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The Rhythm of the Deal: Negotiation as a Dance

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ESMT WORKING PAPER

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The Rhythm of the Deal: Negotiation as a Dance

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Abstract

The Rhythm of the Deal: Negotiation as a Dance

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In all the literature on the theory and practice of negotiation, the governing metaphor remains consistently one of war or fighting. This is true not only for tactical schools of power-based negotiation, but even for more constructive, interest-based approaches. Our language is infused with talk of tactics, flanks, concessions, gaining ground and winning.

This article explores the possible consequences of abandoning this picture in favor of the far too little explored metaphor of the dance. We will see that both the content and the process of negotiation can change dramatically once when we think of bargaining as an aesthetic activity which provides intrinsic joy as well as extrinsic benefits. In such a dance, there is plenty of room for competition as well as cooperation, as movements can be spirited and confrontational as well as smooth and harmonious.

We identify many forms of dance in negotiation, and explore three: the dance of positioning, where passions and presentations interact proudly; the dance of empathy, when the partners come to better understand each other; and then the dance of concessions, where the deal is struck and the music comes to an end.

Finally, we will try to show how the dance can be employed pedagogically, in teaching and training negotiation and mediation. In particular, the Brazilian dance of capoeira illustrates holistically and experientially how movement and rhythm can be interpreted both as fight and as a dance and how we can come to see a process as both aesthetic and purposeful at the same time. First feeling, then thinking and finally speaking, we can use this medium to explore the dynamics of confrontation and cooperation in a negotiation setting.

Keywords: Negotiation, dance, concessions, bargaining

JEL Classification:

I could only believe in a God who knew how to dance.

- Friedrich Nietzsche
Thus Spake Zarathustra

Dance is not only the province of the divine, but also an essential thinking framework for any effective negotiator. As they engage with others in interdependent situations, seeking to persuade them to help us attain our interests, thoughtful negotiators may well soon find that the best way to persuade is to engage rather than to attack, to play rather than to fight. They must learn to dance as skillfully and easily as they can fight.

It is the *metaphor* that is powerful. As we change the frame of negotiation analysis from *fight* to *dance*, new insights emerge for both the practitioner and the teacher of negotiation, as well as new options for win-win outcomes. Not only does the process become far more enjoyable, but it yields better results for both.

The Power of Metaphor

Life is like a picture, or series of pictures: we experience it as we see it, like a film. It is like a story, created and lived through narrative, told and retold to all those around us. It is language, framed by the experiences we bring to it, shaped by the words we choose, and informed by the worldview we provide as a foundation for our actions. It is, as Robert Frost memorably reminded us, not just language but entire thought processes, the “way of all thinking”¹. As we think about life in all these ways, creativity is unlocked and learning is enhanced, all through the use of metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson, in their seminal work *The Metaphors We Live By*, explored this insight in a groundbreaking way. By showing that our language is riven all through with metaphor, they have helped us not only to be conscious of its role in forming judgments, but also show the very real power that developing this meta-level of understanding of human communication can bring to our learning and to our effective functioning as human beings.

In the vast body of literature which builds on this work, theorists have identified many levels of metaphor, each defined by its use in our language. In general, metaphor is

¹ Cox and Lathem, p. 14. Frost illustrated this brilliantly himself all through his work.

nothing more than an effort to understand one thing in terms of another, through interaction with the world. At the most superficial level, this can be done through “illustrative” metaphors, as seemingly unrelated objects or phenomena are compared one to another in a fleeting way. More substantively, we can employ “entity metaphors” playing with descriptions of things in place of other things and the insights to which that thought process leads. Finally, “root metaphors” get at the fundamental frame of our life experience, potentially altering all that we see and feel.²

To this way of thinking, metaphors create meaning, and *meaning is negotiated*, first within each person as we develop new life stories for ourselves, and then interactively as we try to create rapport and understanding with others, building bridges and relationships, all within a shared cultural setting. The most accessible way to share these worlds of meaning is through the telling of stories, or, even more immediately, by drawing pictures of stories, as Lakoff calls them “experiential gestalts”.³

Understanding and recognizing metaphors is, especially for (negotiation) teachers, a powerful pedagogical tool. Without imposing them, teachers and also mediators/negotiators must learn to recognize metaphors and to understand their impact. The choice of especially a root metaphor will very much determine the content of the conversation. Visually, for instance, if a process is described as a *line*, as is common in the West, it will yield different components than when we imagine it as a more Eastern *circle*. *Levels* are not the same as *sides* when we think about dimensions of a concept. The metaphor employed reveals as much about the mindset of the speaker as about the receptive awareness of the listener, and will drive the effectiveness of the communication.

