

CONFERENCE
ZURICH | 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: NEGOTIATION CONFERENCE 2026
FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

No one enters a negotiation expecting to fail. Yet in high-stakes settings, setbacks, deadlock, and unexpected pressure are not exceptions, they are part of the terrain. The 2026 Negotiation Conference, "Failure Is Not an Option," confronted this reality head-on: if failure happens, what do we do with it and how do we turn it into an advantage?

Across two days, world-leading negotiation experts explored how to perform when conditions are at their most difficult. Speakers addressed the mindset required when a counterpart opens with extreme demands, how to separate the past from the future, and how to manage expectations without losing momentum. They examined how to maintain composure under pressure, learn productively from failure and setbacks, and use BATNA and common interests to create leverage.

The program also looked beyond tactics. Breakout sessions explored the value of diversity at the negotiation table, the experiences of women negotiators, and the trust-building needed to gain access to powerful counterparts. Together, they offered a practical playbook for reducing risk, protecting value, and negotiating with greater confidence.

The summaries that follow capture each speaker's individual contribution.

A note on confidentiality: Two sessions at the conference were held under the Chatham House Rule. Case-specific details shared in those sessions are therefore not included in this summary.

ABOUT THE NEGOTIATION CONFERENCE

The annual Negotiation Conference is the world's leading forum for negotiations – the only global event that brings together top negotiation experts, senior executives, and decision-makers in one exclusive, confidential setting.

Why attend

• Learn strategies and tactics from the world's leading experts that you can put to work in your negotiations right away.

• Engage with experts and executives in a confidential environment focused on minimizing risk and preventing failure in high-stakes negotiations.

• Sharpen your strategic thinking and negotiation capability – essential for guiding your organization through complex, consequential decisions.

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KEYNOTE SPEECH BY MATTHIAS SCHRANNER

THE END OF WIN-WIN – SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR DIFFICULT NEGOTIATIONS

Matthias Schranner, CEO and Founder of the Schranner Negotiation Institute, is a global negotiation expert and advisor to businesses and governments. Originally trained as a police lead negotiator for high-stakes situations, he has spent the past 20 years advising clients including the UN, global corporations, and governments. His proprietary Schranner Concept® is used by numerous Fortune 500 companies worldwide to succeed in difficult negotiations. Matthias opened the conference with seven principles for difficult negotiations, drawn from his new book, The End of Win-Win.

1. Attitude: value-based or interest-based negotiations

• Schranner distinguished between value-based and interest-based negotiations. In value-based negotiations, the parties share a trusted relationship and values such as cooperation, partnership, long-term thinking, etc. In interest-based negotiations, a counterpart states what it wants, may not value the relationship, and does not necessarily interpret a concession as cooperation.

• He observed a broader shift from value-based towards interest-based negotiation not only in business contexts but also in political negotiations. Referring to negotiations between Canada and the US administration, he explained that Canadian concessions intended to signal cooperation were instead interpreted as weakness, after which pressure and demands increased. His conclusion was that attempting to persuade an interest-based counterpart to focus on shared values is unlikely to succeed.

• Instead, when faced with high demands, limited cooperation, or threats, negotiators should state their own demands clearly and embrace the conflict. He noted that Europeans and Swiss negotiators in particular often seek compromise and avoid confrontation, an approach he considers ineffective when the other side is pursuing a power-based strategy. He also warned that stress is often highest at the outset of such negotiations. Without preparation, negotiators risk reacting emotionally.

2. Future: separate future from the past

• Schranner argued that every word in a conflict carries emotional weight, and that parties are frequently emotionally attached to past events. When the past is allowed to shape the future of the negotiation process, agreement becomes substantially more difficult.

• His recommended structure is to separate the discussion into two workstreams: one addressing the past and one addressing the future. He referenced peace processes in South Africa and Colombia, where past injustices were addressed through truth-and-reconciliation mechanisms, while future arrangements were negotiated separately. In business, he proposed an analogous "truth commission" where historical grievances need to be acknowledged before constructive forward-looking negotiation becomes possible.

• At the negotiation table, a negotiator can acknowledge the other side's account – "it is noted; I respect your opinion" – while making clear that the past will not be negotiated in the current session. In his view, allowing past events to dominate the agenda makes agreement almost impossible.

3. Expectations: choose the label carefully

• Schranner emphasized that the language used to frame a negotiation creates expectations. Terms such as "peace" or "Win-Win" can generate hopes that often cannot realistically be met, leading to disappointment among stakeholders.

• Referring to the Camp David negotiations and the documentary "The Human Factor," he noted that one of the lead negotiators said he would change the word "peace" if he could do so again. Schranner applies the same lesson by preferring more precise and achievable labels such as de-escalation, stability, or damage control.

• The central question, he argued, is whether the objective is damage control or a strong outcome. The label must match the realistic target: promising a Win-Win result while delivering damage control creates a credibility and expectation gap. He advised negotiators to keep the objective narrow and concrete rather than framing it around an ambitious big-picture outcome.

4. Role: know which part you play and which responsibilities you have

• Schranner stressed the importance of recognizing when a negotiation has begun. Seemingly administrative requests such as "Can we meet on Monday at 10 o'clock?" may in fact be tactical moves and the opening of a negotiation.

