

# **WHAT DO STUDENTS AND ADULTS DO WHEN THEY NEGOTIATE : A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FRENCH BUSINESS SITUATIONS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates what students and adults know from negotiation before taking a class in business negotiation. The goal of the study is to determine and describe implicit knowledges of the students, and use them in order to renovate negotiation teaching. The study was conducted during 4 years, using the method of written story-telling and qualitative analysis of collected data. The main findings are that implicit knowledge of the respondents cover a lot of aspects of negotiation. Some aspects of negotiation are already known by the students and it is therefore possible to simplify the process of teaching.

Keywords : Negotiation teaching, implicit knowledge, renovating pedagogy.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This project presents one of the aspects of a broader research, which was conducted during 4 years, from 2008 to 2011, in order to study implicit knowledge of students about negotiation. The main question was : « *what do they know when they know nothing ?* », with the goal of renovating business negotiation teaching, by using these implicit knowledges. We tried to find an answer to these concerns : what do students and managers do when they negotiate, what do they know about negotiation, especially before following a negotiation seminar ?

The studied populations were composed of several groups of students, without any previous professional experience, and several groups of adults, which had a previous experience of negotiating in business.

Several choices were made for the research method : we choosed a qualitative approach based on the technique of story-telling ; we did not choose oral interviews but written stories ; the written stories which we gathered were analyzed by using Alceste software, an automatic text analysis program. Alceste analyses the words of the global corpus, then divides the texts into paragraphs and gather these paragraphs into homogenous classes. Alceste analysis rests onto the principle that there is a relationship between the words used by the respondents and the meaning of their story.

Therefore we asked the respondents to write the story of a real negotiation they already lived or observed. During the research process, we observed 4 groups of students, and we were able to gather 301 stories ; we also observed 4 groups of managers, and we gathered 56 stories

from which we could retain 52 stories which were analyzed with Alceste.

The main findings about the population of students is that they already know a lot about negotiation ; but these knowledges are implicit and not always conscious. It is therefore possible to use the results of this research for the process of teaching : where some implicit knowledges are common in the population of students, it is possible to teach rapidly these contents through a simplified process. When some knowledges are not present or are not common (for example : several tactics of business negotiation, or even *principled negotiation*), it is then necessary to insist and explain these contents through a complete process of teaching with courses, exercises and case studies.

Another interesting result of this study is that gender seems to have an influence, not onto the technical capacity to negotiate, but on the social situations described by the respondents : men have a tendency to negotiate products and prices, they seem to negotiate outside the family and to use often the tactic of bargaining. Women show a tendency to negotiate decisions, principles, and they focus much more onto the process of argumentation ; they negotiate more often inside the family circle, with relatives.

The main findings of this research for adults and managers is that they negotiate very often, if not all the time. Negotiation is a normal activity for them ; they use negotiation as the only valid method to resolve disputes because conflict is not an economic, nor acceptable way of solving problems in their organisation and they have to communicate, so lack of communication and lack of exchange is not a valid method either.

Alceste led to 3 *classes* gathering the negotiations described by the adult respondents :

- The first class is the *personal negotiation* : adults negotiate for themselves, and they are the object of the talks. They negotiate with their own manager or company subjects like a salary rise, changing to a new position, a promotion, conditions of leaving the company, etc.
- The second class is the class of *trade negotiation* : they sell, they buy, because it is part of their activity. In these cases, they negotiate products or services, they negotiate the prices and the financial conditions of the contract, either with clients or with suppliers.
- The third class is the class of *problem-solving*. In these situations, managers have to solve technical problems with their colleagues and/or peers ; they are in charge of quality, they organize production, they manage teams and must obtain results in this, etc.

In conclusion, some results like selling and buying or solving problems, seem evident when we consider these results *ex-post*. However, one of the interesting elements was to discover that managers negotiate for themselves and develop a personal strategy by doing so ; this strategy can be deeply different from the strategy of company, and their own managers should remain aware of this, in order to avoid unpleasant surprises in managing subordinates.