GUIDANCE

Hostage negotiation

What an organisation has to understand about negotiation in order to support it: the roles, the phases, the information discipline, and the positions that have to be decided before anyone is taken.

European Interagency Security Forum

Few humanitarian organisations negotiate for the release of their own staff. The negotiation is conducted by an intermediary with standing among the captors, by a government, by a specialist provider, or by a combination of the three. What the organisation does is establish the conditions in which a negotiation can succeed, and avoid the activities that cause it to fail.

This guidance is written for that supporting role. It does not set out a negotiation method, which requires training and experience the sector does not generally hold, and it does not describe how to conduct a transaction.

What negotiation is, and what it is not

Negotiation is a process of communication conducted over time with the objective of changing what the other party is willing to accept. It is not a conversation with a single decision at the end. Almost everything that determines the outcome happens before any figure is discussed, and the most important of it is whether the captors believe they are dealing with a competent party that will keep its word.

Bargaining is the part of it that concerns the price. Organisations and their advisers frequently treat the whole process as bargaining, which produces a short, transactional exchange that is vulnerable to being reopened the moment a better offer appears from elsewhere.

The parties

Party	Interest	Common mistake made about them
The captors on the ground	Money, survival, standing within their own group	Assumed to be the decision makers, when they are frequently holding the person on behalf of somebody else
Whoever commissioned the operation	The return on the capital invested	Left out of the analysis entirely
The intermediary	Standing, and the fee. Their credibility with both sides is their asset	Treated as a channel rather than as a party with an interest
The organisation	The release of a member of staff, and its own position in every future case	Treated as the decision maker by its own staff, when in most cases it is one voice among several
Governments	Political and consular objectives that are not the organisation's objectives	Assumed to be aligned, when their interests and constraints differ
The family	The return of a person, at any price, immediately	Treated as an audience to be managed rather than as a party in the case

The phases

Cases follow a recognisable sequence, and the organisation's task differs at each stage.

- **Establishing contact.** Confirming who holds the person, that they are alive, and that a channel exists which both sides will use. The organisation's contribution is to avoid opening parallel channels, which lengthens cases by allowing the captors to test one party against another.
- **Establishing credibility.** Demonstrating that the organisation can deliver what it says and that it speaks with one voice. Cases are frequently prolonged at this stage because the captors have dealt with organisations that could not.
- **Establishing the demand.** Establishing what is actually being asked for. The opening demand is rarely the objective and is frequently not a demand for money alone. The organisation's task is to know what its position is before this stage begins, because a position that changes under pressure is read as a sign that more pressure will produce more.
- **The long middle.** The phase in which most of the elapsed time passes. Nothing appears to be happening. The organisation's tasks are to keep the channel alive, to keep the family supported on a schedule, and to keep its own team functioning. Cases fail in this phase through exhaustion rather than through disagreement.
- **Agreement and implementation.** The arrangement, its terms, the sequence of actions and the guarantees on each side. The organisation's contribution is precision: what happens, where, when, who is present and what each party does if the other does not appear.

- **Recovery.** Medical care, psychological support, the person's own account at their own pace, and the organisation's obligations to the family, none of which end when the person is released.

Information discipline

An organisation in a live case holds information that is valuable to the captors, to the authorities, to the press and to the family, and it processes that information with people who are personally affected.

- **One channel to the captors,** and everything goes through it. Parallel conversations are the most common self-inflicted damage in a case.
- **No detail on the organisation's own position** communicated outside the crisis team, including to the rest of the staff, beyond what they need.
- **Proof of life requested routinely** and on a schedule. The request is a normal part of the process, it is not an accusation, and a gap in proof of life is the earliest reliable signal that something has changed.
- **Assumptions labelled as assumptions.** A team that begins to treat its own assessment of the captors' intentions as established fact will make decisions on it.
- **The log.** Every contact, every demand, every commitment, with the time and the person who made it. Commitments that an organisation cannot remember making are commitments it will be held to.

The no-concessions position in practice

Most organisations state that they do not pay ransoms. What that means in a live case is rarely as clear as the policy.

- **It does not mean refusing to talk.** An organisation that will not communicate at all has removed the only mechanism by which the case can be resolved. Talking is not conceding.
- **It does not resolve the question of other concessions.** Employment, contracts, public statements, the release of a detained associate, the provision of services in an area. The line between a concession and a payment is drawn differently by different organisations, and it should be drawn in advance.
- **It has to be communicated to staff and families.** A family that learns the policy during the case will campaign against it, and it will be right to feel that it was not told.
- **It is tested by the case.** The policy is easy to hold in a meeting. The organisation should assume it will be asked to hold it while looking at a specific person and a specific household, and should decide in advance who has the authority to make that decision and how it will be recorded.

Supporting the negotiation without conducting it

What an organisation can usefully do while a specialist or an intermediary conducts the process.

- **Provide the facts.** Who the person is, their documents, their medical needs, their family, what the organisation has done in the area, who the organisation's contacts are. An intermediary working without an accurate picture cannot use what leverage exists.
- **Deliver reliably.** Whatever the organisation has agreed to do, it does, on time, and says so. Reliability is the organisation's principal contribution to the process.
- **Keep one voice.** One person on the organisation's side is authorised to speak for it, and everyone else refers to that person.
- **Do not run a second negotiation.** Providing information is not the same as conducting a parallel conversation with the captors, which is the most damaging thing a well-intentioned organisation can do.
- **Prepare for the ending.** Medical arrangements, transport, a place to go and people to be with are arranged before the release, because the release is not a moment at which anything can be organised.

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This guidance is published for information and training purposes. It does not describe negotiation methods or payment mechanisms. It is not legal advice, and organisations facing an abduction should engage a qualified crisis response provider and take legal advice on the specific case.