• Once negotiators recognize this, they should consciously switch into the appropriate role. Schranner described moving between roles such as parent, CEO, and professional negotiator, and using deliberate rituals to reinforce that shift. His guiding principle is: "I negotiate a position; I am not that position."

• A professional negotiator, he argued, leaves personal opinions outside the room and does not personally attack or judge the counterpart. Even in negotiations involving criminals or highly difficult counterparts, the task is to negotiate with a human being and solve the conflict not to moralize or escalate.



5. Interests: understanding your counterpart

• Schranner challenged the common advice from the Harvard negotiation approach to understand the other side's motives, pain points, and interests. He distinguished between sales and negotiation: in sales, understanding the customer's needs and asking "why" can be essential; in a difficult negotiation, those same behaviors can transfer power to the counterpart.

• Using the example of a procurement manager demanding a 10% price reduction, he argued that asking "Why 10%?" can hand control of the discussion to the other side. In his experience, it is not possible to fully understand a counterpart in a difficult negotiation, and claiming "I understand you" can create expectations that cannot be fulfilled.

• Instead, he advised negotiators to focus on their own objective, whether damage control or a stronger outcome, and to avoid signalling an understanding they cannot deliver.

6. Being right: do not enter a negotiation believing you are right

• Schranner identified the belief of being "right" as one of the most damaging mindsets in negotiation. Words such as "right," "wrong," "fair," and "unfair" act, in his words, like a "nuclear bomb": they push both parties into an emotional phase and make concession psychologically harder.

• Under pressure, people tend towards flight or fight responses. Flight-oriented negotiators avoid conflict, offer premature compromises, postpone decisions, and escalate internally. Fight-oriented negotiators talk extensively, try to prove the other side wrong, and invoke contracts or prior promises. Neither approach, he argued, leads the counterpart to concede.

• His alternative is to remove the right-versus-wrong framing altogether. Each side has interests; the negotiator should state what they need, ask what the other side needs, and begin negotiating from there.

7. Diversity: men and women need to do their part for more inclusive negotiations

• Schranner presented diversity as a practical risk-management and implementation issue, not a matter of political correctness. In his view, a non-diverse team may find it easier to negotiate internally, but implementation becomes more difficult.

• He introduced the initiative "More Women, More Peace" and called on men to build diverse negotiation teams, arguing that this reduces risk and improves implementation. He also encouraged women to put themselves forward for difficult negotiations.

Schranner's central message was that negotiation is about resolving conflict, not convincing the other side. Where trust and shared values are absent, negotiators should focus on interests, state their demands, and accept conflict rather than avoid it. They should separate the past from the future, choose realistic labels to manage expectations, understand the role they are playing, avoid trying to understand the counterpart, abandon the belief that they are right, and build diverse teams.

He closed by reminding the audience that conflict resolution does not depend solely on large institutions or governments. In his view, the human factor matters most, and meaningful progress can begin in smaller, everyday negotiations.



KEYNOTE SPEECH BY SUSAN GOLDSWORTHY

BEYOND THE FEAR OF FAILURE: HOW HIGH-PERFORMING LEADERS LEARN TO PLAY TO THRIVE

Susan Goldsworthy is an Affiliate Professor of Leadership, Organizational Change and Communications at IMD Business School, an award-winning author, and a former Olympic finalist. She is also a C-suite executive coach, bringing together experience from sport, business, psychology, neuroscience, and leadership.

Beliefs and secure bases

• Goldsworthy began with the idea that what we believe shapes what we achieve. As a young swimmer, she was told she was too small to become a top athlete. Her grandfather, a flyweight boxer, reframed this as an advantage, teaching her that "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" and that "the best things come in small packages." Her point was that beliefs are formed by the people, places, events, experiences, and belief systems around us.

• She introduced the concept of secure bases, which are formed by: the people, places, events, experiences, and belief systems that provide a sense of safety and acceptance, along with the energy to try again and the resilience to fail and recover. Recalling injuries and illness in the run-up to her Olympic trials, she explained that her coach increased training to help her regain lost ground, while her mother researched recovery strategies. Nobody in her close circle focused on the possibility of failure.

• She argued that the brain works in visual images: telling yourself "don't spill the milk" creates the image of spilled milk. The more effective framing is positive: "keep all the milk in the glass." In her view, negotiators and leaders should focus on what they want, not what they fear.

• Goldsworthy also referred to the actualizing tendency, which is the inherent desire of all living organisms to grow and fulfil their potential. The determining factor is the conditions in which they develop. Citing research indicating that people spend 70–80% of their time being influenced by external events, she argued that this balance should be reversed: leaders should spend 70–80% of their time managing their own state.

A stormy outlook and four energy zones

• Goldsworthy placed this personal dimension in a wider context of uncertainty. Referring to the World Economic Forum's global risk ranking, she noted that geo-economic confrontation, misinformation and disinformation, and societal polarization are ranked as the leading risks for the next two years, while environmental risks dominate the ten-year outlook. Drawing on Fritjof Capra, she described these risks as interconnected and interdependent: humanity is a living system within a larger living system.

