

Negotiation Summer Camp

Interview Matthias Schraner

I wouldn't even want to bargain over a scone with this man, now that I know I would either have to share the raisins or the bread with him afterwards. Matthias Schraner won't give you anything without a struggle. He was a leader in law enforcement for the central psychological service of the police for six years. In technical terms: chief negotiator. Schraner is considered to be a luminary in the profession of negotiations. Hostage-takers, suicidal or mentally ill people, this man has talked and negotiated with all of these – as far as you can still call it a negotiation when your opposite says “everyone out or I'll shoot.”

Whoever can negotiate a compromise under time pressure, stress and threat to one's own life must be good with children, right? Although I want to, I can't make my son do half an hour of maths a day. And I've been trying for a year. This must be a piece of cake for a negotiation expert, right Mr. Schraner?

“It is”, he says whilst chuckling. He does that a lot during this interview. On top of that he even looks a bit like Richard Gere. I bet you, would there have been videophones at the police, it would have been the reason for his long lasting negotiation success. Just like his seemingly soft Dalai-Lama-Rhetoric in the middle of a large scale police operation.

So with a provocative yet gentle voice of a first class rhetorician who knows that one is listening, he explains that children and criminals often use the same strategy in negotiation:

- Without qualms or feelings of shame they set out their maximum demands: “I want an iPad and a Wii”. Why should they? First they check how far they can go. They can lower their sights later.
- They are consistent and will repeat their requirements over and over.
- They do not show any willingness to cooperate at all.
- They consciously apply emotional pressure whilst negotiating.

Do parents not do that from time to time? Thoroughly irrational, without even wanting it – because we are affected by wanting our children to achieve those things we already had to learn when we were children?

“Yes but children have a right to use irrational negotiation strategies. Adults should actually know better.” Schraner says, followed by a smile.

But before you cry out in shock – putting children and criminals in one box, how rude! – the father of four children explains: “children have to use their negotiating partner parasitically, everything else would be against nature. With a child you hope its negotiating techniques improve with time. You can forget about that with hostage-takers.”

Stay cool

I'm glad my son isn't present during this interview. I don't want him to be more afloat. And I feel a little back-stabbing, asking Germany's best negotiator for advice how to get my nine-year-old boy to try mental arithmetic. But who knows, it might also help me when trying to animate my husband to iron? But first some theory:

- There are two elements in negotiating — negotiation goal and negotiation relationship. The strategy expert knows one of the two will be damaged — at least for a while. Parents fear that the relationship will be damaged permanently, which is why they often buckle at negotiations, making them bad negotiators. When you want to strategize, you have to accept that you either temporarily lose sight of your goal or your child.
- A very important tip: when negotiating, don't shoot your wad all at once. If you start to list all your arguments you lose all authority. As soon as you start justifying yourself in negotiations, it's over. It is way more constructive to build a joint basis for negotiations and to approach your requirements from there.

Got it Mr. Schraner, but what about maths?

Make an offer

"First I have to be ready to give something during the negotiation. Otherwise it's not a negotiation but an announcement. What are you ready to bring to the negotiation table? Ice cream? Support? A smiley that can turn into a trip to the movies?" "What do you mean? Giving? For half an hour of maths?"

I'm irritated. It's almost like going to an oriental bazaar: "What can you give me for this clay vase? What, only 30 Dinar? You're ruining me and my family." However the negotiation expert makes it clear that with this tactic we are not at the end but at the very beginning: "Secondly you should widen your negotiation scope. So you don't demand 30 but 45 minutes. At the desk, without music.

This way you can give the music into disposition during your next step and go from 45 back to 30 minutes. My son will switch off as soon as he hears about the 45 minute demand. Can I recall your first sentence Mr. Schraner? Children and criminals don't show any willingness to cooperate at all. "You have to find the right time to make a proposal for a compromise", Schraner argues, "one of the ground rules in negotiation is: as soon as the opposite party moves you have got to move as well. And: Don't destroy the respect whilst negotiating. Don't ever tell your child: Look, your sister can do it. Stick to your son. And stay future orientated. Forget about the past."

Then he says something so incredible cruel, pedagogical, exciting, driving parents mad, that I can only guess this is what he did with hostage-takers. Matthias Schraner, friendly, quiet and in a very certain tone, says: "It is

like that: I'm always happy when my children don't listen. What are they in this world for? To listen? No, ideally: to learn. When children are not functioning, they learn.

Persists

Phew, mister negotiator, that is a great initial position when a suicidal person stays on the bridge without jumping. But for everyday life with children, especially with a few, that is wishful thinking. How does this man live with four children? How can he negotiate with them whether mobile phones are allowed during dinner (they're not) and then being happy that they learn something for life? How can this man always be assured that he reaches his goal even when he is not?

Three days later, the following negotiation is available as a live recording and can be sent out by the author on demand: "Son!" "Yes, mum?" "Son, from now on I want you to do maths for 45 minutes, without music, every day. As a reward we'll go to the movies in a week."

"Mum!! For real! Why?"

"We can come to a compromise. You go! Any suggestions?"

"Why should we come to a compromise?? Who said that? Dad?"

"No, a nice man who usually negotiates with dangerous criminals. He said I'm not allowed to compare you to your sister, demand more than I actually do and not think about whether this negotiation disrupts our relationship..."

"Mum, can I go play football now?"

"No, my son, you are learning for life here. I'm very happy for you that you're not listening right now because that way I know that everything is OK with you."

"Mum...(pause)... is dad coming home soon?"

"Yes, when we are done negotiating."

"Okay, mum, I'm going to do some maths now. Do you want me to make you some coffee first and you can lay down for a little while?"

That was the best negotiation of my life.

Successful negotiating

Matthias Schraner's four children have learned from their dad — here are some good ideas on how to negotiate with stubborn parents...

- Stay persistent
- Start friendly
- Compliment the parents
- Say what you want — don't beat around the bush: "I want more pocket money."
- Avoid commonplaces: "Everyone else in my class..."
- Avoid comparisons within the family: "My sister already has..."
- Start small: "I just want a piece of chocolate" – then raise.
- Start big: "When I can't have an iPhone, I at least want..."

Katrin Wilkens

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