

Special Forces Negotiations

How negotiation skills can be your most powerful weapon on the battlefield

Editor's Note: In this column space of *Vet-Advantage*, we will give you insight into both basic and advanced tactical selling techniques that will help you serve customers better than ever before. But let us preface this with a warning. The material in these articles is not for salespeople who are not ready to push themselves harder than ever before. It is for the professional who seeks constant improvement, fresh ways to serve customers, and constant learners who are never satisfied with being average. If this is you, it's great to have you on board. Now let's get to work!

Special Forces Green Beret Major Ed Croot was told by intelligence in Afghanistan there was a dangerous warlord who was setting up checkpoints outside the city. At these checkpoints, the "Warlord of Gereshk" and his 1,000 men would regularly "shake down" and steal from the people coming in and out of town. When not shaking people down, his men would walk heavily armed through the streets providing what they called "security" to the town. While the warlord was not necessarily anti-USA or anti-government, he was still a problem as he was regularly interfering with the objectives of the new legitimate leaders.

Croot's orders were to stop the warlord and his 1,000 men from setting up checkpoints. He would also have to force them to transfer all security authority to the Afghan government. Croot had two choices. He could assemble several hundred coalition forces, and through military muscle, force the issue. Or he could use some old fashioned negotiation skills to meet the objective. Croot opted for option two.

The negotiation

To fully prepare for his negotiation, he decided he must fully understand the culture of the man he would negotiate with. Through his homework, Croot realized that a major part of Afghan daily life is the people's observance of the *Pushtunwali Code of Honor*. One ingredient of the code is known as *Melmastia*. *Melmastia* states that if somebody enters



By Brian Sullivan

your home, the host must show the visitor hospitality regardless of ethnic or religious background. This also means the visitor must be protected from any harm. In learning this, Croot determined that if he could set up a meeting in the warlord's house, he would most likely live through the end of the meeting ... because according to the code, Croot would have to be protected.

- **Negotiation Lesson No. 1:** Study, know and understand the "culture" of your customers and business partners before any negotiations.

After preparing for the meeting, he made contact with the warlord. Because Croot's posture was non-threatening, the warlord agreed to meet with him at his compound/home. At this point, Croot had to gamble. He could show up with several hundred soldiers to protect him should something go wrong in the negotiation, or he could trust his knowledge of the *Pushtunwali Code*. To Croot, it was more important to build the trust of the warlord than it was to show force. In fact, showing force would create a contrarian reaction and most likely ruin his ability to influence the warlord.

- **Negotiation Lesson No. 2:** Preserve an "Attitude of Yes" in all negotiations. If the other party suspects that your intent is for them to lose and you to win, their emotional walls of defense will never come down. So be positive and approachable in every "deal."

Croot showed up with only a few men and a translator. He got out of his HumVee and approached the house while some of the soldiers stayed in their vehicles. The door opened and Croot and his small crew entered the compound. Upon entering the compound, Croot noticed the warlord had assembled 200 of his fully armed combatants. These men were not only assembled to protect the compound, but Croot believed it was a clear attempt to intimidate Croot and his team. Croot had second thoughts about not bringing more soldiers to protect him, but quickly realized that if he let fear control the atmosphere of the negotiation, he wouldn't meet his objective. The team was then directed to the warlord's chamber. As they walked through a dark corridor, Croot's interpreter assured the team that they had nothing to fear because the warlord would adhere to "The Code."

- **Negotiation Lesson No. 3:** Trust your preparation and don't let fear and negative emotion change your attitude. Even when you are scared or feel pressure, remain calm.

The warlord invited the soldiers to sit in a circle and drink tea before they started their negotiation. But as Croot looked over at the warlord, he noticed his attitude slowly going from positive to negative. The interpreter leaned over to Croot and told him the warlord was not happy. He said the warlord wanted to know why Croot and his team came to his house in body armor and Kevlar helmets. Did they not know they would be protected in his house? To him, it was an insult. Now Croot had another choice to make. Taking off his body protection could be a death sentence. But to Croot, the only way to maintain a positive negotiation atmosphere was to trust the warlord and "The Code." So Croot and his team immediately removed their gear. Croot then told the warlord that he meant no disrespect. He also told him he was aware of Pushtunwali Code but admittedly failed in his understanding of the intricacies of it. Once the warlord saw the trust Croot had put in the warlord's ability to protect him as well as Croot's humble and disarming attitude, the atmosphere changed.

- **Negotiation Lesson No. 4:** When you screw up, admit it. Humility is often an effective negotiation tool.

Croot then conveyed his hope to work with the warlord to help create a safer town for people of Gereshk. Upon hearing this, the warlord laughed saying he was happy and relieved. Because at first to him it appeared Croot's team was coming prepared to battle, not prepared to negotiate. Shortly after, the warlord thanked Croot and his team for their effort in understanding the Pushtun culture. To him it showed respect. He also thanked the team, and said he believed the Croot's soldiers' plans were to help the people of Gereshk. And because of the meeting, the warlord agreed to turn over the checkpoints to the coalition and Afghan forces and team with them to create a more secure town. Croot had met his objective, and no lives were lost.

When you screw up, admit it.

So what does Major Croot's experience teach us about effective negotiations?

- Do detailed homework before any negotiation, sales presentation or employee coaching discussion. Your attempt at better understanding the other party will pay big dividends.
- Don't try to overpower the other party. The more force you use, the more they fight back.
- Remain calm if something goes wrong during the negotiation. Lose your cool and you will lose your leverage.
- Use humility as a tool to get a deal that is better for both parties. After all, how flexible will people be with a jerk?

And whether you are walking through an airport or your local shopping mall this holiday season, don't forget to take a minute to thank that soldier who continues to defend our freedom. Because to him/her, giving up or giving in is something that is NOT negotiable. ■

Brian is author of the book, *20 Days to the Top - How the PRECISE Selling Formula Will Make You Your Company's Top Sales Performer in 20 Days or Less*. To learn more, go to www.preciseselling.com.