast around for opinion and facts which support their preconceived opinion.

Whilst it's true that very little can be said with absolute certainty outside the realm of mathematics, even numbers can be manipulated, misrepresented and misused. Negotiation is about two parties arriving at a mutually acceptable position and resolving any differences. Negotiation is not about *who* is right, but about *what* is right for both parties at the negotiating table.

What *is* truth then?, I hear you ask! Moral questions cannot be answered definitively for all possible conditions. Even the ones that seem obvious, like "is it immoral to kill another human?", have notable exceptions in different people's eyes. Truths can be seen as a mere matter of opinion which is subject to an almost infinite amount of variation depending on the eye of the beholder.

Many have tried to understand what is truth. Stanford in 2013 said *“The problem of truth, is in a way easy to state: what truths are, and what (if anything) makes them true”*. What is truth for one person may not be the truth for someone else. Hence there might not actually be any absolute truth to anything, just an individual's perception of any given truth.

How should we apply these philosophical concepts in a practical way to negotiation? What behaviours should a negotiator adopt in order to best capitalise on what the research tells us?

Firstly, enquire and understand. Work with weak opinions to develop them in your favour, rather than force your opinion. Understand the position of opinion, weak or strong, from your counterpart. This could be considered the art of good communication and, therefore, the art of good negotiation. *Quot homines tot sententiae - every man had his sentence. You will never win an argument in negotiation so don't bother trying.*



Secondly, remember that negotiation is a dialogue between two or more people who are trying to work out solutions to their problems. Getting to agreement is in both sides' interest. It's in your best interest to understanding the position of your counterpart regarding their views and opinions, to "get inside their heads" (a fundamental concept that we teach at The Gap Partnership). In doing so, and in testing whether they are confident in their opinion, we may indicate a strong opinion position that is unchangeable. Conversely, if the person is ambivalent and can be persuaded either way, then this may indicate a weak opinion position and give you the knowledge you need to open the opportunity of persuasion.

Thirdly, bear in mind "The Backfire Effect". If you try and force your opinion onto somebody in negotiation when they have a strong opposing or differing views, it's likely that you will be unsuccessful in persuasion and could actually lead to the person sitting opposite you entrenching themselves in their position. In 2006, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler at The University of Michigan and Georgia State University studied this effect with fake newspaper articles. Their findings confirmed their hypothesis that when your deepest convictions are challenged by contradictory evidence, your beliefs get stronger.

Fourthly, ask yourself: what, exactly, is the purpose of sharing my opinion at this moment? Am I trying to change people's minds about something, trying to correct a perceived mistake, or am I looking for an opportunity to show off my superior knowledge? Am I just trying to be right, or am I searching for a solution to get to agreement?

The credibility of opinion depends on the rationale behind it. It can be held by one or many people. In negotiation, it may help you to observe the opinion of others, and through their opinion see that person's truths. This will allow you to negotiate from inside the head of your counterpart - as this is where you should be, *not* inside your own head. Seeing the value from your counterpart's perspective could be the single most important route to getting you the best deal.

Every person has an opinion, so it's in your best interest that in your negotiation you listen and share, not argue and force as truth. It is true that in negotiation if it is not in the person's interests to agree with you, that they will probably not do so. Look after your interests and let others look after their own.

Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but in negotiation choose whether appropriate or not to share and discuss or keep to oneself. Consider the possible responses that may or

may not be returned on expressing your opinion, or your benefits, and give time and space to the opinion of others if you want to work in collaboration.

