COMMENTARY

The Art of Public Apology

Recent news got us thinking. President Bush apologizes to veterans about the conditions at Walter Reed Hospital. Jet Blue leaves passengers stranded on a plane for several hours during a Valentine's Day snowstorm; the CEO apologizes in person and the company follows up with full-page apology ads in major newspapers. The new Governor of Massachusetts finds himself apologizing for a large, expensive inauguration, expenditures on new office furnishings and a new Crown Victoria town car, and for calling Citigroup on behalf of a sub-prime lender to put in a "good word." In Europe, the wife of a former Italian prime minister writes a letter to a major newspaper, demanding a public apology for his serial flirtations. Meanwhile Britain and Iran each demand the other apologize for the capture of British sailors. What motivates these expressions of—and demands for—sorrow and regret? In our work helping leaders and groups to reach better agreements, what advice would we give to those who wish to offer a public apology?

BY PAT FIELD

Private and personal apologies, as difficult as they can be, are a necessary part of maintaining relationships. We all apologize to friends or family members when we have done something thoughtless or harmful. In the growing field of restorative justice, apologies also play an important role. Though a perpetrator may not have had a relationship to the victim, the act of apology may become an important part of the community effort to regain balance, increase trust, and restore dignity and respect for the victim, as well as for the perpetrator.

While it is easy to say, "accept responsibility and admit mistakes," it turns out it's not so clear how to do so. Public apologies present researchers and consultants with a series of interlocking and difficult questions:

- What exactly is a "public apology" in a culture of mass media? What purpose(s) does it serve? To whom should it be directed?
- How are public apologies similar, or different from, personal apologies? How does a leader apologize to thousands or millions of people—or to their governments?
- If meaningful apologies are deeply personal and personally delivered, can corporations and governments truly give a meaningful apology?
- How can an individual apologize on behalf of a corporation or government, when in fact, numerous people may have contributed to the problem (and in some cases the people at fault are long since dead—consider recent debates in state legislatures wrestling with the question of apologizing for the institution of slavery)?
- If the "heartfelt" nature of an apology is essential to its meaning, 1) how can personal feeling be conveyed through mass media; 2) can it ever be really heartfelt if the targets of the apology perceive

INSIDE

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the intent to be "strategic" (getting back votes, credibility, customers, or shareholder value); and, 3) can a consultant offer advice on apologizing without tainting the genuine, heartfelt, sincere expression?

- Do apologies "weaken" the offerer? For instance, when an individual (whether a CEO or governor) needs to be seen as strong, powerful, decisive, and capable in order to exercise a role, can he or she afford to make apologies?
- Can public apologies be made without opening the company or government to liability and civil or criminal proceedings? (Many good defense attorneys would say, "Just let me do the talking.").

We offer the following advice about apologies, though we think there is much to be learned about what works, what doesn't, when to apologize, and when not to. In our experience, effective public apologies are:

- Clear and specific
- Personal
- Visible and direct
- Non-defensive
- Genuine
- Accompanied by action

APOLOGIES MUST BE CLEAR

Apologies should be succinct, specific, and detailed. They must be clear about that for which the offerer is sorry. The Massachusetts Governor's first attempt at a public apology regarding office and automobile "upgrades" didn't work so well. The local media reported him saying, "I am so sorry that we all have spent the kind of time we have on what we have spent time on, and I am sorry to have been responsible for that." What exactly was he apologizing for? In order to be clear, he might have instead just said: "I am sorry I spent money and time on my office upgrades rather than first and foremost on the people's business."

APOLOGIES MUST BE PERSONAL

"I apologize on behalf of the Giant Corporation," just doesn't feel sincere, heartfelt, or real. On the other hand, when a high-level Air Force official came to a community dramatically affected by groundwater pollution from an Air Force base, he said in a large public forum: "I am sorry we polluted your water. I am sorry we have not dealt with investigation and cleanup in the way we should have. I will take responsibility for ensuring that the Air Force makes your community whole again." His statement was personal, filled with "I" language—and well received.