Thus “meta-negotiation” makes us more powerful. By seeing beyond the issues and individual parts of a negotiation conversation to understand its flow, and focusing on connections and relationships between the parties, we can harness the energy of the game itself. Changing these dynamics will have a material effect not just on outcome, but on the process and on participants’ enjoyment of that process. To a large extent, work becomes play in the game at hand, either the negotiation game or one of the many others that life offers.

These root metaphors invite us into imaginative conversations. By connecting traditional “rational” thinking to emotion, sensation, imagination and creativity, they help us explore new dimensions and insights. Through the shorthand of metaphor

² The most famous “root metaphor” is of course Plato’s cave, which offers a powerful picture of a fundamental shift in the way we look at the world.

³ *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 81.

and “imaginative rationality”⁴, we can enter other worlds of meaning, or as Aristotle put it, “get hold of something fresh”⁵. And in conversation with others, we can communicate that meaning in ways so far not possible, thinking together “outside the box” to reach new levels of understanding.

Metaphors can also unlock the insights of *selective perception*. It is now fairly well known to empirical researchers that human perception is a complicated and sensitive process, always focused on only a fraction of what is received and able to process only that to which it has an immediate frame of reference.⁶ Root metaphors, in providing that frame, can significantly alter what we perceive and process in any given situation. We experience things differently and come to different conclusions and results only by changing the lens through which we are focusing.

Even as we write this article, the authors are acutely aware of this power of a root metaphor to profoundly affect both process and content. For it seems to us that we could view the challenge of this project in at least three metaphorical ways: as a journey to be embarked on, as a puzzle to be solved or as a river going downstream. The choice of each metaphor, conscious or unconscious, will materially affect our creativity, our writing experience and also the results of our efforts.

If we view this article as a journey to be embarked on, for example, we will think in a linear fashion. We will assess our starting point and the probable distance to our destination. We will map out routes to get there, perhaps writing a project plan with a timetable and phases of the work to be completed. We will look for milestones along the way to track our progress, and probably stop at various strategic points to “take in the view” and assess how we are doing. We will experience some parts of the task as uphill and arduous, and others as downhill and more exhilarating. And we will not feel satisfied until we have reached the goal, proud of our accomplishment.

An article written as a puzzle to be solved will engage our critical problem-solving skills. We will first try to visualize the finished result, the “right” end product, and also move to gauge just how many pieces of the puzzle will need to be fitted together to make that vision a reality. We will start with border pieces, perhaps, section headings, to form a frame, then fitting in the most familiar pieces between those

⁴ Lakoff and Johnson’s term, still the most pithy way to get at this.

⁵ Aristotle thought that “the greatest thing by far is to be a master of the metaphor” (*Poetics 1459a*). Since “ordinary words convey only what we know already, it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh” (*Rhetoric 1410b*).

⁶ The now well-known Vislog DVD “visual awareness” exercise with the gorilla strolling through the basketball court is a good example of this. Most viewers, asked to focus on the number of times a basketball is bounced and passed to the other team, will utterly fail to even see him!

anchor points. We will then gradually fill in sections with pieces that match each other, saving the difficult parts for last. We will use trial and error to try out the possible placement of pieces that make no sense, not resting until we have fit the whole thing together in a coherent whole, a problem to be successfully analyzed, tackled and solved.

If the article is a river, on the other hand, then the main challenge is simply first jumping into the (probably) cold water. Once that initial shock is absorbed, we will soon find the current and the best way to adjust to and go with the flow. We will let go of attempts to navigate and instead submit to the inherent power of the water, letting it carry us, confident that it is taking us somewhere that while, if not purposeful, will be a natural conclusion to the river's flow. We will feel the sensations of the water along the way, shiver at the temperature, and marvel at the current's strength, all the while learning and relearning not to fight its powers. And we will know that both the process and the destination are not of my doing. I am just along for the ride.

