THE ART OF NEGOTIATION:
HOW TO IMPROVISE AGREEMENT IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

By

Michael Wheeler

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Michael Wheeler is a Professor in the Harvard Business School and has taught negotiation at Harvard University for more than two decades. In addition, Professor Wheeler has been an important member of the Program on Negotiation, an inter-university consortium of faculty from Harvard, MIT, and Tufts and is the editor-in-chief of the Negotiation Journal.

Prior to his tenure at Harvard University, Michael Wheeler was a professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT and a professor of law at the New England Law School. Mr. Wheeler has been a member of the Massachusetts Bar Association since 1969. Mr. Wheeler serves as a mediator or arbitrator in a wide variety of business and regulatory disputes.

Professor Wheeler is the author or co-author of ten books, scores of articles and a frequent spokesperson about negotiation on public television. The author holds degrees from Amherst College, Boston University, and Harvard Law School. Unquestionably, Michael Wheeler is an expert on the field of negotiation.

The Art of Negotiation is the product of Professor Wheeler’s wide and intensive experience as both a practitioner and a scholar of negotiation. The work is results Mr. Wheeler’s conviction that most traditional negotiation texts, whether espousing win-win or positional approaches, erroneously portray the negotiation process as a one-dimensional activity within a static environment.

In this book, Professor Wheeler seeks to offset what he is convinced is a distorted and common view of negotiation and replace it with a view of the process he believes to be a more accurate one. In Wheeler’s view, negotiation is a dynamic interaction between two or more parties operating within a changing and uncertain world. Assuming the world is chaotic rather than a stable one, negotiation as well as all human activities depends upon the adoption of be a new approach to the field. The view of reality, of course, is the ultimate assumption in every human
activity. Negotiation is no different. Traditional negotiation training is, of course, but a mirror image of that false view of reality. It is critical that negotiation which is so critical to human action is predicated upon reality rather than illusion.

Professor Wheeler’s mission in this book is to explain how the negotiating process works in the “real world” he perceives, underscore why it is important, and provide a new direction for negotiators.

As Wheeler perceives the world, the art of negotiation requires a fundamental change in view and a consequent alteration in approach. This book is intended as the guide to that critical change.

For the negotiator, this book is meant to provide an intellectual touchstone and a how to manual for the accomplishment of negotiation in the “new world.” Professor Wheeler has accomplished the achievement of both of his primary goals in the opinion of this reviewer. That said; let us look briefly at the sort of topics readers will find highlighted in this work.

As we begin, let me note, the author presents an enhanced view of negotiation, makes no argument for a clean slate approach. Planning, research, ethics and other parts of the traditional process remain. Working meanings of perspective, action, and opportunity, for examples, are clarified and expanded not discarded.

A dynamic interaction with other parties in a negotiation, as postulated by the author, is an inherently fluid situation. The opportunities presented through the investment of time, the utilization of lessons drawn from differing experiences, and the potential of reallocating resources comes to life through openness in negotiation.

With openness as the negotiator’s guide, the key to an effective negotiation requires “learning, adapting and influencing” to accomplish the potential of values resulting from what began as one goal and evolved into an even better deal (p.257). As a part of this learning process, the central theme is always center forward: goals as well of the conditions within which the parties function need to be approached as a part of a world in chaos not a fixed landscape. Mr. Wheeler explains in careful detail both the whys and the hows of the dynamic negotiation process.

The author’s method of presentation is a rich and interesting one. To make his point, Professor Wheeler combines a wide array of anecdotes from master negotiators and extensive illustrative examples of “principles and techniques from other domains in which people collaborate, create or compete,” such as jazz, theater, and sports and other avenues (p.259).

*The Art of Negotiation* is an important negotiation book for the new negotiator as well as experienced practitioners.
The author has provided a carefully annotated and extensive section of notes and a well-designed index which readers will find very valuable resources.

Highly Recommended.