

Principles of The Four Agreements for an Efficient Negotiation

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I read Don Miguel Ruiz's book *The Four Agreements* a few years ago. Initially, I viewed it as a self-help book offering practical principles for improving personal and interpersonal relationships. Recently, while preparing for a negotiation with a supplier, the book came to mind because I realized its principles applied perfectly to negotiations, inspiring me to write this article.

The Four Agreements is a practical guide rooted in Toltec philosophy. The Toltecs, a pre-Columbian culture, flourished in the northern Mexican highlands between the 10th and 12th centuries. The book centers on the Toltec belief in liberating oneself from self-limiting beliefs that cause suffering, a concept applicable to both individuals and negotiating parties.

According to what I have learned from the Harvard University Negotiation Model, an efficient negotiation is one that:

- The interests of the parties are satisfied
- The options offer mutual gain
- It is based on objective criteria
- The commitment is clear and well-defined
- Communication is efficient
- The relationship improves
- The context of the negotiation is known
- The agreement that was reached is better than my BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement) which answers the question: what is my best alternative in case I cannot reach the desired agreement?

Below, we will review each of the Four Agreements to identify how their application can enhance the effectiveness of our negotiations.

FIRST AGREEMENT: BE IMPECCABLE WITH YOUR WORDS

Don Miguel Ruiz states, "Words are a force; they constitute the power you have to express and communicate, to think, and consequently, to create the events of your life." He further clarifies, "They are a double-edged sword: they can create the most beautiful dream or destroy everything around you."

We are constantly negotiating, in both personal and professional spheres. For example, “Where do we go on vacation?” may require negotiation among family members, or “At what price will we close an important deal for the company?” Even when considering geopolitical aspects, questions like “What portion of a territory belongs to which country?” necessitate negotiation.

Regardless of the negotiation’s scope, we are ultimately discussing two or more people interacting, communicating, and using language to reach an agreement.

In this article, I will refer exclusively to negotiations of a professional nature. That is, negotiations where the parties represent organizations and must reach an agreement to satisfy their interests.

Surely it has happened to you that a single word misplaced in a sentence or said at the wrong time or misinterpreted can end a conversation. Likewise, a word said at the right time and in the right way can build relationships of trust. This is the power of the word. The Venezuelan philosopher José Manuel Briceño Guerrero said, “language creates realities” and therefore the importance of constantly improving our communication skills.

Communication is key in negotiation. Not only in terms of what we say, but how we say it. Aspects such as intonation, volume of the voice, and non-verbal language radically influence how the other person interprets our message.

Ruiz’s use of ‘impeccable’ in this agreement emphasizes commitment, which aligns with the advice of my former consulting colleague, Eleodoro Ventocilla, who used to say, ‘Promise only what you can deliver’. In negotiations where maintaining a long-term relationship is important, being upright and complying with agreements create trust, and that trust is the fundamental basis for maintaining a healthy relationship.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR NEGOTIATING EFFECTIVELY

- Design the key messages that you are going to communicate during the negotiation. Do not leave it to improvisation
- Analyze beforehand what kind of words or phrases you should avoid using in your messages. This is particularly important in multicultural negotiations.
- Be congruent between what you think, say and do

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- Think before you speak. Sometimes we think that when faced with a question we must answer immediately because otherwise we are going to transmit insecurity or lack of knowledge. The use of silence is important in a conversation and therefore it is strategic because it allows us to think carefully about what we are going to say
- Listen to understand, not to respond. Avoid the inner voice that is looking for answers while they are speaking to you. Focus on the other person, listen to what they are saying, and make sure you understand the message before you respond.
- Read, increase your vocabulary, investigate, and learn about oral and written communication

SECOND AGREEMENT: DO NOT TAKE ANYTHING PERSONALLY

Don Miguel Ruiz says, “taking things personally is the maximum expression of selfishness, because we believe that everything revolves around us”.