The Metaphors of Negotiation

What is true for life is certainly true for negotiation. There is probably no other field of human communication where all of this is as relevant and useful as in this age-old art and practice. When human beings engage in conversation not only for its own sake but also as a means to find creative solutions to an interdependent problem, their creative, analytic and social competencies are all stretched and challenged. Harnessing the power of metaphor is crucial here, as the frame that guides their thinking will be critical to both process and outcome.

Language of War

As we consider the metaphors most commonly employed for situations of conflict and negotiation, however, it is striking how quickly the word **war** comes to mind, and if not war then certainly **battle** or **fight** among parties or enemies. In the spirit of competition, advancement and success, we are constantly thinking in terms of rising challenges, subduing opponents and winning. Naturally expressing the strong human urge for territoriality, we fight for advantage, often at the expense of the other. We do this in our professional lives, as we manage interactions especially with those who are in conflict with us, and often even within our own reflections.

In the context of negotiation, both theorists and practitioners make ample use of the war metaphor, both consciously and unconsciously. Our negotiation language is shot through with it: we *defend*, *undermine* and *attack positions*, *advance* or *marshal*

arguments, plan *strategies of attack*, *give and lose ground*, *offer negotiation ploys and knock out objections*. Borrowing from sports, we worry about *weak flanks* and about the *level playing field*, take *timeouts*, *shoot down proposals*, and (at least the most skilled of us) are proud of our reputation for *playing hardball*'. Through it all, in the end, the aim is always to *win*.

Even "principled" win-win negotiators, allowing room for the other side to be pleased with the agreement as well and always in search of an approach that brings value to both sides, will speak of *concessions*, *strategic moves*, *bottom lines*, effective *tactics* and considerations of *power*. These proponents of the softer "integrative" or "interest-based" school of negotiation pioneered by Fisher and Ury (1980) are still concerned with *win-win*, negotiating the *rules of the game*, maintaining a *tactical advantage*, and always *setting goalposts* for success. They want to *stake out positions*, *drill down for interests* and always be *tough on content*.

More aggressive negotiators schooled in the "dirty tricks" methodology will take it farther. They may even speak openly of a *new plan of attack*, *leaving them in the dust* and even *going for the kill*. They will revel in having a *fight on their hands*, and basically *go for it*. It is all a game, and a fairly competitive one at that, whether the stakes are just points in sport or blood and victory in war.

An Alternative Perspective

This metaphor is pervasive to such an extent that we no longer even realize it governs our thinking and dominates our expressions. But what were to happen if we deliberately changed it? What if we were to consciously imagine a different picture as we enter the process, one that doesn't involve battle or territory or even winning and losing? How else could we approach thinking about the negotiation game, and what alternative picture might yield new insights?

A clear alternative can be found in the metaphor of the ***dance***. While this very different way of imagining negotiation has been explored to some degree in the literature (Brett, 2005, Cohen, 2003), much more can be learned from examining it further, not always from a cognitive frame. When we finally let go of the "win-lose" or even "win-win" template and begin to regard negotiation as an aesthetic experience, one that is fulfilling in itself, the insights that unfold can take both theoreticians and practitioners in unexpected new directions with sometimes surprising results.

Imagine the negotiators not as adversaries but as partners, engaged with one another in an intimate and fairly physical dance. As the music strikes up, they find their step, expressing themselves through movement and enjoying the dynamic that such an expression creates. The participants are performers, and their goal is

balance, aesthetic pleasure and fun, not victory. With no other purpose in mind, they concentrate on beautifully executing the steps the choreography prescribes, or in more freestyle dances, just allow their bodies to make their own movements and express their own feelings, sometimes surprising both themselves and each other.

Often this dance is elegant, harmonious and beautiful to behold, as the dancers fall into a common rhythm and react in harmony to one another, delighting in their own movements and enjoying the response elicited from their partner. This is where the contrast to the war metaphor becomes most apparent. It is the joy of the dance, the thrill of being perfectly in step with one another, that is fulfilling, not so much the “result” of the exercise.