• She cited research showing that 88% of global leaders expect the next two years to be stormy, turbulent, or unsettled, and 92% expect the same for the next ten years. Against this backdrop, she presented her IMD research with approximately 9,000 executives since April 2020, asking them in which of four energy zones they spend most of their time:

- Performance: positive, high energy – hopeful, invigorated, joyful, challenged.
- Recovery: positive, low energy – calm, serene, relaxed.
- Survival: negative, high energy – frustrated, irritated, anxious.
- Burnout: negative, low energy – hopeless, exhausted.

• She reported that, across groups, between one-third and two-thirds of executives say they spend most of their time in survival or burnout, with survival the larger category. Even those in the performance zone reported becoming irritated or frustrated more quickly and moving between positive and negative states.

• Goldsworthy highlighted recovery as the zone where executives spend the least time, despite its importance for sustained performance. She distinguished genuine recovery – human connection, connection with animals or nature, walking, exercise, or reading – from activities such as answering emails, scrolling, or using social media. She warned that solely relying on holidays for recovery can lead to illness and argued that recovery must be built into every day.

Two needs, two fears and the care/dare model

• Goldsworthy identified two basic psychological needs: acceptance, associated with connection and safety, and achievement, associated with autonomy, meaning, purpose, and recognition, when both are present, people feel grounded; when only one is present, they become unstable.

• The corresponding basic fears are failure and rejection. She linked these fears to the difficulty of change, including anxiety around Artificial Intelligence (AI) and perceived loss of competence. Her research on high-performing leaders in high-performing organizations, as rated by employees, identified two levers: caring and daring.

• Caring means unconditional positive regard and a genuine interest in helping someone grow; it does not mean simply liking someone. Daring means providing risk, challenge, and stretch beyond the comfort zone. Together, they create what she calls "play to thrive": conscious choice, constructive challenge that separates the person from the problem, and courageous communication. She located innovation, creativity, and curiosity in this space as well.

• By contrast, "play not to lose" preserves connection but avoids challenge, which may be useful temporarily but is unsustainable. "Play to dominate" reflects anxiety and a need for control; leaders respond by adding processes, systems, and reporting, which signals distrust and encourages micromanagement. Employees then move into "play to avoid," creating what she described as a "set-up-to-fail" syndrome. The key, she argued, is to notice personal and organizational triggers and to find ways back into "play to thrive."

Reframing failure

• Goldsworthy contrasted a fixed mindset with what she prefers to call a growth "mind shift." By nature, the brain scans for danger; by nurture, people are conditioned through fear-based media and binary categories such as right/wrong and pass/fail. Choosing possibility, opportunity, and growth is therefore a daily practice rather than a fixed identity.

• She also referred to two press-conference examples to illustrate how questions can frame failure. A basketball player challenged the premise that a season without a championship was a failure, describing it instead as a step towards success. A freestyle skier rejected the framing of "two silvers gained or two golds lost," emphasizing her achievements rather than accepting the loss-based question. Goldsworthy described these as "wrong questions" rooted in past conditioning.

• Finally, she introduced ten conditioned masks that people adopt, which were explored further in the breakout session. She highlighted three particularly connected to the fear of failure: the critical mask, marked by self-criticism and criticism of others; the pleasing mask, where self-worth depends on approval and leads to excessive compliance; and the superior mask, a defensive posture of appearing above criticism or beyond the problem.



BREAKOUT SESSION BY SUSAN GOLDSWORTHY

• Susan Goldsworthy's workshop built on her morning session, examining how conditioning shapes what people see, how the brain and body respond to triggers, and how individuals can register, regulate, and reframe their inner state. Her focus was on developing the capacity to respond consciously rather than being driven by habitual patterns and the fear of failure.

Questioning our assumptions

• Goldsworthy used a practical demonstration to show how quickly the brain falls into conditioned assumptions. Her point was that assumptions based on experience can prevent people from seeing what is present. To be innovative, curious, and creative, she argued, individuals must question the assumptions that limit them while retaining those that remain useful.

• Her message was that being absolutely convinced of being right does not guarantee being right. What people believe to be true may reflect habit, culture, or experience rather than reality.

• Goldsworthy quoted physicist David Bohm: "the greatest conditioning of all is believing we are separate." She argued that people rely on one another and co-regulate off one another, and that recognizing interdependence is essential for thriving in a connected world.

Brain, body and the 0.2 seconds

• Goldsworthy explained that the brain naturally defaults to the negative as a survival mechanism. When pain or threat is acknowledged, individuals face a choice: remain in the emotional response, which releases chemicals preparing the body for fight, flight, or freeze, or intervene consciously and choose a different response.

• She also discussed how elite athletes reinterpret physical arousal. A racing heart, visualizing the future, and clammy hands can be interpreted either as nerves or as excitement. Reframing the narrative – for example, telling yourself "this is so exciting" before a high-stakes presentation – can change the physiological and psychological response.

• Explaining the neuroscience, Goldsworthy described how input reaches the sensory thalamus. If it signals major threat or delight, it is sent to the amygdala, which triggers fight, flight, or freeze responses and releases chemicals that keep the body on high alert for around 20 minutes, remaining in the system for six to eight hours. In higher mammals, the signal also reaches the prefrontal cortex, the thinking part of the brain. The full sequence takes approximately 0.5 seconds, of which 0.3 seconds is neurotransmission, leaving roughly 0.2 seconds to intervene.

