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Revisiting Ury's Golden Bridge – in an age of hyper-polarisation

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Fisher and Ury's Getting to Yes (first published in 1981 and never out of print) was followed ten years later by Ury's Getting Past No. Both made a significant impact on our negotiation preparation and engagement.

These texts, and others that followed, changed the landscape of negotiation in ways that have been remarkable and enduring. They moved our thinking significantly – from the common view that negotiation is a transactional process to what we would now call a systems thinking based approach.

Fisher and Ury reimagine negotiation as a series of moving and interacting elements, where a change to one element creates the possibility of a cascade of changes to others. This reflects the dynamic nature of many negotiations.

The idea of 'The Golden Bridge' – a tool from Getting Past No

For those of us whose conflict work brings us into regular contact with uncooperative and intransigent parties, Ury's five-step strategy is a strategic marvel. His concept of the Golden Bridge, his step four, draws on the concept of negotiation jujitsu:

- drawing the other side in the direction in which you want them to move by reframing
- stepping to the other side so you can jointly explore the solution
- making it as easy as possible for the other to say yes

Ury explains that:

"you may be tempted to push—to cajole, to insist, and to apply pressure. But pushing may actually

make it more difficult for the other side to agree. It underscores the fact that the proposal is your idea, not theirs. It fails to address their unmet interests. It makes it harder for them to go along without appearing to be giving in to your pressure. And it makes the prospect of agreement seem, if anything, more overwhelming."

"Instead of pushing the other side toward an agreement, you need to do the opposite. You need to draw them in the direction you want them to move. Your job is to build **a golden bridge** across the chasm. You need to reframe a retreat from their position as an advance toward a better solution."

Ury's repertoire of tools also includes his concept of The Third Side. He identifies the first and second sides as the opponents in a negotiation. The Golden Bridge is a vehicle to encourage the parties to walk together aided by The Third side – particularly relevant in national and international conflict.

Ury calls this 'a swarm from the third side' – a critical mass of influence from the community.

These are constructive, attractive ideas. My question is – are they the answer today? Ury's answer is a resounding yes! In support of this in his new book he describes himself as a 'possibilist' – a very attractive description of his belief that since conflict is created by humans it can be transformed by humans.

Exploring the history of The Golden Bridge

Ury himself, together with various commentators on his work, attributes the concept of The Golden Bridge to the Chinese general, military strategist, writer and philosopher Sun Tzu (although numerous historians dispute the authorship).

His military text, The Art of War, written 2500 years ago, contains 13 chapters of simple instructions for preparing and engaging in warfare. He provides a masterful frame for a good outcome:

'The Supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting'

Sun Tzu's text is well worth revisiting. Despite how his work is reported, he does not actually talk about 'The Golden Bridge' (at least not in the translations I have consulted) and his concept is the polar opposite of Ury's.

Sun Tzu is counselling leaders to 'leave an outlet free' so a party facing certain defeat can escape. What Ury has done is to rework this idea to give us the Golden Bridge – an outlet that both parties can use together. He counsels us to help the other party to reframe a **retreat** from their position to an **advance** towards a better outcome. A very different message from the original.

Where does that take us in the age of hyper-polarisation?

Nationally and internationally, we are seeing a retreat to transactional, win/lose behaviour where powerful players display a contempt for working relationships and characterise compromise and bipartisanship as weak. Powerful players are demanding the return to a positional and binary approach. The middle ground is being made unavailable through a variety of means.

Ury remains convinced that conflict can be overcome using the tools he advocates.

However, I think we need to consider 2 more lessons from The Art of War itself:

- Leaving *the outlet free*, as Sun Tzu advocates, is really another version of the BATNA. Our BATNA is our Plan B. It is where we may form other alliances; retreat to the balcony to wait and see (doing nothing, at least for now); focus on making our own defences impenetrable or seek intervention from a regulator or powerful authority. It tells us whether to stay or to utilise what Sun Tzu names “the free outlet”.

  Dealing with bullying and threats requires a strategy that is independent and not reliant on cooperation or collaboration.

  Despite what we are counselled to do in Getting to Yes, we may also need to be hard on the problem **and** on the people – where relationships are so impossibly toxic that seeking to repair them can only be seen as weakness by the other side and an encouragement to bully us harder.

  In my view we have entered the most important Plan B era in living memory.

- The text also comments on the role of chaos as a very deliberate tactic to distract and fragment forces, wasting resources and unwinding alliances. I am not suggesting that we follow Sun Tzu’s advocacy and engage in this tool of war. Rather I am advocating that we strongly call it out so that we are not blindsided by it. At present, the deliberate proliferation of chaos by players who see no downside to the outcome is chilling and dangerous.

We are certainly facing a huge challenge.

Perhaps we need a cameo appearance from Sun Tzu to show us how to stare it down!

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