But sometimes the dance is more passionate, and also far less harmonious. It yields emotion, discord, even open conflict. Depending on the dance in question, the steps can become more abrupt and the movements less conciliatory. Some dances, such as the *capoeira* discussed below, blend seamlessly into a fight. Many are spirited, even competitive, as each dancer focuses more on her own performance than on meshing with that of the other. They remind us that pure cooperation can be a dull affair, lacking the suspense and the fire that makes any good dance a joy to participate in. They illustrate the value of competition as an end in itself.

Three Dances

And so we come to view the actors in a negotiation as performers, both seeking not just to prevail in getting what they want but also to play the game in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way, always enjoying the intrinsic value of the process. As they engage in the negotiation dance, we can imagine several specific stages in the choreography of the typical proceedings. We identify three here: ***the dance of positions***, ***the dance of empathy*** and, finally, ***the dance of concessions***.

The Dance of Positions

As the conversation begins, picture the music striking up for a spirited *flamenco*. The dancers draw themselves up to their full height, and proudly, confidently and almost showily commence the first steps. Full of fire, they expertly execute the *desplante*, the *pica* and the *zapateada*.⁷ There is much stamping of feet, postures are erect, gazes are fixed and staring. Each presents himself in his best possible light, seeking to dazzle and impress with his technique, passion and power. This is the ***dance of positions***.

⁷ All technical terms for the variously nuanced foot stamps of flamenco, illustrating that there is a great deal more to positioning than petulant and intransigent demands. See Terry (1982), p. 28.

This dance is almost solipsistic, with each dancer concentrated very much on her own technique and on the impression she is making on the audience. She has no real need to engage particularly with her partner, as this initial dance is mostly about her. Through the movements, but also thanks to the costume, stance and expression, she creates an identity, a persona that also demands attention and compensation for the show on offer.

Occasionally, the dance is impressively beautiful, but sometimes it can seem aggressive and demanding. In any case, it is, like its sister the *tango*, full of power, passion and emotion, as both parties express not only their cognitive identity but also the language of their hearts. They long to be understood and valued, but first of all they are gratified by the chance just to express what they think and feel. In taking their initial position, they have laid down the markers, and established just who they are. This is not the end of the dance, but a good beginning.

The Dance of Empathy

As the cadences of the music shift markedly, the dancers take up a very different set of moves. We are moving from spectacular to even more expressive dance. The tone is now much softer, almost elegiac, and the mood wistful. The castanets give way to the strings; the dance has now become a *ballet*. As body stances soften and movements become more elastic, we realize that the negotiators have shifted to the ***dance of empathy***.

In this dance, expression continues to reign supreme, but now the expression goes deeper. Each dancer seeks to convey his own deeper needs or interests under the proud dance of positions of a few moments ago. But the choreography now also calls for her to interact more completely with her partner. This requires an added focus on the moves of the other, and a synchronous pairing of movement. The two are now dancing together, not separately. And, importantly and increasingly, they must trust each other not to let them fall.

For some of the time, the music is sweet, and the movements harmonious. The dancers find a common rhythm, falling gently into step with one another. Their interests are in common. But then the tension builds, as what is being expressed by one diverges from the narrative of the other. One dancer becomes the pursuer, the other the pursued. At times the pursuit grows more intense, and can even turn to an open conflict. Even passive poses, such as the *attitude*⁸ provide an abstract

⁸ The (usually female) dancer balances on one foot with the other pulled back, vulnerable but strong, trusting her partner to support her but fully capable of coming back to point at a second's notice (Terry, p. 38).

meaning which goes beyond that of the narrative of the choreography. The dancers express their emotions freely, even when those emotions are anger or fear, and when their interests are clearly not the same.

But at the end of the ballet, at least the dancers *understand one another*. They have moved beyond the showy posturing of the flamenco and achieved real communication. They know where their goals are in harmony and where their interests are undeniably different. Although no resolution to the dance is yet in sight, the interaction has moved to a deeper level. The dance still has no real objective, but the aesthetic experience is satisfying in itself.

