

Practical Tips for Negotiations with Bank Officials

***NOTE:** Corporate cultures are a world apart from NGOs. And Bank negotiations usually center not only on "ideas", but also on underlying issues of "power" relations. Here are some practical tips which I've found useful, based on personal experience. The intention here is not to teach "one-upmanship", but to help NGOs put their message across, and to get their desired responses in meetings.*

DRESS UP. It is part of corporate culture. Dressing up will help you avoid unnecessary hassles, like being stopped by security personnel or being denied appointments by over-protective Bank staff. Unless this is precisely the point you'd like to raise, access to officials should be the least of your worries.

SET UP APPOINTMENTS. Be kind to secretaries. They also serve gatekeepers and confidants. Leave them your calling card or contact address and phone. The boss will likely forget; but secretaries won't.

In any case, always be ready for "walk-in" meetings or "corridor-lobbying". Give room for spontaneity. Small, informal meetings over lunch or coffee breaks are best, because you will have the official's undivided attention.

COME EARLY FOR APPOINTMENTS. It makes the strongest first impression. While waiting, review your notes. Keep busy.

TALK ABOUT THE RIGHT ISSUE TO THE RIGHT PERSON. Know who in the Bank is in charge of what, and whom you should talk to. No use wasting each other's time. If the Bank official just sends his junior representative, or if you find out that you are talking to the wrong person, just state your message, cut your meeting short, and then leave.

BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR SPECIFIC PURPOSE, AND PLAN YOUR MESSAGE WELL. Are you: Searching for information? Protesting a Bank project? Proposing an action plan?

Know how much meeting time you have in advance, and the official you are speaking to. If you are in a group, role-play who will speak first, and act-out what each one will say. Better still, prepare a one-page written summary of your message, which you can leave behind after the meeting.

TRY TO EMPHASIZE JUST ONE CENTRAL MESSAGE. Busy Bank officials are likely to forget all the details. Introduce yourself and what/whom you represent. Clearly state your purpose, what your issues are, and what you would like the Bank to do.

Know your facts. Bank officials are likely to jump on the smallest wrong detail or statistics you give, and to wrestle you to the ground on this. If you make a mistake, quickly get back to your main message.

If you wish to present a set of documents, include a one-paged summary up-front. Try using colored/tinted paper. With so much paper lying around, busy officials have very short attention spans.

TRY TO START BY SAYING SOMETHING THAT THE BANK WOULD LIKE TO HEAR, TO CAPTURE THEIR ATTENTION. Then proceed to state your issues. For instance: you may start by acknowledging the Bank's efforts towards reforms. After that, state your issues, and what you expect the Bank to do. Remember that there is always some initial hesitance on the part of the Bank officials to meet with NGOs.

SPEAK OUT LOUD AND CLEAR. Never mind if your English is bad. It is the confidence that counts. Sound convinced and convincing. Do not be intimidated.

PRESENT CONCRETE DEMANDS, NOT JUST COMPLAINTS. Always pin down your demands to specific follow-up actions, i.e. funding questions, target dates and deadlines and measures of compliance. Explain how it is in the "best interest" of the Bank to act on the issues. If you can translate your issues into monetary terms, then you are likely to be more convincing. Money is the language that the Bank understands. You can point out, for instance, how the Bank could have avoided the costs of a failed project if the Bank had only consulted with the affected local community, in the first place. Or else you could mention how a thoroughly-done EIA could save environmental costs and damage in the longer-run.

KNOW WHERE TO SIT. The physical lay-out in a meeting suggests underlying power relations. A desk, for instance, is a symbol of power; and so is an official surrounded by his assistants. Try to avoid sitting opposite an official who is positioned behind his desk. At best, pull your chair beside his desk. If there are other options, choose to sit around a neutral table, or place chairs around in a circle.

NEVER TAKE "NO" FOR AN ANSWER. Often, Bank officials will put the blame on governments, and say that it is governments, not the Bank, which decides on projects. Or else, they will say that they will "do their best". Don't take these answers at face-value. Always be ready to propose concrete, workable actions and solutions. Try not to leave a meeting without a clear next step.

DO NOT EMBARRASS AN OFFICIAL IN FRONT OF HIS COLLEAGUES OR SUPERIORS. Try to keep the broader view that Bank officials who are willing to meet with NGOs are also likely to be the more open ones. Other officials may not want to meet with NGOs at all.

DO NOT ACCEPT PATRONIZING STATEMENTS FROM BANK OFFICIALS. Statements that suggest pity for NGOs and locally-affected communities have no place in negotiations. You are seeking justice not sympathy.

PUT THINGS DOWN IN WRITING. Take notes of your meeting. Bureaucracies value paperwork. Bank officials invariably respond only to written arrangements, and to ignore verbal agreements. To them, what is not written does not exist at all. If the commitments are made through meetings or phone calls, take time to write this down, and send it back to the official concerned, as proof or reminder that a commitment has been made. If a commitment is deemed very important, furnish a copy to his¹ colleague or superior.

TOWARDS THE END OF THE MEETING, BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE YOUR CENTRAL MESSAGE, THANK THE OFFICIAL(S), AND SHAKE HANDS. This will leave a lasting impression that an agreement has been reached.

This briefing was prepared by Antonio B. Quizon, Executive Director, Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC). It was presented at the "MDB Literacy Workshop" sponsored by ANGOC at Innotech, Quezon City Philippines on 20 April 1996 and in the NGO Manual on ADB.

¹ Use of the male pronoun here for Bank officials is deliberate. Most Bank officials are men.