

Post #7: How to negotiate with power?

Watch Anthony's video [here!](#)



Why negotiate with power?

The philosophy of popular education - to advance a cause of collective interest through the collective organization of those first concerned - leads, after a phase of awareness-raising actions and the construction of demands, to **confronting the powers that be** to make demands succeed, to **transform social situations**.

"Power" here refers to public or private individuals or institutions with the ability to modify a social situation. This could be a company, a local authority, a public service or a large landowner.

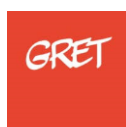
The very principle of negotiating with the authorities, and the actual outcome of these negotiations, are potentially divisive issues. We can hope that this phase of negotiations goes "well" and doesn't upset anyone. We can also prepare for these negotiations.

Analyze the situation

1. Clarify claims

Moving from a cause to defend, often presented as an ideal or a distant goal, to concrete demands is a difficult step. It's a question of **moving from the register of shared values to the register of a shared strategy**: what are the next steps in advancing a cause? Should we limit ourselves to small demands, at the risk of being instrumentalized by those in power, or, on the contrary, demand the impossible, at the risk of certain failure?

Clarifying concrete demands on the basis of a general cause often means **opening up an internal conflict** between the right and left wings of a movement with demands. By not opening up this conflict before going further, we run the risk of giving part of the movement the impression of having been cheated and manipulated, once we reach the negotiation stage.



How to clarify claims? How to make these internal choices? I refer you here to the post: How to run a meeting? The important idea here is that it's generally worse, for the longevity of a movement, to avoid internal discussions on these divisive subjects.

2. Targeting decision-makers

Who do we want to meet at the negotiating table? For a multinational, for example, is it the head of the local unit? The national representative? The international CEO? The shareholders? This choice will undoubtedly depend on the demands made: **the people targeted must have the power to accede to the demands** made of them. If they don't have enough power, the negotiations won't succeed; if they have too much, they risk ignoring the request for negotiations.

Once you've targeted your contacts, the next step is to **focus on them** and investigate. What **interest** do these contacts have in agreeing to the demands put to them? If they have none, the negotiation will be difficult! But that's very rare. If you put yourself in the head of the decision-maker, you'll often find that he or she has a personal interest in satisfying your demands, which may be to improve his or her image or to act on a cause at a lower cost, for example. Going along with the decision-maker obviously makes negotiation much easier.

Let's also **look for the weak points** in decision-makers, and we'll find them. It can be difficult, even for those in power, to censor an idea, a just cause or a necessary action, or to clarify their opposition to a project. Those in power often cannot afford to damage their image in the eyes of a section of the population.

Playing together

3. Expand the movement

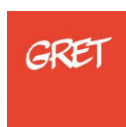
If it's possible to ignore the demands of an association, it's more difficult to ignore the mobilization of a broad coalition of social actors. Negotiating with the authorities means first **and foremost negotiating with allies** - sometimes allies of circumstance - **to rally to your cause**.

This alliance will be all the more powerful if it is made up of members from **different socio-cultural fields**: social, economic, religious, institutional... Rallying mayors, business leaders, priests or immams will have a guaranteed effect on negotiations.

The idea here is to **identify formal or informal leaders** in each of the sectors in which you're looking for alliances, and give them the task of **rallying their network to your cause**. This will work if your cause is also theirs. This organizational work often involves **convincing** these partners one by one. It's time-consuming, but also exhilarating: you feel stronger with every member you win over. And it's far more effective for a cause to be championed by those directly concerned, rather than by institutional intermediaries.

4. Publicize the negotiation

The more public the negotiations, the more difficult it will be for those in power to ignore the demands being made. Obtaining a meeting with decision-makers can be seen as a victory in itself, and the outcome of this meeting can be full of hope. The key is to publicize this victory and this hope, even before the meeting.



En partenariat avec



There's nothing like publicizing the cause. A suitable popular education method here is the word carrier: this involves collecting responses from passers-by to a question posted in large format in the public space, and then displaying the answers. In no time at all, this method creates a public debate on the cause you wish to defend.

The aim here is to bring a negotiation with the authorities out of the shadows. And if this meeting is a failure from the negotiation point of view, publicizing this failure can be very effective in mobilizing a wider audience.

The art of compromise

5. Defining victory

In the end, the feeling of failure or success depends as much on the position of power as on your own: it's enough to have very low demands to achieve victory, or to have very high demands to fail. Negotiating with those in power means first of all negotiating with your allies **what a victory would look like**. Being satisfied with too little is not very mobilizing, nor is demanding the impossible.

It's a question of sharing this strategic issue with our allies, i.e. determining collectively, in the light of the chosen demands, **what will be deemed sufficient and acceptable as the outcome of** the negotiations. Conducting these internal negotiations is already advancing the cause, as they can strengthen the current alliance and future mobilizations. Facilitating these debates is a crucial point in future negotiations, as they will give legitimacy and strength to the people who will be negotiating.

6. Preparing for negotiation

Negotiation requires practice. There's nothing like **role-playing**: give the role of decision-maker to some, the role of negotiator to others, and improvise the negotiation scene. Debrief with all the members present, then repeat until everyone is satisfied.

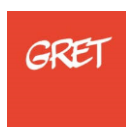
This exercise will enable you to recall, clarify and prioritize the elements to be included in the negotiation: the interests and weaknesses of the decision-makers, the demands made, the composition of the alliance making these demands, the media coverage of the negotiation, etc.

These scenarios will also be an opportunity to put yourself in the shoes of power, and thus demystify it, which is useful for the people who will be carrying out the negotiation, but also to highlight the way in which the negotiation is carried out: tone of voice, body language, choice of seats around the table, eye contact, and so on.

Capitalize on this negotiation

7. Celebrating victory

The success of a negotiation depends very much on the choice of demands made. To advance a cause, it is more motivating to have victories than defeats, and this should guide the choice of the height of the demands made. And **these victories must be known**, first and foremost to the people who achieved them!



What differentiates a victory from a simple agreement with the authorities is the way it is **celebrated**. The stronger and more memorable the celebration, the more the negotiation will be seen as a victory.

Celebrating a victory means organizing a **festive and public event**, proclaiming the demands that have been met and allowing us to replay the game that led to this victory, with **stories of** the different stages of the negotiations told by the people who experienced them.

This is just the beginning, let's keep going...

The best way to mobilize people for the next round of negotiations is to **build on previous victories**, notably by staging celebrations. The idea here is to **keep track of** previous celebrations, whether through photos, articles, films or exhibitions, or by once again calling on the testimonies of those who experienced them.

Inviting those involved in this victory to a festive debriefing gives us the opportunity to imagine together what the **next demands** might be, and the next actions to publicize them!

Further information

- The [documentary](#) produced by SCOP Le Contrepied on the "porte de parole", a device for debating in the public space, by questioning passers-by.
- [A guide for every word-carrier](#), designed to be put into practice as soon as you've finished reading it!
- A [free introduction to Community Organizing, with registration](#), offered by Organisez-vous
- Saul Alinsky's 1972 interview with Playboy magazine, [in English](#) and [French](#)