APOLOGIES MUST BE AS VISIBLE AND AS DIRECT AS POSSIBLE TO THOSE HARMED

Quiet apologies later reported by the media aren't likely to be felt, believed, or trusted. If an organization's action has caused harm or offence to many, then the apology has to be made as directly as possible to the many. Do it in front of lots of real people, hard as that may be. Look straight in to the camera. Apologize in a physical location that is appropriate. Apologize to real people who you harmed or represent those you harmed. For instance, President Bush recently went to Walter Reed, in front of the cameras, to face and apologize to actual, flesh-and-blood veterans.

APOLOGIES MUST BE NON-DEFENSIVE

Apologies cannot and should not offer explanations (those can come later), defenses, deflections, or blame. Too often, like a school child in the principal's office, the offerer of an apology muddies the waters with excuses. However relevant these may be, they make matters worse and, unfortunately, a poor apology may be worse than no apology at all.

Massachusetts Governor Patrick tried to have it both ways in his apology for making a call to Citigroup on behalf of a business in which he had previously had a financial interest: "Even though I made this call solely as a former board member, and I believe that was clear to Mr. Rubin, I appreciate that I should not have made the call. I regret the

mistake." Arguably, the statement would have been clearer if he had simply said, "I did not think clearly enough about the way the call might be perceived. I should not have made it. It was a mistake. I am sorry."

APOLOGIES MUST BE GENUINE

Perhaps the most important word of advice to any leader or spokesperson is this: if you are not really sorry, for goodness sake, don't pretend to be. Apologies do have important functional value for one's shareholders, constituents, or others. But they cannot and must not be false. The public, at least the American public, can be surprisingly forgiving. But, they can also see through half-hearted apologies, wording that looks like P.R. copy, and "mommy made me say it" efforts. If it isn't felt, it isn't real, and if it isn't real, that will be conveyed one way or the other.

APOLOGIES ALONE ARE NOT SUFFICIENT

Any apologist must determine the extent of harm and injury done (preferably not only to themselves, but to others)

and offer appropriate and "fair" mitigation, corrections, or compensation. So, after apologizing directly verbally and in newspaper ads, Jet Blue CEO David Neelman, stated: "We have begun putting a comprehensive plan in place to provide better and more timely information to you, more tools and resources for our crewmembers and improved procedures for handling operational difficulties in the future." Apologies are a necessary and important step, but often if and only if, followed up by direct, specific, substantive corrections. ★

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THE NEGOTIATOR'S WORKSHOP

When Individual Bargaining Skills Aren't Enough

It is often said that negotiation is a fundamental skill, in business and in life. Yet interventions designed to build these individual skills often fail to produce the desired results. Workshops that receive glowing evaluations too often produce participants who admit months later that little has changed. In part this can be attributed to the difficulty of implementing new skills and breaking old habits.

However, as Professor Lawrence Susskind and I argue in a forthcoming book (*Building A World Class Negotiating Organization,* Harvard Business School Press), such failures also occur because leaders have focused too much on building general negotiation skills—such as identifying interests behind positional statements or inventing options for joint gain—and not enough on addressing strategic shortcomings in how the organization pursues

BY HAL MOVIUS

its goals and structural constraints within the organization that affect its negotiation capabilities at the table.

STRATEGIC SHORTCOMINGS

Poor alternatives. Some firms face poor prospects at the table because their alternatives are poor. Consider the experience of a procurement team for a major computer maker. For a decade the team had cultivated and developed a close relationship with a single "qualified" supplier who had crafted a unique solution for the buyer. When the team went to renew the deal, the supplier demanded a 50% increase in price. Members of the team enrolled in several classes on negotiating collaboratively and took away various pieces of advice, which included demanding objective criteria to support the price increase, listening for hidden interests, and discovering additional sources of value to the supplier. Yet these prescriptions did not produce the desired result: a decrease in price from the supplier. What options remain?

In this instance, the team needed to change its fundamental strategy of negotiating with a single supplier, and focus on improving their alternatives away from the table. When he first heard this suggestion, the commodity manager groaned, "But it would take at least six months to qualify a second supplier and cost us millions." As the discussion continued, however, it became clear that the cumulative cost of the 50% increase would run into the tens of millions. Ultimately, the team decided it had to spend time educating and qualifying a second supplier. When the existing supplier discovered that the team was serious about developing a second supplier, they immediately returned to their original price. "It was a huge pain, but it saved us a lot of money compared with the proposed increase," commented the commodity manager a year later.