The Dance of Concessions

And then the music changes yet again. Now it becomes livelier, more hopeful, but also more purposive. The dancers pause and shift positions, eyeing one another playfully, clearly set to try new things. The step is now one of *jive*, and we feel the energy rise as they begin the ***dance of concessions***.

Now the rhythm becomes decidedly jaunty, and the first dancer drops to a crouch, in preparation of the first move of this very different new dance. He leans forward and, demonstrating a jazzy movement, offers the first new pattern of the new step, encouraging his partner to respond in kind. As she moves forward herself, the eyes meet, the hands lock, and the first joint turn of the jive is executed.

The moves become more athletic and more creative, as each dancer first pulls the other to his side, then pushes away to protect his own space. At times, the dynamic is confrontational, but then it always finds some sort of harmonious resolution, even if the dancers emerge in unexpected poses. Somehow, always, they find a point of common repose before embarking on the next exchange of movements.

This dance is, we realize, highly *improvisational*, much less planned and choreographed than were the previous two. Within a minimalist set of rules, it is up to each dancer to continually offer creative new moves, and then to the other to find an appropriate response, topping the gesture with one of their own. Movements are loose, with hips, shoulders, wrists and ankles always free to engage in ever new combinations in a seemingly carefree celebration of energy.

Sometimes a dancer will pause unexpectedly, deliberately slowing the pace to just stand and repeatedly tap the foot, then move the hip jauntily in one direction, with the hand and shoulder shooting off in another, a new and surprising “offer” for the other

to consider.⁹ The tapping provides excitement, teaching us to listen to as well as look at what is happening, and the polycentric nature of the moves, with virtually any body part taking its turn as leader keeps each dancer, literally, on her toes.

Finally, as the pace quickens ever further, the dancers work themselves up to a frenzy. They trade moves ever more quickly and furiously, and, in the process, engaging more and coming closer to one another, with a physical closeness and energy which would have been unimaginable in the dance segments before. As the music reaches its climax, they join for one last twist and flip, then collapse exhausted but invigorated, in full enjoyment of what they have just experienced together.

Capoeira: Fight or Dance?

This metaphor of dance in negotiations can be employed far beyond the traditional focus of popular western dances as described above. Consider *capoeira*, for example, an acrobatic dance with Afro-Brazilian roots involving fluid movements combined with ritual, music and fighting style¹⁰. *Capoeira* is actually more than a mere dance: it blends choreography with martial art maneuvers, in an interactive game with dance steps, always to the African-descended rhythms of drums and tambourines. Once prohibited for slaves who disguised their fighting practice as dance, and subsequently banned until the 1930s, it has now become a national sport in Brazil and is spreading throughout the world¹¹.

Both Fight and Dance

Capoeira, especially as interpreted in the context of negotiations, reveals a unique fusion of opposite metaphors related to both fight and dance¹², with much to teach us about negotiation. For when two *capoeiristas* engage in athletic dance movements, they are essentially playing a game (*jogo*), during which they continuously explore their strengths and weaknesses, their fears and fatigue limits. The inside of the *roda* (ring or circle) marks the center of attention, like a negotiation space with two delegated parties, surrounded by the energy of the observing community. As a dance of grace and playfulness, *Capoeira* lacks a system of codified rules which are at best considered normative and pragmatic. Instead, these are acquired by experience in practice and passed down from generation to generation. The

⁹ This "isolation" is actually an essential characteristic of jazz dance, maintaining the suspense and tension while at the same time providing a "breather" to the dancer. See Terry, p. 114.

¹⁰ See Downey (2005) for a detailed ethnographic study of the dance.

¹¹ Capoeira (2002) presents a historical and cultural examination of *capoeira*.

¹² Capoeira (2006) delves into the philosophical aspects of the synthesis between fight and dance.

individual movements, however, including combinations of sweeps, kicks and head strikes, which all form part of a fluid choreography, are more explicitly defined.

