

Tug of War – The Tension Concept and the Art of International Negotiation

Dr Paul Gibson says that this often deeply theoretical text by Tony English offers useful concepts and analytical ideas, including the metaphor of negotiators (and mediators) as ‘tension managers’.

This book focuses on international negotiation, and is applicable to the most general examples of “negotiation”. Tony concedes that any negotiator manages tension and usually does so without being necessarily conscious of doing so. To increase our consciousness of this, he explains more fully what he refers to as the “operational definition of tension management in negotiation”.

The book follows from Tony’s PhD studies in which he explored the ways in which international managers cope with unfamiliar contexts. He acknowledges that while he coined the phrase ‘tension management’ for his PhD thesis, he did find earlier explicit uses of the tension concept in the literature, albeit within more limited constructs.

To make more sense of the term ‘tension concept’ the reader is encouraged to consider the existence of such tensions in everyday life generally by understanding the tension in simple polar opposites: day-night, male-female, life-death and yin-yang. Indeed in the worlds of management, the arts and philosophy tensions exist between competing forces and forms. The application of dialectic thinking and debate in management is a practical application of exploring the value in competing ideas and strategies. Delightfully, Tony even weaves in a reference to Shakespeare with the often quoted phrase from Hamlet (Act III): “To be, or not to be: that is the question” to illustrate his point. In Tony’s words “Hamlet muses on the human struggle with a tension that on one hand draws us to cling passively to life, with its familiar problems and torments, and on the other hand to retaliate by suicide, and so launch ourselves into the hidden and possibly worse realm of death”.

Tony pointedly also refers carefully to ‘western’ views on the subject and includes many references to ‘eastern’ thinking about the subject. Specifically he refers to the application of Buddhist and Confucian ethos of ‘the middle way’ to illustrate how the Chinese people may be influenced to ensure harmonious relationships with those who matter to them.

Tension and its management are threaded through a whole raft of human activities, scholarship, religious debates and so on. We even see its application in our own politics and the current debates around climate science and human induced global warming. The concept is however applied in a much more complex form once the tensions are considered between cultural groupings or religious orders where the tensions are multidimensional. This latter complexity is more applicable as Tony applies the tension concept to international negotiations.

Tony makes the point which most negotiators understand that tensions exist in all negotiations, mostly brought about by the relationships between the parties. The negotiator has therefore to manage these tensions in order to move the negotiation along a constructive path. He argues that skilled negotiators identify and manipulate these tensions for the benefit of one or more parties.

Tony's interest is declared as being focussed "on the tension construct that influences the way they (negotiators) manage their intellectual and other behaviour". He likens the negotiator to a 'tension manager' and this metaphor brings meaning to mediator and negotiators.

The book is organised into four "Parts". Part 1 deals with Tony's general view of managerial behaviour within negotiation in particular. While the author argues that negotiation 'is just another human activity', he outlines the need to order the sometimes chaotic nature of negotiations.

Part 2 leads the reader into the world of international negotiation and Tony suggests that tension based analysis is one way of interpreting behaviour, and admits that it is not the only way of doing so. He has the view though that by using systematic means for discovering significant tensions, we can better understand what may be the underlying causes for the tensions. Tony examines some models while not necessarily prescribing any of them for negotiators. He also explores the impact of culture in international negotiations. Much of the material in this Part is heavy going and the author himself suggests in the preamble to this part of the book, that if the reader is 'shy of theory' they may discard the book and get a copy of Francis Walder's "The Negotiator" (1960).

Part 3 is very much about the stories of veteran diplomats and negotiators involved in international negotiations and makes very interesting reading for those who may be intrigued by this. For those of us unfamiliar with international diplomacy generally and international negotiations specifically, we are introduced to the idea of 'Track 1 diplomacy' and the specifics of the experience of a number of veteran diplomats. We are also introduced to the intrigue of hostage taking, blackmail and extortion. In some of the cases Tony changes the names so as to not un-mask people who may want their anonymity preserved. This further adds to the intrigue. I did find that Tony's analytical use of the Content v Process was very useful, and the way in which he found tensions within each component of content and process was helpful in better understanding the application of his central idea of tension management.

Part 4 extends many of the author's views on tension management and returns to a more academic treatment of his ideas. He argues that tension management 'is underexploited as a way of understanding negotiation in particular while acknowledging that tension management is a reasonable way to manage the chaos of influences on us generally, and the way we manage our immediate environment. While engrossed in Tony's arguments, I couldn't help thinking about the work of Roberto Unger in his seminal work on Knowledge and Politics where he argued the existence and importance of "antinomies" (logical contradictions) and how there were similarities in the arguments being made by the author and those of Unger. In this Part, the author describes seven "marks" – skills, inclinations and other traits – which he thinks differentiates good negotiators from others. He again connects the ability to be a good negotiator with that of being a good tension manager. Central to the author's idea is the negotiator's ability to define scenarios once the tensions in a situation are well understood.

The book is a learned text, often deeply theoretical, and is most obviously for those who enjoy engaging with such theories.. It explores complexity and the reader has to be in the right mindset to stay with the author. The central parts of the book are most applicable to international negotiation and diplomacy and are interesting reading for those with a particular interest in the subject. Otherwise the book contains some very useful concepts and analytical ideas. The codification of the seven "marks" provides food for thought for all of us who may be involved in complex negotiations.

About the book

Tony English (2010) *Tug of War: The Tension Concept and the Art of International Negotiation*. Common Ground Publishing: Melbourne. Social Sciences Series of The University Press. ISBN 978 1 86335 673 2 (paperback); 978 1 86335 674 9 (pdf). 310 pages. Print: \$US35; Electronic: \$US10.

Available from:

Common Ground Publishing, price in \$US, [click here >>](#)

Lawbooks.com.au, [click here >>](#)

Imprints Booksellers, Hindley Street, Adelaide and many other online suppliers including Ingram, Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, Bertrams, Blackwell, Book Depository, and Coutts.

About Dr Paul Gibson

Paul was originally a line manager and ended up running a number of significant businesses at quite an early age, accumulating quite diverse hands-on management and industrial experience. He's been a broad-based management consultant for the last 20 years helping large organisations work their way through complex change and much of this has involved resolving conflict.

Over the last 5 years he has specialised and concentrated on formal dispute resolution and conflict management.

He is a nationally accredited mediator as well as a graded arbitrator, but he uses common sense in most disputes applying techniques and tools that we would variously call facilitation, conciliation or mediation in order to get a result for the parties. Paul specialises in organisational and workplace conflict as well as doing some commercial mediation. He trains and coaches in mediation and has been adjudicating some of the Negotiation Competition in the UNSW Faculty of Law. He is a member of the NSW Chapter Executive and a Senior Fellow of the Corporate Directors' Association of Australia.