Unclear value propositions. Sometimes strategic shortcomings result from larger market or industry trends that make it difficult for an organization to explain the value of its goods or services. Case in point: for seven years in a row a global advertising firm finds itself facing demands for fee reductions from its largest clients. A change leadership team within the company is given the task of hiring a negotiation consulting and training firm to "help us learn to negotiate better terms." The consultant interviews leaders and is struck by this complaint: "our clients don't understand; we are not a commodity!" The consultant also reviews stories collected before the training about difficult negotiations the trainees have conducted in the last year. And he learns that the industry as a whole is still consolidating. "What they need," he confides in a colleague, "is to demonstrate to their clients—quantitatively and qualitatively—that they are not a commodity in an oversupplied market. Until they do that, the clients will keep demanding price reductions, and will often get them."

The consultant proceeded by developing tailored training to raise awareness not just of negotiation skills, but to identify barriers to implementing skills, and to make explicit the link between negotiation and strategic opportunities and threats. He organized a suite of services designed to help the change leadership team 1) identify better preparation practices for the company; 2) move the company toward contractual options that included greater bonus incentives to meet client-relevant goals (like sales); 3) engage leadership in a dialogue about how to support new systems and risks; and 4) use the negotiation challenge as an information feedback loop about their competitive challenge (identifying tangible examples of value added). Skill building was

one piece of the puzzle, but absent other efforts, change was not likely to occur.

Rewards. A third kind of strategic problem can arise when firms fail to create or implement reward systems that reflect their professed priorities and values. It is common for firms to focus on value—for stakeholders, customers, and so forth—but much less common for them to measure value in terms of a balanced scorecard that includes how much the negotiation cost in time and resources, how much risk was mitigated or managed, and the state of relationships at the end of the process.

In one case, a manufacturing firm that had reduced payments year-after-year to a supplier for five years found itself needing the supplier to ramp up production in an environment where the supplier was suddenly in great demand. Unsurprisingly (though it came as a shock to the manufacturer), the supplier felt no strong obligation to help. The manufacturer lost tens of millions in product that it was unable to ship that quarter because of the missing part. The tangible costs and benefits of relationships are seldom documented as well as they should be in evaluations of negotiation success. Negotiators with best intentions and great skills are bound to resort sooner or later to behaviors that reflect narrow metrics, even when they know it is not helping the organization in the long run.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

It isn't just strategy that undercuts negotiation practice. Structural constraints can be just as challenging.

Poorly organized "back tables." Most negotiators understand the importance of careful preparation prior to coming to the table. But in a time-crunched, matrixed, right-sized world, preparation is often given short shrift. Consider the case of a computer manufacturer. Its negotiation process called for commodity managers to work with business leaders to determine scope and pricing targets, and then to go to the table to try to achieve their targets. This meant shuttling back and forth between the supplier and various internal stakeholders to assess whether a supplier's counterproposal involving newly created options was acceptable. Negotiators reported that supplier began to go around them, sensing that the organization had not sent negotiators who were empowered to invent options at the table.

A further challenge then kicked in. Once this back and forth process had led to an agreement on scoping and pricing, the negotiation was turned over to the Legal depart-

> Negotiation behaviors are most likely to change when an organization is willing to go beyond a commitment to training by actively supporting new structures, strategies, and incentives.

ment to negotiate terms and conditions. A whole new set of negotiations was launched, involving a new set of issues (intellectual property, privacy, liability, indemnification, etc.) in a much more positional tone. As the legal negotiation went on an on, both the supplier and the internal customers felt stymied. Each side blamed the lawyers—including its own. For their part, legal insisted that they were protecting the company as a whole from enormous exposure and risk.

