

# Our leaders need empathy to solve the Brexit puzzle

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‘In negotiations of all kinds, the greater your capacity for empathy — the more carefully you try to understand all of the other side’s motivations, interests and constraints — the more options you tend to have for potentially resolving the dispute or deadlock.’

These are wise words from the negotiation guru Deepak Malhotra of Harvard Business School. He goes on to conclude that “a lack of empathy usually guarantees failure”.

If these observations were merely academic, we might nod sagely and agree. But they are not. We are hearing more these days about a lack of empathy at senior political levels. Sadly, Malhotra’s words may provide at least a partial diagnosis of what has gone wrong with the UK’s Brexit negotiations.

In his book, *Negotiating the Impossible*, Malhotra describes three central components of effective negotiation: framing, process and empathy. Another notable writer in this field, Kenneth Cloke, emphasises the criticality of these components.

Cloke points out that nearly all of our focus in solving political problems is on content while comparatively little time is spent on process and relationships. Ironically, working hard to build trust and goodwill, being careful with language and showing respect for contrary viewpoints, enhances the prospects of success. Obvious, perhaps. But this doesn’t appear to be the experience in Brexit negotiations and we may suffer the consequences.

As Cloke says: “When we act unilaterally, in our own exclusive self-interest, in matters that directly and significantly impact others, they feel disrespected and more inclined to resist.” He suggests that if we added up the costs we incur as a consequence, the results would be staggering. Think of the cost to the British economy because of the uncertainty arising from Brexit. Running at £600 million a week, according to one report.

Where does this lead us? Any new approach to Brexit must, it seems, address these issues of process and empathy. Adversarial, binary approaches which stimulate the fight or flight response may no longer be fit for purpose. We must find ways to deal with complexity, volatility, uncertainty and ambiguity. We need leaders who can work with these ideas.

Our political leaders may have years ahead of difficult negotiations about our future relationship with Europe. Who, of the possible candidates for prime minister, has the intellectual and emotional range to handle these in a way which will ensure constructive political, economic and social relationships?