• She described this as the "0.2-second" opportunity to choose a response rather than lose control of emotion. Because the neural pathway for emotional regulation is the same as that for motor regulation, she suggested a practical training method: deliberately switching hands for routine actions such as picking up an object, opening a door, or using a toothbrush. Practized five times a day for two weeks, she said, this strengthens the capacity to intervene with in the moment; it is also used in clinical anger-management work and requires ongoing practice.

The ten conditioned masks

Goldsworthy explained that conditioned masks arise from personal history, family patterns, culture, and intergenerational conditioning. They may not originate with the individual but can be inherited through lineage. She emphasized that masks are neither good nor bad, that everyone wears several, and that claiming to have none is itself a sign of the superior mask.

She outlined the ten masks as follows:

1. Superior: insecurity beneath a stance of being the smartest person in the room, typically dismissing others.
2. Indulgent: escaping the present through excessive self-treatment, which can develop into addiction.
3. Drama: turning small events into drama, often as a cry for attention or recognition.
4. Brain: becoming stuck in the head, distracted, and disconnected from the body.
5. Victim: self-pity and the belief that life is unfair.
6. Countdown: a constant sense of time pressure and urgency.
7. Treadmill: using work to avoid issues one does not want to confront.
8. Critical: judging oneself and others.
9. Pleasing: deriving self-worth from others' approval and sacrificing one's own needs.
10. Exiled: numbing or dissociating, potentially while in burnout despite appearing normal externally.

• She encouraged participants to identify their dominant masks, understand what those masks protect them from, recognize their triggers and roots, and develop bodily signals, phrases, or trusted allies that help them notice and interrupt the pattern. She stressed that this should be approached playfully rather than judgmentally, as lifelong work.

Register, regulate, reframe

• Goldsworthy presented a three-step practice: register what is happening in the body, regulate the physiological state, and only then reframe the situation. She argued that the body often provides clues before the mind recognizes a problem, such as neck or back tension. Without regulation, a person remains caught in emotion and cannot reframe effectively.

Breathwork as a therapeutic tool

• Goldsworthy described breath as a readily available tool for reducing stress and anxiety, improving clarity, decision-making, wellbeing, energy, and sleep. She explained that staying within the window of tolerance – between hyperarousal, associated with the "hamster wheel," and hypoarousal, associated with numbness and withdrawal – allows the brain to function effectively.

• She noted that accepting an emotion without trying to fix it reduces activity in the amygdala. Breath, she argued, enables a shift from the sympathetic nervous system, associated with stress, to the parasympathetic nervous system, associated with calm and recovery.

• Referring to her IMD research with executives, she said awareness of breath and body scored lowest among the factors measured, while trust, connection, and meaning scored highly. She linked common modern habits – holding in the stomach, shallow chest breathing, mouth breathing, prolonged screen focus, and hunching – to signals of stress in the nervous system.

Exercises to try

• 4-7-8 breathing: inhale through the nose from the belly for four counts, hold for seven, and exhale for eight; calming and useful when waking at night.

• Box breathing: inhale for four, hold for four, exhale for four, and hold for four; used by Navy SEALs to remain calm while focused.

• Pursed-lip breathing: inhale through the nose and exhale slowly through pursed lips, with a longer exhale than inhale; she reported that participants' breathing rates fell to roughly three to four breaths per minute during the practice.



BREAKOUT SESSION BY MATTHIAS SCHRANNER

Following his keynote, Matthias Schranner presented the Schranner Concept®, drawing on almost 20 years in law enforcement and his experience as a hostage negotiator. Built for negotiations without a BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement,) the concept rests on four core elements: preparation, opening, leadership, and deadlock.

Core mindset

• Schranner argued that in a hostage situation there is no BATNA: a negotiator cannot simply walk away or switch to another hostage-taker. His concept therefore does not begin by searching for alternatives; it focuses on negotiating with the counterpart in front of you.

• Because there is no alternative, mistakes are costly. Negotiators must remain focused and show the highest level of respect, even towards a counterpart they dislike. If the other side communicates disrespectfully, he said, the choice is between escalating or de-escalating.

• He advised negotiators not to speculate about power, leverage, or dependency. In his view, it is impossible to know the other side's alternatives or leverage, and assuming weakness, particularly among senior leaders, undermines negotiation performance. He identified the fear of loss, such as losing a customer, supplier, or investor, as a central vulnerability in difficult negotiations.

Preparation

• Schranner observed that many organizations are well-prepared on content – spreadsheets, numbers, and volumes – but insufficiently prepared strategically and tactically. Strategic and tactical preparation includes deciding who should be in the negotiation team, when to walk away, when to increase pressure, and which signals to send.

• He also warned against being over-prepared on content in a way that leads negotiators to build a proposal around what they believe the other side wants. In his view, a proposal belongs at the end of a negotiation, not at the beginning.

Opening

• Schranner stressed that clients often underestimate the first minute of a negotiation. If a negotiator does not take the lead at the outset, he argued, they are unlikely to regain it later. Taking the lead does not require aggression; it requires setting the framework before discussing content, for example by seeking commitment to a timeline and milestones.