The Aim of the Dance

Perhaps surprisingly, the objective of *capoeira* is not to win or even to injure the opponent, in stark contrast to the traditional power-based approaches to negotiation. As they move, *capoeiristas* generally do not even make physical contact with each other. Instead the emphasis is placed on skill, on feigning moves, and on theatrical sequences of attack and counterattack. *Let me show you what I could do, without actually doing it and you show me how you would respond to it. Let's have a what-if conversation.* A skilful dancer may also initiate a movement without concluding it, merely to convey his dominance inside the *roda* as a powerful signal to his counterpart and to the community of bystanders. As they are attacked, the players have the opportunity to practice evasive techniques before switching roles again between leading and following, attacking and defending.

Movement as Conversation

Capoeira is a non-scripted discourse, an interactive, highly spontaneous game of questions and answers between two parties who are expressing themselves through thoughtful negotiation with each other. But here the negotiation is expressed through physical motion, non-verbally. Rather than seeking to beat an opponent, each participant strives to demonstrate his acquired skill to the community and to earn respect among its members. The athletic activity yields intrinsic value of joy and aesthetics for its participants, even though there is no higher goal or specific target to be fulfilled. Overall, the protagonists learn to reflect as much about their self-awareness, expression and personal growth as they do about their alternating opponents and their movements inside the *roda*.

Tactical Games

At the heart of *capoeira* lies the phenomenon of *malicia* – commonly referred to as deception or trickery (with a positive connotation). Once the *capoeiristas* have mastered the basic elements of the dance, they strive to adopt ever more sophisticated patterns of improvisation and modification under the guidance of the *mestre* (master). They aim to acquire the skill of feinting or tricking the opponent into a wrong response, an awkward position or an evasive defense. The term *malandragem* refers to the art of trickery or the application of *malicia*. It is considered as one of the main gateways to fully appreciate the art-form of *capoeira*. Masters of effective *malandragem* tend to have developed an astute sense of observation and anticipation of moves and effective responses. The cunning movements develop into a fluid dance of tactics without ever actually hurting the opposite partner. It is almost

like playing a series of chess moves solely in the minds of the players without ever making a first real move.

Capoeira as Methaphor

Tactics are therefore key, as is the importance to real-life simulations of movements and actions that could otherwise have potentially deadly consequences. The fun lies in learning about the self as well as about one's counterparts, all while engrossed in this fluid sequence of signals, countersignals, moves and reactions. *Capoeiristas* as negotiators explore every angle of the deal; they carefully absorb the various moves, signals and tactics of their counterparts, all without ever committing to any concessions on their side. The purpose is always not to win but to understand, while exploring the positions and interests, strengths and weaknesses of the other party. Through this continuous process, both parties' awareness grows and should ultimately lead to better outcomes when the real negotiation is concluded.

Lessons Learned

The example of *capoeira* teaches us that dichotomies are never absolute: fight versus dance, harmony versus war, adversaries versus partners can indeed be reconciled within the same construct. In the language of negotiation, still dominated by a terminology of war and fighting, we have learned that the negotiator's frame can indeed be illuminated by the power of metaphor. Just changing the frame of our thinking leads to new insights.

As we do this, we realize that there are many shades of grey on a continuum of competition versus cooperation as extremes. The dances of negotiation offer a rich and dynamic playing field, with ample opportunity to integrate elements of both. We learn that rigid role definitions can be flexibly altered, effective signals can be sent without actually hurting the other party and interactions can be enjoyable and aesthetically pleasing even if there is no winner. Finally, we learn from the dance the paramount importance of mutual trust and respect among the negotiating parties in order to achieve sustainable win-win outcomes.

Certainly a direct application of all of this is in the arena of training or teaching. For incorporating nontraditional teaching methods such as *capoeira* enactments into seminars is a powerful way to convey messages which do not easily reach students on the cognitive path. Surely dance is one of the most accessible forms of experiential learning, and should be experimented with further in both the classroom and other academic settings.

In actual negotiations, our view is that “dance” is probably most applicable during the early stages of large, complex negotiations, helping to increase the likelihood of success at the later, more critical stages. Trying on this kind of thinking helps us go through the motions of a negotiation without actually concluding the deal itself. Through the dance, negotiators get to know one another closely through continuous interaction, and develop a heightened awareness of each other’s skills, tactical patterns and weaknesses. As they come to actually experience the movements of the dance, they are more likely to let go and enjoy the power of a more playful process, knowing they will reach better joint results when the music strikes up for real.

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