

THE HOSTAGE NEGOTIATOR'S GUIDE TO CHANGE MANAGEMENT

By

Simon Horton

Many years and careers ago, I was a young fresh-faced management consultant, involved in a very high-profile multi-billion pound outsourcing project. Unfortunately, this project was not going smoothly. Why not? Because there was resistance to the change – quelle surprise!

Specifically, there was resistance from just one person – but one person who was very loud, well-connected and stubborn. And she was jeopardising the whole shooting match. Holding the whole project hostage. And it was this fresh-faced young management consultant who was sent to deal with her.

It's ironic, really, because now I teach negotiation skills and have even taught hostage negotiators. But I knew nothing of those skills back then and I had to freestyle it. But I just wonder whether a hostage negotiator could have taught me something useful in my predicament back then.

Holding the project hostage

Indeed, hostage crises are often initiated by change of some sort, a change that the hostage-taker does not take kindly to and decides to fight. They make demands that are, frequently, totally undeliverable and the negotiator has a choice: talk, send in the SWAT team or, most frequently, take some kind of parallel approach.

Not dissimilar to the project leader's situation. Resistance to change is common and those resistors really can hold the project hostage.

Of course, we don't want to stretch the analogy too far - we certainly won't be recommending purchasing helicopter gunships for your change team. And likelihood of death should be lower in the project situation. But there are similarities and my advice-giving negotiator would certainly have recognised many of the issues I faced.

Establish your war-room

The first thing my advisor would have told me is to take the situation seriously and plan my response as thoroughly as possible.

Like most things military or quasi-military, crisis responses are extremely well-planned, whenever possible, down to the last detail. They use a war-room with everything up on the wall, they use checklists to avoid heat-of-the-moment errors, they have a team working together, all members highly trained and drilled, and they get expert advice.

Their first action is to find out as much as they possibly can about the situation and about the hostage-taker themselves. Who are they, what their background is, what their demands are, what their drivers are (beyond the demands), what the logistical facts of the situation are, who else is involved, what are the power sources on either side? The more knowledge of the matter they have, the greater chance of a successful outcome.

Of course, planning will only take you so far; almost certainly events will unfold differently to the predictions of the plan. Napoleon wasn't so into planning – his approach was “I engage, then I see what happens” – and he did pretty well. But the Prussian army revolutionised warfare with the extent of their plans – and ultimately Napoleon was defeated by the Prussians at Waterloo (with, of course, a little help from Wellington).

Perhaps the best advice is from another successful military leader, Eisenhower, who said, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”

Work as one team

My advisor would also tell me to be wary of splits within my team. Hostage negotiators always have to fight against their own SWAT team who are itching to go in all guns blazing.

Senior FBI negotiator Gary Noesner describes this: “Just when we had finally established a bond of trust with the perpetrator, moving closer to ending the crisis, we'd sometimes find that a fellow agent or police officer had thrown a rock through the window, ordered a military vehicle driven up on the lawn as a show of force, or turned off the power. This often produced violent resistance and injuries or death that might have been avoided”.

So get everyone on message.

And that includes third parties too. In the Iranian Embassy siege in 1980, it was discovered that one of the interpreters was not translating the negotiators' messages faithfully, instead relaying their own opinions and thoughts. And in the same incident, the BBC agreed to broadcast the demands of the hostage-takers but did so in a way that infuriated the terrorists' leader and made the situation significantly more dangerous.

Engaging with the enemy

Erm, did I say enemy? See, that's what I mean about being on message!

At some point, you have to make connection and when you do, the most important thing is to listen. Why? Because it is the most effective way to achieve your objectives. Hostage negotiators talk about the “behavioural change stairway”: namely, listening leads to rapport which leads to influence which leads to a successful outcome.

So ask lots of open-ended, non-judgemental questions to find out everything you can from the original source. Find out their demands and the concerns behind those demands; find out their story; find out their values.

After all, however crazy you think their demands are, *they* don't. That you can guarantee. So you need to work with their rationale if you want to persuade them. If you know their values, nothing will be more compelling than to use those values to support your case.

In the world of change, resistance is actually quite understandable. Behind an unreasonable demand may well be a very reasonable fear – that they won't be able to do the new role, that they will lose their job, that the change won't work and will be followed by yet another initiative and yet another and yet another.

Find this out, help address it and you are well on your way to a resolution.

Don't rush

A key tactic of the hostage negotiator is to delay. The more time they can buy, the more likely that emotions will defuse and a peaceful solution achieved.

Remember your objective here is to get hostages released safely. In the analogy with change management, this means your project being delivered successfully. And as time passes, they calm down and trust is built, you should be able to start talking them around to where you want them to be.

Bear in mind, too, that people don't change their minds instantly. If you offer them a solution that isn't exactly equal to their first requests, don't expect them to agree straightaway. They will need time for the idea to process before they will accept it.