• He noted that even a routine email proposing the next meeting is already part of the negotiation. Agreeing to the other side's suggested timeline can hand over the lead and place a negotiator in a weaker position. His principle was to establish the framework first, then move to content.

Leadership

• Schranner based his approach to negotiation leadership on the roles used in crisis negotiation teams, which he referred to as the FBI principles. These comprise a lead negotiator, who addresses the conflict; a commander, who observes the process; and a decision maker, who provides the license-to-negotiate.

• He recommended keeping one's own decision maker out of the room while asking the other side to bring theirs. In his experience, decision makers often accept such invitations because they feel important but then become drawn into the negotiation. For small companies, he suggested delegating important negotiations rather than negotiating personally, noting that founders and CEOs are especially prone to conceding because they fear losing the deal.

Deadlock

• Schranner presented walking away not as failure but as one tactic within a negotiation. If there is no agreement, he argued, someone benefits from the non-agreement; otherwise, an agreement would already exist. If a counterpart does not want to negotiate, they may be benefiting from the current non-agreement.

• His guideline was that the price tag of non-agreement must be higher, more painful, and more expensive than the price tag of agreement. In a deadlock, negotiators should therefore assess whether non-agreement benefits them or the other side, and work to change that.

• He also cautioned against interpreting a counterpart's walk-away as either emotional or tactical. Because it is impossible to know which it is, he advised avoiding guessing games and assumptions in a negotiation.

• Schranner further warned against the word "but," describing it as a "nuclear bomb" in difficult negotiations because it can immediately block a counterpart's final attempt to reach agreement. Instead of "but" he recommended acknowledging the counterpart with "thank you," referring to common interests, and then asking a question or proposing a way forward.



KEYNOTE SPEECH BY DR. JOSHUA WEISS

TURNING SETBACKS AND FAILURES INTO STRATEGIC NEGOTIATION ADVANTAGE

Dr. Joshua N. Weiss is co-founder of the Global Negotiation Initiative at Harvard University and a Senior Fellow at the Harvard Negotiation Project. He is also Director and creator of the Master of Science in Leadership and Negotiation at Bay Path University. With extensive experience in negotiation, mediation, and systemic conflict resolution, he is the author of "Getting Back to the Table: 5 Steps to Reviving Stalled Negotiations."

Weiss opened by noting that, although failure is not an option in principle, negotiators do fail. The most important question, he argued, is not whether failure occurs but what people do with it and how they learn from it. Quoting Jim Collins, he emphasized the need to face the "cold hard facts" of the situation, including the difficult task of turning the mirror on oneself.

Defining failure

- Weiss defined the purpose of a negotiation as meeting one's objective as best as possible, not simply reaching agreement. Failure, in his framework, occurs when a negotiator fails to meet that objective as well as possible.
- He distinguished failure from a setback. A setback is a break in the process that has not completely collapsed; a failure is a process that has collapsed and, for the foreseeable future, will not proceed. He noted that a failed negotiation may sometimes be revived later, but only if the parties understand what happened.
- Referring to William Ury's Getting to Yes with Yourself, Weiss observed that the hardest negotiator is often the one looking back at us in the mirror.
- He argued that the best organizations he has worked with separate shame from failure: rather than concealing what went wrong, they ask what happened and seek to learn from it. His aim, he said, is to help people become resilient negotiators who can recover, reflect, and perform better next time.

Three responses to failure

- Weiss explained that people often fail to learn from failure because blaming others helps them rationalize their own behavior. Cognitive biases, including confirmation bias, also protect existing beliefs and prevent an honest review of events. Heuristics – mental shortcuts that help people navigate complex processes – can similarly prevent deeper examination of what went wrong.
- Weiss identified misaligned interests, lack of preparation, emotions and ego, and walking away too early as common causes of negotiation breakdown. He argued that the best negotiators he has worked with are among the most patient: they continue working the problem after others have given up.

Getting back to the table: four steps

Weiss outlined a four-step process for learning from failed negotiations:

1. Accept that you failed. Although it sounds simple, he acknowledged that acceptance is difficult because it brings frustration, anger, and fear. Emotions are always present in negotiation; the task is not to eliminate them but to manage them.

2. Analyze what happened. Weiss described this as examining both the forest and the trees. At the level of the forest, negotiators should identify which of the seven types of failure occurred. At the level of the trees, they should examine when the negotiation began to fail, identify critical moments, moves, and turns, and consider what could have been done differently and why.

3. Learn the right lessons. Quoting John Maxwell, Weiss argued that experience is not the best teacher; evaluated experience is. Negotiators should ask whether their core approach worked and compare the similarities and differences between negotiations, including power differentials, cross-cultural dynamics, and the number of parties involved. He warned that people unconsciously transfer lessons from one negotiation to another when those lessons may not apply.

4. Unlearn. Quoting Peter Drucker, Weiss argued that learning something new requires unlearning something old. Negotiators should ask what their weakness is, why they have it, where they learned it, and what they can replace it with. His own example was compromise, which he described as "a race to the bottom" when used too early.