To apply this agreement, it is key to understand that all people have perspectives, paradigms that influence how they act. What someone says reflects their own feelings, beliefs, and opinions. If someone insults you and you take it personally, you accept it, make it your own, and it affects you negatively. Developing immunity from these attacks is a skill that must be cultivated for a happier life and more productive negotiations.

We do not control what other people say or do, but we do control how we assume it. If we take it personally, we lose control over our emotions, which is very likely to behave in a way that goes against our own goal and thereby sabotage ourselves.

For example, if someone shouts during a meeting where something important is being negotiated and where we want to achieve a benefit for our company and we react by shouting, it is very likely that the meeting will be interrupted or canceled and with this we have decreased the possibility of reaching some point. agreement.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR NEGOTIATING EFFECTIVELY

- Understand that the opinion of the other is as valuable as yours and therefore deserves to be understood
- Manage your emotions during the negotiation, do not fall for provocations
- If the other person insults, yells, let him know that these behaviors will not allow him to get anywhere and, on the contrary, will affect the possibility of fulfilling his own interests.
- It is valid to take a break during the negotiation to "calm down" or handle any emotion that could negatively affect the achievement of the objectives
- Understand that "Listening is different from agreeing". Listen carefully to the other party. This will give you valuable information during the negotiation.

THIRD AGREEMENT: DO NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

A negotiation implies a constant process of communication. During a conversation we constantly exchange points of view and understanding them is a fundamental element to reach agreements.

It is important to be sure that we understand what the other party is communicating and for this it is worth investing time in validating that we really understood those messages correctly.

Just as in the previous agreement, the ego can play a trick on us, it can also be a barrier for us to "accommodate" the messages to our own interests. This can even happen unconsciously. Our brains, attempting to be helpful, may filter information to align with our beliefs, paradigms, and interests. Therefore, during negotiations, it's crucial to take time to apply these tips:

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR NEGOTIATING EFFECTIVELY

- Consider that your assumptions may be wrong (check them)
- Avoid making judgments before or during negotiation
- Ask questions to understand and clarify during the negotiation, it is even worth interrupting to ensure that we understood a message correctly before continuing
- Design your messages to be clear and leave little room for interpretation
- At the end of the interventions where you consider that something could be interpreted, ask if anyone has any questions
- Pay attention to the body language of the people who are listening. Particularly facial gestures can show a lack of understanding or doubt.

FOURTH AGREEMENT: ALWAYS DO THE MAXIMUM YOU CAN

Applying this agreement is what allows us to continually improve on the other three. This does not mean that everything will always go as expected, but it is important that at the end of a negotiation you can say "we did our best to achieve our objectives". There should be no doubt that every effort was made, even if not everything that was expected was achieved.

Excellence in itself does not exist, but we can aspire to be excellent, and this is the journey we have to embark on.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR NEGOTIATING EFFECTIVELY

- Identify and recognize your areas of opportunity as a negotiator and improve them
- Keep working on your strengths
- Practice, organize mock negotiations and be sure to analyze them to identify what was done well and what can be improved

The Four Agreements serve as a guide to improving how we interact with ourselves and others, both personally and professionally. Applying the Four Agreements can increase the effectiveness of our negotiations because there is a direct relationship between our actions and the outcomes we achieve in human interactions. Ultimately, there is no such thing as a 'business-to-business negotiation,' only negotiations between people representing business interests. Therefore, the human element, with its complexities, satisfactions, and frustrations, will always be present. Remember, what truly matters is doing our best to meet our needs and, ideally, those of all parties involved.



Javier Carnevali is a renowned specialist in the areas of: Strategic Sourcing and, Procurement and author of the Spend Lifecycle Management model (www.spendlifecycle.com). He has 29 years of experience in Consulting and Leadership in companies from various countries and sectors. He graduated in Business Management from Universidad Metropolitana (Caracas, Venezuela) and Master in Business Administration from Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración (IESA). He holds a Certificate in Supply Chain Management from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and a Certificate in Business Analytics from the University of Cambridge. He also completed the Program on Negotiation at Harvard University and holds a Certificate from the International Association for Sustainable Economy (IASE).