CONFERENCE ZURICH | 2026 X SCHRANNER NEGOTIATION INSTITUTE

ACADEMIC DAY 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What makes a successful negotiation?

Schranner Negotiation Institute | N-Conference Zurich
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What Defines Success in Negotiation?

The discussion brought together expert perspectives from academia and professional practice, including business, trade, diplomacy, peacebuilding and high-stakes conflict negotiation. The central question was deceptively simple: when can a negotiation be called successful?

The Institute hosted Remigiusz Smolinski, Peter Kesting, Joshua Weiss, Sam McAlister, Beth Fisher-Yoshida, Christopher Ratsch, Matthias Schranner, Fabio Falkenstein, and Marzia Marastoni.

(01) Success Requires a Defined Objective

A recurring argument was that an agreement is not the objective by default. Success must be judged against what the negotiator actually set out to accomplish. An agreement may fail to solve the underlying problem, while a decision not to agree may protect important interests. Participants also emphasized that objectives should be explicit enough to support accountability and improvement. Vague targets can make nearly any outcome appear satisfactory.

Implication: Define the intended result, constraints, and acceptable alternatives before entering negotiations. Revisit objectives when circumstances materially change. If you don't have targets, the negotiation can't be seen as a success.

(02) Success is Multidimensional

Peter Kesting and Remigiusz Smolinski's paper, *Defining Success and Failure in International Negotiation*, described an emerging research approach examining four dimensions of negotiation performance: substance, relationships, process and ethics. They differentiated the basic question of whether the negotiation achieved its purpose from the additional question of how well it was conducted. These dimensions may not point in the same direction: a strong substantive result may weaken trust, be difficult to implement, or raise ethical concerns.

(03) There is No Objective Success

Participants challenged the idea of a universally objective verdict. Negotiators, principals, political leaders, constituencies and affected communities may assess the same result differently. In peace negotiations, a signed agreement can be judged very differently when implementation, public approval, durability and everyday safety are considered. The roundtable did not agree on a single universal definition; it instead emphasized the need to state whose success is being assessed, against which objectives and over what period.

CORE PROPOSITION

An agreement is an event. Success is an assessment of objectives, conduct, consequences and time.

How Success Changes Across Context

(04) Positive Success and Negative Success

A useful distinction emerged between positive success, where negotiation improves the starting situation or creates an advantage, and negative success, where it prevents deterioration or limits harm. In high-stakes contexts, avoiding loss of life, preventing escalation or stabilizing a relationship may be a significant achievement even if an ambitious agreement remains out of reach. Participants drew parallels between trade disputes, humanitarian access and crisis negotiation.

Practical question: Are we negotiating to create additional value, or primarily to prevent damage? The answer changes both strategy and the appropriate performance measures.

(05) Formal Negotiation Versus Informal Negotiation

The closing discussion highlighted a distinction between the visible, formal negotiating arena and the informal exchanges surrounding it. One perspective held that formal negotiations, particularly under political or public scrutiny, can become theatrical displays of status, power and confrontation. Informal interactions may offer more space for creativity, mutual understanding and workable solutions. This was presented as a context-sensitive observation, not a universal rule.

Several participants also cautioned that public theatrics matter: they shape expectations and can damage confidence in negotiation as a constructive process. Success may require managing both the formal process and the less visible work of relationship-building.

(06) Time, Implementation and Relationships Matter

An outcome that appears successful on signing day may fail months or years later. Contributors pointed to the sustainability of peace agreements, the long-term consequences of trade policies and professional relationships that produce opportunities only after repeated refusals. Relationship preservation can therefore be a legitimate objective rather than a secondary courtesy. One of the clearest disagreements was how to balance outcome and process: in some law-enforcement settings, following established protocols is central because negotiators cannot control every consequence; complex corporate negotiations may demand greater adaptation and creativity.

DISCUSSION TAKEAWAY

The same negotiation can look successful now and unsuccessful later, or the reverse.

From Defining Success to Improving Performance

(07) Measure Negotiation Performance, Not Only Business Results

The research discussion distinguished sales volumes, completed deals and other organizational outcomes from the quality of negotiation itself. Results can be influenced by markets, timing, bargaining position and external stakeholders. A strong outcome does not necessarily prove a strong process, and vice versa. Organizations were encouraged to evaluate negotiators on identifiable competencies and processes alongside eventual results.

(08) Turn Experience Into Examined Experience

Participants observed that post-negotiation reviews are often skipped precisely when a crisis has been resolved. Yet improvement depends on reviewing what was controllable, which decisions were effective, where the process broke down and what should change next time. Learning is more likely to endure when leaders create time for structured reflection and repeated practice rather than relying on isolated training sessions. AI-assisted evaluation was raised as a promising research direction for more consistent, multidimensional feedback - not as a substitute for judgment or a settled solution.

(09) A Practical Framework for Negotiation Teams

- **Before**: Specify objectives, non-negotiable boundaries, decision mandates, stakeholders and alternatives. Identify whether the priority is value creation or harm prevention.
- **During**: Track substantive progress, relationship effects, ethical constraints and the quality of the process. Distinguish public positioning from constructive informal engagement.
- **After:** Evaluate immediate objectives and likely long-term consequences. Debrief process and competencies even if the desired deal was achieved or a crisis was avoided.

QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN OPEN

How should competing stakeholders' definitions of success be reconciled? How should the four performance dimensions be weighted across industries and negotiation types? When should process outweigh outcome? And how can organizations measure negotiation competence credibly when an alternative outcome can never be observed? The roundtable identified these as important subjects for further research and practice.

Closing insight: Negotiation success cannot be reduced to a signature, a headline or a single KPI. It requires clarity about purpose, disciplined evaluation of conduct, and attention to the people and consequences affected by the result.