

## ALUMNI STORY

### Oxford Programme on Negotiation

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**nengli** GLOBAL  
能力

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## Imagining yourself in someone else’s shoes

**I started my consultancy company, Nengli Global, to support a diverse client base which, to date, has encompassed everything from building a San Francisco-based wearable tech start-up, to growing a Chinese packaging business, to managing VIP transport and security at six different Olympic Games.**

Most of my work is focused on helping start-ups and enterprises plan, establish, and implement international operations across a range of industries – and that means I do a lot of negotiating. Rather than conducting formal discussions or trying to get one major deal over the line over a long period, I use a wide-ranging approach to break down issues and move forward in many small areas. Ultimately, this helps achieve the final, major goal.

Even though what I do – operations management – sounds rather industrial and mechanical, it is really all about people. I build teams for other companies and manage them; bring people together to execute plans, navigating time and cultural differences; and manage and grow existing relationships with my clients. Because I am quite flexible about the way I work – sometimes charging

as an external consultant, sometimes taking a stake in the client company – I am negotiating in the context of relationships all the time. My guiding principle has always been to determine how I can best relate to my client. What can I do that improves communication and freedom of expression?

I applied to the Oxford Programme on Negotiation to receive formal education about the process of negotiation, learn new techniques and approaches, and ultimately improve my own understanding and related negotiation skills. Like most people I had no formal education regarding negotiation and what I knew had been learned simply through practice and experience. Learning concepts such as Framing the Substance and defining Zones of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) was a missing piece, providing clarity and a framework to the life lessons and experiences to date.

In addition to negotiation skills, I also wanted to discover if executive education in general was right for me as I had not done a formal education course since my undergraduate degree. ‘Learning by doing’ has been the means of furthering my own understanding and knowledge since graduation. The programme lived up to my expectations and I was able to benefit from it immediately, with improved results in my relationships

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and negotiations with suppliers and clients alike. Having spent several years of my career based in China, I was pleased to interact with the international cohort and compare notes and working styles from region to region which gave me a new perspective.

### **Continuing ideas from new perspectives**

The most interesting part of the programme for me, as a Briton who has been living and working in China for some years, was the recurring theme of negotiation across cultures. It was fascinating to hear Programme Director Tim Cullen's perspectives: his experience with doing business in China, mostly in the context of very large organisations such as Ford and the World Bank, were particularly interesting. Tim's experiences with the large-scale, and mine with the small scale provided me with a unique compare-and-contrast opportunity and clarified the similarities and critical differences that need to be considered at the two ends of the scale. Additionally, because I speak Mandarin and developed my early career working within that culture, much of my style of negotiating took on the stylistic elements of China. The programme actually put me in the shoes of a person wondering how best to deal with Westerners!

One aspect of my cross-cultural negotiation skills that has evolved and become much more effective since attending the Programme relates to Sino-US projects. Whilst acknowledging the inherent limitations when referring to cultural stereotypes, I have noticed that often people in China want to have a lot of early information and, to the US viewpoint, seemingly extraneous detail before coming to a decision. Through first establishing a broader context, gradually an agreement on a single viewpoint is reached and then a decision made. In contrast, when working within a US environment, a typical manager might say, 'Give me the outline or a general idea, and if I need more information, I'll ask you.'

I believe you can look at these different approaches as two triangles – one bottom up resting on a point, and one top-down resting flat on a base. Both parties are focused on achieving context to make a decision, but the varied approaches are often cause for unintended frustration: too much information and it becomes tiresome under the US approach; too little and it is insufficient for the Chinese style.

The solution is to find the band in the middle of the two triangles; this maximises the effective overlap of communication and understanding for both parties. The US organisation should realise that providing a larger contextual background for its Chinese partner will enhance the negotiation process, while the Chinese organisation should recognise the strong 'big picture' focus of its US partner. I believe Europeans are more in the middle: compared with our US counterparts, we tend to seek out more information before making decisions, but less than the Chinese. Focusing on the effective build-up of understanding and trust is paramount throughout the entire negotiation process and this came across continuously during the programme.

I enjoyed participating in the Oxford Programme on Negotiation and I regularly revisit the concepts and ideas I learned. I find they enhance my negotiation results both in and out of work situations. I have maintained my connections with Saïd Business School and have gone on to continue furthering my education as a result. In fact, I recently revisited Oxford to share further ideas with the current OPN attendees. I would encourage anybody to attend the Oxford Programme on Negotiation: not only will it provide thought provoking ideas, but the skills and techniques you learn will quickly reap rewards as they are applied to your own career.

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