Referring to an article titled "Compromise should be the last stop on the train, not the first," he argued that negotiators should understand the other side's motivations, interests, and needs before compromising. Weiss argued that replacing compromise with creative problem-solving allows parties to address underlying interests rather than simply splitting differences. In his experience as a mediator, once parties begin problem-solving creatively, they reach agreement in approximately 95% of cases.

Returning to the conference theme, Weiss said that while failure may be unavoidable, allowing it to become debilitating is not an option. In his view, going directly into failure creates an opportunity to become a better negotiator; once negotiators confront it honestly, the fear begins to subside and meaningful learning becomes possible.



PANEL DISCUSSION: MATTHIAS SCHRANNER, DR. JOSHUA WEISS, DR. BETH FISHER-YOSHIDA

BATNA, COMMON INTERESTS AND DIVERSITY AT THE NEGOTIATION TABLE

Two methodologies, one conversation

A moderated conversation brought together the two main negotiation methodologies represented at the conference: the Harvard principles associated with Getting to Yes, and the Schranner Concept®. Matthias Schranner and Joshua Weiss compared their approaches about BATNA and the relevance of common interests, before Beth Fisher-Yoshida, Professor of Practice at Columbia University, added a perspective on diversity and women in negotiation.

BATNA: best alternative to a negotiated agreement

• Joshua Weiss explained that, if success means meeting one's objective as effectively as possible, a BATNA can itself represent an alternative form of success. Before entering a negotiation, he argued, negotiators should think through both their own BATNA and the counterpart's. If an offer is worse than one's BATNA, the rational response may be to walk away and pursue the alternative.

• He illustrated this with an engineering firm that initially believed it could not walk away from major clients. Over time, it began reviewing unprofitable or difficult client relationships and ultimately asked how to end those relationships more effectively to focus on better clients. For Weiss, this showed that a BATNA is not simply a fallback; it is a standard of comparison that answers the question, "Did I get a good deal? And if so, compared to what?" It can also help negotiators resist power tactics and recognize that they have options.

• Weiss cautioned against using a BATNA to threaten or pressure the other side. Naming a specific alternative, he argued, can turn the discussion into a battle of wills and damage the relationship. In his view, the greatest value lies in the process of thinking the BATNA through: it builds confidence, clarifies how much one needs the deal, and helps a potentially weaker party see that it has choices.

• Matthias Schranner offered a contrasting view. In the Schranner Concept®, the aim is not to create or rely on an alternative. He observed that clients often try to construct one; for example, by saying that if no agreement is reached with Supplier A, they can move to Supplier B. In his view, this is the wrong starting point. Where no alternative exists, negotiators must be more focused, prepared, and respectful, because mistakes carry heavier consequences. Accordingly, his approach does not mention an alternative to the counterpart.

The role of common interests

• The conversation then turned to common interests. Schranner argued that Harvard-style thinking places strong emphasis on identifying common interests to build a relationship. From his experience negotiating with criminals and counterparts operating within very different value systems, however, he does not believe a common interest always exists. What can usually be discussed, he said, is a shared willingness to reach an agreement.

• Weiss responded that context matters. Hostage negotiation differs from business negotiation, where parties may share goals such as delivering on budget and schedule. In his view, exploring common interests is necessary but not sufficient. Shared experiences and common ground can build rapport, but value is often created by understanding differences.

• He used the image of an iceberg to distinguish positions from interests. What people say they want sits above the surface, while the reasons behind it – motivations, fear of losing face, or uncertainty about how to explain a deal internally – lie below. Understanding those underlying factors, he argued, is essential to reaching a sustainable agreement.

• A language point was also raised: in German, the equivalent of "interest" is often expressed as "motive." What Weiss describes as the interest behind a position may therefore be understood in German as the motive behind the interest, which can contribute to conceptual confusion.

Diversity and women in negotiation

• Beth Fisher-Yoshida was invited to comment on diversity and the role of women in negotiations. She began by questioning why audiences frequently ask what women bring to the negotiation table, while rarely asking what men bring.

• Her central point was that value at the negotiation table comes from different perspectives, not only gender. Age, discipline, industry, background, race, and ethnicity all shape how people see a problem.

• She acknowledged that diverse representation can make negotiation, particularly consensus-building, more complicated, but argued that implementation improves because the groups responsible for implementation are represented.

• On BATNA, Fisher-Yoshida noted that for many women negotiation is relational rather than transactional. If preserving the relationship matters more than achieving a particular outcome, the objective shifts, and the ask may become smaller. She added that interests may not be aligned if the counterpart does not value the relationship to the same degree.

The closing message was that negotiators need a broad toolkit and a willingness to learn from one another. If more people understand how to negotiate well, the argument concluded, the world will be a better place.





BREAKOUT SESSION BY DR. JOSHUA WEISS

Joshua Weiss's breakout session continued the morning's theme in a smaller, more interactive format. He described it as an experiment on a subject that negotiators often struggle to discuss openly. The session examined whether failure should be understood primarily as an outcome or as a process, introduced a scale for assessing its severity, and explored cases that illustrate common negotiation pitfalls.

Outcome or process?

• Weiss explained that, after writing his book, he realized that his seven categories of failure were somewhat more focused on outcomes. He came to see that process matters just as much.

