

# Competitors must learn how to become better negotiators

By Michelle Warren

**T**here is enough food produced in the world to feed all people at least four times more than they need. Yet, millions still go hungry while thousands of tons of food are thrown away every day. Why do we let things like this happen?

This is a question raised by Mark Smith – director of CMI International Group, specialists in negotiation, partnering and managing strategic relationships – who spoke about conflict management at a two day conference hosted by The New Work Organization in Ireland last week.

CMI International Group is one of a handful of consulting firms descended from the Harvard Negotiation Project in the United States. Smith and his partner Horacio Falcao have recently teamed up with Pat Savage of the Irish change management facilitator, consultancy and training organisation IPC. One of their goals is to see Irish organisations build on present successes and become stronger competitors by changing the nature of industrial relations – how management and labour regard and work with one another.

Speaking to Irish business people, Smith explained that if organisations want to compete effectively in the future, they have to learn to collaborate. Competitors are often disabled



Horacio Falcao and (right) Mark Smith of CMI International Group: competitors must collaborate

TONY O'SHEA

by fear or suspicion – they hoard their resources to prevent those who they perceive as their rivals from gaining any benefit. They “focus less on generating the greatest possible value than on simply achieving greater value than their competitors.”

As Smith pointed out, he'd rather have 1 per cent of a gigantic pie than 100 per cent of

a tiny one. “If we are to prosper, the question we face is not whether or not we will collaborate, but how we can most productively collaborate while competing? The simple answer is to become better negotiators,” he said.

Unfortunately we are crippled by common misconceptions about what it means to negotiate.

Too much time is spent haggling over irrelevant issues and making concessions – most of which are charades. Smith calls the old system “self-limiting” and defines negotiating in much broader terms: “Any time we seek to influence the decisions, the actions, or the attitudes of someone else, we are negotiating. Negotiating is really about creating value and

capturing it.” The way that we conduct ourselves in everyday negotiations determines the nature of the relationships we build, said Smith. “No single issue in negotiation is more important than sustaining the relationship at a workable level.”

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business, management and unions and sometimes even different departments view each other with suspicion – as enemies rather than partners. These adversarial relationships get in the way of organisations maximizing their potential. For example, resentment and evidence of neglected relationships rear their heads during labour negotiations and detract

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management and explore all the best options at hand, they must bring issues out in the open and make an effort to understand one another's strategic interests.

**I**nstead of wasting their energies fighting against each other, they fight together against the challenges of a relentlessly competitive marketplace. They can develop greater value for both sides in this way than they could ever achieve through the traditional, corrosive dance of positional bargaining,” explained Smith.

“Organisations investing in resolving old internal tensions and preventing new ones are thereby building critical competitive advantages over those ones that are still squandering valuable resources in counter productive contention,” he said.

The partnership between CMI and IPC aims to provide Irish organisations with the resources to succeed and compete on a whole new playing ground. The team is also optimistic about facilitating relations between the north and south of Ireland. CMI has several years of public sector expertise working with governments around the world to solve disputes and build relationships; including facilitating a peace process in Columbia and developing a strategy for managing bad-debt recovery in Mexico. One of their senior people is currently on loan to the Clinton government to help with the changing hands of the Panama Canal.

“Alliances that fail generally do so because the organisations involved neglect the human side of things. If you can make your relationship itself a topic of conversation, then you can change adversarial relationships and create value,” said Smith.

Conflicting interests are inevitable between two groups, such as management and labour, but they are not unmanageable. If the groups want to reap the benefits of relationship