In this case, training turned out to be a first step in reconfiguring the internal structure and sequence of the negotiation process. A Global Solutions (GS) team was formed to liaise between legal representatives and commodity managers. A preparation process was instituted, which required the commodity manager and GS member to work together to understand and rank all of the company's interests in advance. Benchmarks were gathered, and authority to invent options was explicitly granted by the Vice President, who was delighted to have the chance to review a strategic plan (a shift from often seeing the deal for the first time when his signature was required, and having to listen to convoluted explanations for why terms were structured and worded one way or another). The company has in the last year run billions of dollars worth of deals through the new process. Training was a key first step—but just a first step. Again, skills training alone would have been unlikely to generate a real return on investment for the team.

Principle-agent dynamics. In the case just described, the company had not empowered its negotiators to invent options, and the role and authority of the legal team was also vague. Therefore suppliers often made "end runs" to more senior leaders to get deals done, demoralizing the negotiation team. But consider problems *across the table* as well. Imagine you have a very good relationship with a long-term client, only to find that the client has been told by her leaders to bring a consultant to the renegotiation. The consultant has promised leaders of a substantial savings and has yoked his compensation to achieving it. Your counterpart looks sheepish but explains, "I've been told to let them do this." The negotiation has now been structured in a way that focuses on achieving a new set of goals (the agent's) that may in some cases conflict with his client's. For example, an agent may want short-term savings whereas the client (and you) prefer operational efficiency and continuing quality of service. In this case, training that focuses only on individual skills is not likely to help overcome the structural dilemma facing the negotiator.

Stove-piped human resource budgets. In large organizations, training and development expenditures are often earmarked for a particular service, such as coaching, or training, or consulting. When a trainer, consultant or coach seeks to provide a more systemic solution that could yield significantly higher ROI, the response is often, "I don't know who you would talk to about that. I have dollars for *training,* only." Even a business leader inside the organization who wants to champion such an integrated solution can find that the human resource budget in his or her organization is not designed to handle such an effort.

What should organizations that want to maximize return on investment be prepared to do?

Authorize an organizational negotiation assessment.

Conducting an assessment involves confidentially interviewing a representative set of negotiators and their leaders. An interview typically takes 30-60 minutes and involves a set of diagnostic questions as well as drawing out stories of recent difficult negotiations. Stories often generate more useful information than even the best open-ended questions, because they contain examples of behaviors and systems in motion, as well as "theories in use" that guide negotiators. Ideally the assessor is also given an opportunity to talk with counterparts of key partners outside the organization, in order to compare how the organization sees itself with how others see it. The assessor can use this information to develop a "diagnosis" of the organization's strengths and weaknesses, with (masked) examples of each drawn from stories. Such an assessment can inform next steps, including coaching, systems changes, new resources, and training. The assessment should include the following considerations, each of which carries a set of questions.

- *A description of the strategic context and challenges.* What is happening in the industry as a whole? Does the organization have strong or weak competition? Is their value proposition changing? Why? Are there new players or coalitions that need to be taken into account? To what degree are the negotiators at the table hamstrung by not having a core value proposition that they can demonstrate (and bet on, as a part of their own compensation)? Do new processes (e-auctions, for example) shape the degree of freedom that negotiators have?
- *Attention to organizational constraints and the opportunities that are being missed as a result.* Do negotiators have the authority they need to invent options at the table? Are negotiators given the time and knowledge resources to prepare effectively? Are there sufficient mechanisms in place to monitor commitments? Are key stakeholders left out of the process or brought in too late to participate constructively?

- *An inventory of gaps in analytical and communication skills that could reasonably be address through tailored negotiation training.* Carefully tailored training that focuses on building skills that are needed for success in the client's environment can complement broader efforts toward organizational change—and generate useful discussions about what needs to happen in addition to training.

Generate recommendations to the organization's leaders

A good assessment should spell out how to create a real change in behavior, given existing strategic and structural barriers. At the strategic level, this can mean describing a new value proposition, a new strategy for building a coalition, or a new way of structuring compensation or risk. At the structural level, it might mean re-engineering the negotiation preparation process, so that negotiators have access to a broader range of stakeholders and experts prior to the negotiation, have increased authority to invent options at the table, or combine two- or three-stage negotiations into one. At the level of individual learning, it could mean providing a model, a language, shared concepts, and opportunities to practice difficult negotiations that involve the specific challenges faced by each audience.