• He drew on five hostage-crisis cases from his earlier case-study book. When he asked each negotiator how they measured success, all answered in terms of process rather than outcome. The same actions could lead to everyone dying in one case and everyone surviving in the next, so negotiators cannot judge themselves by outcome alone. Instead, they follow protocols and steps and ask whether they followed them.

• He recalled one case in which an untrained person shouted at a barricaded individual, yet the hostages still came out alive. The negotiator classified it as a failure because the positive result occurred despite, rather than because of, their best efforts. For Weiss, this illustrated that a good outcome does not necessarily validate a poor process.

• He also cited American football coach Nick Saban, who, even after a 55–0 victory, begins by asking what could have been done better. The quotation that opens the final chapter of Weiss's book captures the same mindset: "Never waste a good failure."

How bad was it? A four-point scale

• Weiss introduced a four-point scale, analogous to the magnitude scale used for earthquakes, to help negotiators distinguish a setback from a catastrophe.

Level 1: A modest setback, from which creativity may allow the parties to return to the table.

Level 2: A more severe setback.

Level 3: A point at which it becomes difficult to see a way back to the table.

Level 4: A complete failure, with no realistic way back.

• He acknowledged that the rating is subjective but argued that it helps negotiators assess where they are on the spectrum and decide whether attempting to revive the negotiation makes sense.

Weiss closed by encouraging participants to embrace failure and move through it rather than avoid it. While failure remains painful, he argued, it is not as damaging as people often fear, and it is one of the most important ways negotiators learn.

BREAKOUT BY DR. BETH FISHER-YOSHIDA
THE MEANING OF FAILURE TO WOMEN IN NEGOTIATION

Dr. Beth Fisher-Yoshida is a Professor of Practice in Columbia University's MS Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Program and Director of Women, Peace, and Leadership at Columbia's AC[4]. She is a facilitator, educator, mediator, and executive coach, and President and CEO of Fisher Yoshida International.

Fisher-Yoshida's breakout session used a short presentation followed by small-group discussion and a shared reflection. It examined how failure is defined, why complex problem-solving efforts fail, and how high-status and low-status groups experience and interpret failure differently.

What do we mean by failure?

• Fisher-Yoshida began by examining the meaning of the word "failure." She listed its common associations: non-performance, insufficiency, deterioration or breakdown, impasse, total collapse, decline, or loss.

• Personally, she said, she prefers to reframe failure and ask what can be learned from it. Her aim was not to deny difficulty or loss, but to encourage negotiators to examine failure constructively rather than allowing it to become a fixed judgment about themselves or others.

The logic of failure

• Drawing on Dietrich Dörner's research on complex problem solving, Fisher-Yoshida outlined patterns associated with failure. People who fail, she explained, often act without sufficient prior analysis – "winging it" – rather than building a solid foundation of knowledge. They also fail to anticipate side effects and unintended consequences, assume that the absence of immediately visible negative effects means a measure is working, and become so involved in detail that they miss emerging needs and changes.

• By contrast, people who achieve positive outcomes tend to make more decisions, and smaller and more frequent ones. They act more complexly, attending to nuance, different constituencies, and the need to adapt messages to different audiences. They focus on the real issue first, ask "why" rather than relying on assumptions, and test their hypotheses; for example, by developing prototypes and integrating feedback. She referenced The Social Lab Revolution in this context.

• Fisher-Yoshida connected this to her change-management work. Leaders often wait until a major decision is fully formed before communicating it. In the meantime, she argued, people create their own explanations, which are frequently worse than the eventual outcome. By the time leaders communicate, their message may no longer be believed. Successful leaders, she said, communicate in smaller and more frequent steps.

High-status and low-status groups

• Fisher-Yoshida then examined how high-status and low-status groups tend to interpret failure. High-status or dominant groups, she argued, often attribute individual failure to external causes, view minority groups as a monolith, shift blame from systemic issues to marginalized groups, assume everyone has equal freedom of choice and control over outcomes, and attribute failure to laziness or incompetence.

• She used the question "What value do women bring to the table?" as an example. In her view, the question itself treats women as one homogeneous group, when there are many different women with different experiences, perspectives, and strengths.

• Low-status groups, by contrast, may internalize blame because of social conditioning and the stories told about them. They may fail to recognize unfair systemic constraints and instead focus narrowly on their own competence. Fisher-Yoshida emphasized that these patterns are shaped by social systems, not simply individual behavior.

Narratives and confidence

• Fisher-Yoshida also discussed the role of narrative. People carry stories formed through education, upbringing, profession, relationships, media, and social media. These stories often operate subconsciously until a particular situation activates them.

• Using the example of a woman negotiating salary with a more senior man, she described how competing narratives – being told to be nice and respectful, while also being encouraged to assert oneself – can create confusion. Her recommendation was to become conscious of the stories one carries, identify those that support growth, and replace limiting narratives with new ones. In her view, unlearning requires replacement: a new narrative must be developed and tested over time.

Reflections on equity and the perception tax

• Following the group discussion, Fisher-Yoshida reflected that, although conditions have improved in some industries and organizations, equity is still not consistent across the board. She referred to recurring survey evidence, including the annual Lean In/McKinsey report, indicating that women still tend to earn less than men in the same role and at the same rank. She stressed that these are generalizations rather than claims about every individual woman or man.

