

Negotiation with Heart: Lessons from a Lobola Moment

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Sometimes, as a facilitator, you walk into a session not knowing how it will unfold. You carry your experience, your models, your years in the game, but the unexpected moment arrives and shifts everything.

As part of our advanced leadership development program, we explore “leadership moments”, those often quiet, sometimes loud moments that shape a leader. One of these modules is on negotiation.

Now, I've been in negotiation spaces for the better part of 30 or 40 years, from national wage tables in the Auto industry to in-house sessions at Eveready. I've seen the hard edges of bargaining, the legalese, the walkouts, the compromises.

But what happened today in a simple role-play session both shook me and gifted me a new lens through which to view negotiation.

I decided that instead of our usual wage negotiation simulation, I wanted to do something different. I chose to construct a role-play around the Lobola negotiation, a uniquely African process of engagement between two families as they negotiate the “bride price”. Yes, cattle. But so much more than cattle. It's a conversation layered with meaning, respect, and long-term thinking. *It's not transactional. It's relational.*

The class was made up of predominantly Black African leaders, many of whom understood the depth of this process in ways that don't come from textbooks.

The response from the group was *immediate and authentic.*

A Masterclass in Meaningful Negotiation

Here's what struck me, and I mean goose flesh, rethink-everything-you-know struck me:

- Negotiation can be **fierce and respectful at the same time**. The Lobola process wasn't soft. There was push. There was pull. But **the core was respect, not dominance**.
- **The foundation was relationship, not power**. Western negotiation often revolves around leverage. This one revolved around connection. Two families finding each other, not one winning over the other.
- There was always **an awareness of the relationship and community**. Imagine a negotiation where the backstory is two people in love, and the aim is to unite communities. What would that do to the tone in the room?
- Knowing when to push and when to pause mattered. There's a delicate rhythm to Lobola. Push too hard and you fracture trust. Pull back too much and you risk appearing disinterested. **The sweet spot lies in mutual significance**.
- Every role had meaning. It wasn't just about the "main parties". There were elders, observers, family members and mediators, each contributing, each watching the dance unfold. **Western models don't often make space for those subtle players**.

A Wake-Up Call for Western Negotiators

Here's the thing, if we, especially those of us steeped in Western corporate tradition, want to negotiate well with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds, we need to wake up to these dynamics. Many of our shop stewards, team members, and business partners come into the negotiation space with a whole world of cultural reference behind them. If we only see the surface, the demand, the figure, the deadline, we miss the richness underneath.

Too often, our approach is tactical: who's got the upper hand, who's blinked first, who's winning. But in this Lobola dynamic, the lens is different:

- What does this mean for the long-term?
- How do we make sure we honour each other?
- What kind of community are we building?

It made me reflect on how, over the years, I may have bulldozed through a process or missed the subtle cues from across the table. *What I learned today wasn't just about culture—it was about humanity.*

Let's Not Negotiate Like Trump

Forgive the bluntness, but it's necessary. The current global rhetoric around negotiation, where bravado replaces respect, and coin-toss decisions override dialogue, is deeply troubling. A commentator put it perfectly: "While the rest of the world are playing chess, trying to decide whether to use the Queen sacrifice or the Vladimirov thunderbolt, Trump is flipping a coin." **That's not negotiation. That's gambling.** And it's reckless, especially when what's at stake is dignity, society, and future collaboration.

Closing Thoughts: We're Not Just Swapping Numbers

If there's one thing I'm walking away with, it's this: *negotiation isn't just about reaching an agreement. It's about how we reach that agreement.* The Lobola process reminded me that behind every 'yes' and every 'no' is a human being. And behind every tough stance might be a desire to be seen, respected, and valued.

Let's be clear, money matters. But meaning matters more.

When we lead negotiations with awareness, cultural sensitivity, and a deep commitment to long-term relationships, we don't just build deals, we build trust. And that, ultimately, is what leadership is all about.

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