Good trainers often do some of these things in the course of preparing a program. But lasting change is most likely to occur with careful up-front assessment and when leaders commit to supporting new systems and resources. At one level this requires thinking beyond stove-piped budgets for "training" and "consulting" and "coaching." But at another level it means acknowledging that negotiation is not just an individual capability, but an organizational one. If a half-century of research in social sciences has anything to tell us, it is that situations are almost always more powerful determinants of behavior than intentions. Negotiation behaviors are most likely to change when an organization is willing to go beyond a commitment to training by actively supporting new structures, strategies, and incentives. ★

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ON THE HORIZON

CBI to Facilitate Stakeholder Input on Coastal Management

The coasts of the United States are managed under the Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA), first enacted in 1972. Two federal agencies, the Coastal States Organization (CSO) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are considering suggesting updates to the Act, and have enlisted CBI's help in doing intensive outreach to stakeholders.

During the spring and summer of 2007, Ona Ferguson and CBI Partners Jeff Edelstein and Suzanne Orenstein will be organizing and facilitating a series of 11 meetings around the country. These meetings are designed to gather input from a range of constituencies that care about what happens on the coasts. The ideas generated by stakeholders during these meetings will be used by CSO and NOAA as input for their development of suggested improvements to the CZMA and for improving coastal management in general. ★

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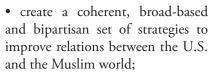
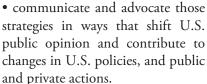# Improving U.S. Relations with the Global Muslim Community

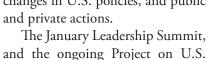## CBI and Search for Common Ground Convene American Leaders

In early January, Search for Common Ground and CBI convened a distinguished group of American leaders with diverse political viewpoints, cultural backgrounds and professional skills for a Summit on U.S. Engagement with the Global Muslim Community. Together, they launched a two-year project to begin reversing the downward spiral in U.S. relations with the Muslim world.

The project on U.S. Engagement with the Global Muslim Community will create new strategies that represent the best thinking of these leaders, informed by in-depth dialogue with the public. The project aims to:

• create a coherent, broad-based and bipartisan set of strategies to improve relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world;

• communicate and advocate those strategies in ways that shift U.S. public opinion and contribute to changes in U.S. policies, and public and private actions.

BY DAVID FAIRMAN

The January Leadership Summit, and the ongoing Project on U.S. Engagement with the Global Muslim Community, have been convened by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and CBI, in partnership with Viewpoint Learning, a public opinion research organization founded by Dan Yankelovich. The project has received generous financial support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Bernard and Audre Rapoport Foundation, and Mr. George Russell, Jr. CBI Managing Director David Fairman is co-directing the project with SFCG-USA Executive Director Rob Fersh.

The project responds to widespread anxiety among U.S. leaders and the public about trends in U.S. relations with the Muslim world. *(see sidebar)*

There is a growing sense that new initiatives are needed on every level, from high-level diplomacy to grassroots, person-to-person contact. Although there are many ongoing programs and projects, there has not yet been a national dialogue across the U.S. about the sources of tension in U.S. relations with Muslim countries and communities, or about strategies that could improve relations while strengthening U.S. and international peace and security.

The Leadership Summit began the process of creating a new set of strategies. Its participants were an exceptionally diverse, bipartisan group including a former Secretary of

DATA & PERCEPTIONS

Polling data show that majorities in most Muslim countries hold an unfavorable view of the United States. This view is driven by Muslims' perceptions that the U.S. is inflaming conflicts in the Muslim world, supporting repressive governments in Muslim countries, and disrespecting Muslim religion and culture. In the U.S., polls show that many Americans hold unfavorable views of Muslims despite limited understanding of their cultures and concerns:

• 45% of Americans see Muslims as violent
• 35% of Americans see Muslims as arrogant
• 40% of Americans perceive Muslims as fanatical
• Even as 56% of all Americans admit they know little or nothing about people living in Muslim countries.