• She introduced the concept of a "perception tax" from her recent research. While in a negotiation, some people spend significant attention monitoring how they are being perceived: wondering whether they are being too bold, how they should phrase a point, or whether they will be judged negatively. That attention, she argued, is diverted from the negotiation itself and can cause them to miss the moment to speak. Once a conversation has moved on, re-entering it becomes much harder.

• She also noted that women often negotiate more effectively on behalf of others than for themselves, partly because they may be wary of appearing aggressive when advocating for their own interests.

Her final message was that support matters. Men and women can act as allies and mentors to one another, and creating space for different voices strengthens negotiation. In her view, there is room for everyone at the table.



FIRESIDE CHAT WITH SAM MCALISTER

POWER IMBALANCE IN NEGOTIATIONS: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Sam McAlister is an Emmy and BAFTA-nominated producer, author, TEDx speaker, and Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics, where she teaches negotiation. She has negotiated at the highest levels of power – from Buckingham Palace and the White House to Tesla and Facebook – securing interviews with figures including Prince Andrew, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, President Bill Clinton, Elon Musk, and Sheryl Sandberg. She is the author of Scoops: Behind the Scenes of the BBC's Most Shocking Interviews.

Booking is negotiating

• As a producer for BBC Newsnight, McAlister's job was to persuade people to appear on a demanding news program – something most guests did not want to do. Although the team called it "booking," she described it as negotiation in practice. Securing an interview could take months or even years, and she estimated that 99% of her work involved rejection.

• She became resilient by learning not to take rejection personally and by always asking why she had been refused. The answer, she said, could lead to a yes at a later stage, whether in two years or five. She distinguished four kinds of "no":

1. The hard no: non-negotiable for both sides.
2. The "no, but": a refusal that contains a condition or opening worth exploring.
3. The middle ground: a position that may move with further discussion.
4. People playing with you: counterparts who imply a possible yes but never intend to agree.

• Knowing the difference between these responses, she said, was one of the most enjoyable and valuable parts of her job.

Finding the right person and building trust

• McAlister described finding the right person to speak to as often the hardest part of the process. With large companies, multiple agencies might each claim to be the correct contact.

• She used a double approach: an official channel and an unofficial one, which she estimated worked roughly 50-50. Through the unofficial channel, she looked for someone within two degrees of separation from powerful people whom she could meet face to face. Trust, she said, was her currency. Because people typically fear journalists, she worked to establish herself as someone of integrity and discretion – someone who would protect what she was told, even when her own team wanted to know.

• She also stressed the importance of self-knowledge: knowing when she was not the right person for a particular meeting.

Empathy, humility, and the human element

• McAlister argued that there is no single blueprint for persuading someone to give an interview. Each person has different commercial, reputational, and personal reasons for saying yes or no. Her approach combined empathy and humility: she tried to see the situation from the other person's perspective, including their business interests, concerns about risk, and human motivations.

• She estimated that at least 60% of her negotiations resided in the human element – an aspect she believed many colleagues overlooked. Where there was no commercial reason to appear, she looked for a persuasive intellectual or personal reason instead.

• She also explained that she was able to remain objective because she met powerful people only in professional settings. Unaffected by power, money, or influence, she was often able to offer a directness that powerful people, who are frequently surrounded by people telling them what they want to hear, found refreshing.

The 2019 interview

• The negotiation for the 2019 BBC interview with Prince Andrew took 13 months. Her team initially declined because the proposed conditions limited the interview to Prince Andrew's charitable work. McAlister walked away politely, while indicating the door remained open if his position changed. Several months later, she was invited to Buckingham Palace.

• She attributed the eventual yes to mutual respect and mutual fear: when negotiating with his Chief of Staff, both women knew that one of them would be blamed if the interview went wrong. In her view, Prince Andrew agreed because he wanted to be remembered for the right reasons after a major fall from grace, was approaching his 60th birthday and had overconfidence in his ability as an interviewee – a common trait, she noted. His relatively small staff also meant there were fewer people around him to filter or block the approach.



CLOSING REFLECTIONS
WHAT THE NEGOTIATION CONFERENCE 2026 REVEALED

Across the keynotes, workshops, and conversations, one message emerged clearly: failure in negotiation is not the end of the story. It is a source of information, resilience, and better decision-making, if negotiators are willing to examine it honestly.

The speakers approached this from different angles. Matthias Schranner showed how to negotiate when trust is absent and counterparts lead with power. Susan Goldsworthy and Beth Fisher-Yoshida explored how beliefs, inner state, conditioning, and status shape performance before negotiators even reach the table. Joshua Weiss offered a practical framework for accepting, analyzing, and learning from failure. Sam McAlister demonstrated how trust, empathy, persistence, and knowing when to step aside can create access to the most difficult counterparts. Together, they reinforced a central idea: great negotiators are not defined by never failing. They are defined by how quickly they recognize what happened, regulate themselves, extract the right lessons, and return to the table stronger.

Three questions to take away

1. What did I focus on and did it serve my objective?
2. What part of this outcome was within my control, and what will I do differently next time?
3. Which assumption, habit, or fear do I need to unlearn before my next high-stakes negotiation?

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