Carrot and stick

As well as building relationship, you must also appear strong and manage the expectations of the hostage-taker. In “Kidnap and Ransom”, Trevor Eve, the negotiator, tells the hostage-takers, “I'm trying to talk to the police to buy time; but if anyone is shot, it's all over, you do realise that?”

Challenging their reality and sowing seeds of doubt as to their version of events or view of the world can help undermine the strength of their position and start moving them to concessions. Without threatening, make them aware of the SWAT team who are standing behind you, busting to get involved. As Roosevelt advised: “Speak softly and carry a big stick.”

Dr Mike Webster has helped design the FBI programmes on hostage negotiation. He promotes the parallel approach to crisis resolution, combining the promise of reward for good behaviour and the threat of penalty for bad behaviour, as the best method to bring the other party around. It’s carrot and stick, it’s not new.

The reward can be giving into small requests. You might not be able to give them their getaway plane, the dancing girls and freedom for Whereonearth-istan but you can offer food and water or medical treatment or similar things easy to give. In return, the hostage-takers agree to release some of the hostages or drop some of their demands.

This process builds trust, develops the habit of agreement and gradually weakens the hostage-takers’ position. Again from “Kidnap and Ransom”:

- “You need to start releasing hostages and you need to start now”
- “What do I get in return? I need medical supplies and we need guns and bullets”

Eve allowed the former in return for one hostage but did not allow the latter. He also agreed to remove the snipers in return for seven more hostages.

Slowly trust is built, slowly their position is weakened, slowly a resolution is achieved.

Negotiating inwards

George Schultz was U.S. Secretary of Labor and Secretary of State for seven years. To quote from his book, “Turmoil and Triumph”:

“Here is a first principle for negotiations: The toughest negotiations are usually the negotiations *within* the constituencies.” (my italics)

Negotiating with the hostage-taker is one thing but you will have to conduct parallel negotiations with your own side or with third parties at the same time. And they can be just as tricky. You may not be able to deliver what you promise because other parties are not willing to honour the deal you have struck. So bear this in mind when you make your concessions – all part of the expectation management.

Saving face

One last piece of advice my hostage-negotiator mentor would probably give me would be to allow the other side face. This is crucial.

Bear in mind that the hostage-takers want a way out of this predicament too. They want an end to the situation and they usually want to live as well and the negotiator needs to capitalise on this. But they also want a solution that allows them honour and you must provide for this.

When Iran and the U.S. negotiated their settlement of the hostage crisis in 1980-81, the agreement was mediated through Algeria. To enable the deal, the final wording suggested any Iranian concessions were made to Algeria and not to America. You can't make a deal with the Anti-Christ but you can with the Anti-Christ's drinking buddy.

Indeed, face works both ways. Sometimes secret deals are made so that the government gets the hostages released without appearing to give in to the hostage-takers demands.

The good news

The good news is that most hostage incidents end well and this is more likely if the dual approach of speaking softly whilst carrying a big stick is applied.

It wasn't always this way. A 1977 study by the Rand Corporation found that one in seven victims in a kidnap/hostage situation died. It also found more hostages died during the assault of the security forces than were executed by the hostage takers.

Partly as a result of this research, the late 70s and 80s saw the introduction of a new methodology from security forces in dealing with hostage situations, which allowed for a more integrated approach – relying on negotiations much more than previously. Tactical forces were still present but the aim was not to use them directly if possible. Carrot and stick.

The FBI maintains a database of all hostage situations in the U.S. and as of 2007 held details of over 5,000 incidents. In 97% of these incidents, no one apart from the hostage-taker was injured (and, excluding self-inflicted injuries or death, only 11% of hostage-takers were harmed).

This is a remarkably high success rate and by far the majority of these were achieved through negotiations only and a significant minority involving both negotiation and physical force.

So perhaps the last thing my advisor would have told me is to be optimistic. Expect a good result, negotiate for it, and I'd be likely to get it.

And in reality?

Getting back to that young fresh-faced management consultant, dealing with the manager holding the billion pound project to ransom – how did he get on?

Well, he messed up at first. His first few meetings were an absolute disaster and it very nearly all came tumbling down. He'd been given a bit of a hospital pass but he certainly wasn't dealing with it well. The Project Lead spoke to him personally and told him to give in to all the demands.

But he didn't follow orders. He tried one more time and this time managed to win her around. How did he do that?

His explanation at the time was that he listened, *really* listened. He thought he'd listened before, but he hadn't really. And this time, not only did he listen to the demands (which he felt he could not give in to) but he listened to the concerns behind those demands. And when he heard those, he understood why the woman was behaving as she was.

The concerns were valid, the demands less so. He addressed her concerns fully and was able to turn her around. In fact, he was so successful in turning her around that a few months later she became a champion for the whole project; a champion for the project in her loud, well-connected and stubborn kind of way.

Who knows? Maybe he could have taught a hostage negotiator a thing or two.

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