Nonetheless, members of the public in Muslim countries and the U.S. want to improve relations. Pluralities or majorities across the Muslim world wish for better relations but question whether the U.S. does. By a two to one margin, Americans believe there has been too much emphasis on military force and not enough on economic, political, and diplomatic initiatives to improve relations and restore America's standing in the Muslim world.*

State, former members of Congress, a leading U.S. expert and former envoy on the Middle East peace process, Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious and cultural leaders, philanthropists, business leaders, and experts on foreign policy, public opinion, conflict resolution, and the psychology of extremists. *(see below)*

For two days, this remarkable group explored several critical questions: Where do relations stand today? What are the major drivers of tension and conflict? How could those tensions and conflicts be addressed in ways that meet the concerns of both the U.S. and Muslim countries? How could the project on U.S. Engagement with the Global Muslim Community best contribute to progress? The participants noted the depth of mutual misunderstanding and misperceptions of each other's interests and values; the global importance of geopolitical conflict in the Middle East; the underlying challenge of economic and political difficulties in many Muslim countries and communities; and began to discuss opportunities for addressing all of these challenges.

Members of the group committed to further discussion, planning and action to engage the American public and leaders in education and dialogue. Currently, the project team is working with the Leadership Group to develop strategy choices, plan for public engagement, and develop effective language to frame and convey the issues.

During the second half of this year, the Leadership Group will seek input from cross-sections of the American public, and will reach out to leaders of key constituencies--in foreign policy, electoral politics, business, media, and religious communities--to seek their ideas on ways to improve relations. In the fall, the Leadership Group will frame key challenges, choices and recommendations for improving relations.

The Group will release a Report early in 2008, seeking substantial media coverage. During 2008, Leadership Group members will brief decision makers and opinion makers across the country. The project team will also collaborate with public affairs groups to disseminate the Report and supporting materials widely across America. ★

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* Polling data on Muslim perceptions from the Gallup Poll of the Muslim World; data on U.S. perceptions from Public Agenda; both presented at the Leadership Summit on U.S. Engagement with the Muslim World, Pocantico, NY, January 8, 2007.

Project on U.S. Engagement with the Global Muslim Community
Leadership Summit Participants

Madeleine Albright Principal, The Albright Group; Former US Secretary of State

Steve Bartlett President, Financial Services Roundtable; Former US Representative; Former Mayor of Dallas, Texas

Paul Brest President, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Stephen Covey Co-Founder, Vice Chairman, Franklin-Covey; Writer, speaker, and academic

Marc Gopin James H. Laue Professor of World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution; Director, Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University

Stephen Heintz President, Rockefeller Brothers Fund

Shamil Idriss (co-facilitator) Acting Director, Office of Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations

Daisy Khan Executive Director, American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA)

Richard Land President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, Southern Baptist Convention; Member, US Commission on International Religious Freedom

John Marks President and Founder, Search for Common Ground

Susan Collin Marks Senior Vice President, Search for Common Ground; Author, Watching the Wind: Conflict Resolution during South Africa's Transition to Democracy

Sayyeda Mirza-Jafri Program Manger, One Nation Project, East-West Institute

Dalia Mogahed Executive Director of Gallup's Center for Muslim Studies, The Gallup Organization; Co-author with John Esposito of Can You Hear Me?: Listening to the Voices of a Billion Muslims

Vali Nasr Professor, Naval Post-Graduate School; Adjunct Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign Relations

Feisal Abdul Rauf Imam, Masjid al-Farah in New York City; Chairman, Cordoba Initiative; author of What's Right with Islam Is What's Right with America

Dennis Ross Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Studies; Former US Special Middle East Envoy and Negotiator

George Russell, Jr. Chairman of the Board, East-West Institute; Chair, The Threshold Group

S. Abdallah Schleifer Washington Bureau Chief, Al-Arabiya News Channel

Jessica Stern Lecturer in Public Policy (terrorism), Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Mustapha Tlili Founder and Director, Dialogues: Islamic World-U.S.-The West; Senior Fellow, Remarque Institute of NYU

William Ury (co-facilitator) Harvard Global Negotiation Project; Co-author of Getting to Yes

Vin Weber CEO, Clark and Weinstock; Chairman, National Endowment for Democracy (NED); Former US Representative

Daniel Yankelovich Chairman, Public Agenda; Author

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