



Negotiation Strategies



To Succeed in a Negotiation, Help Your Counterpart Save Face

People will compromise if you protect their reputations.

by **Joshua N. Weiss**

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What do a human rights negotiation in Afghanistan, a crisis negotiation in Calgary, and a business dispute between a Brazilian and a Frenchman have in common? At first blush, nothing. However, when we dig deeper into these high-stakes negotiations, there is a common thread that connects them all. The concept of face.

What exactly is face? In their [classic work](#) on politeness, Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson define face as “the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself/herself.” Put differently, face is how people want to be perceived and connected to identity and dignity. When it comes to negotiation, it is about both sides preserving their and their organizations’ reputations.

To understand the critical nature of face to negotiation success, consider the three cases I just mentioned, which I feature in my [new book](#).

Afghanistan – Freeing Hostages

In 2002, Karen was working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a senior protections officer in the Western province of Herat. One day, as she was conducting a training in a nearby village and on a lunch break, someone from the kitchen at the Foreign Ministry satellite office slipped her a handwritten note on a crumpled piece of paper. It claimed that 20 to 25 Iranian girls and women were being held hostage in a nearby village.

Based on this lead, Karen and her team began investigating. They tracked down the informant, who explained that he knew about this situation because he’d been giving these women food. He’d been reluctant to talk for fear of retribution (which would have been imprisonment or death) but felt he had to risk it.

Karen and her team wanted to bring this matter to the attention of the Foreign Ministry, but it seemed as if people in it might be involved. An advocacy-oriented approach — that is, publicly calling attention to the issue and applying pressure from the outside — would have caused a loss of face for local officials and hopes for a deal would be lost.

Instead Karen and her team approached their contacts privately, noting that, because this situation had been brought to their attention, they had a duty to explore it. The Foreign Ministry granted them permission to visit the women. After many meetings and other negotiations, the women were freed — some transferred to a safe house in Kabul while others returned to their homes in Iran. It turns out that the Foreign Ministry recognized they had a problem on their hands and the UNHCR team was providing them with a face-saving way out.

Calgary – A Crisis Negotiation

A number of years ago, a crisis negotiator named Gary received a call in the evening. It was a police dispatcher, who explained that a man of indigenous origin (native Canadian) in his mid-30 and high on methamphetamine was threatening suicide. His wife, who was also an addict, had checked herself into a rehabilitation clinic to get clean, but the man had refused to join her, and now, amped up on drugs, he was upset. He'd driven to the clinic with a rope, found the big tree that his wife had mentioned was right outside her window, and intended to hang himself. A passerby had seen him; worried, they called 911.

When Gary arrived on the scene, the man was sitting up in the branches. "Hey friend, what is it going to take to get you out of this tree?" he asked. "The only way I will come down is in a body bag" was the terse reply.

An hour or two of small talk later, Gary tried again: "What is it going to take to get you out of this tree?" The man thought for a minute. "If you can guess my native Canadian name I will come down."

That was the breakthrough Gary needed. He asked for a few minutes to think it over, stepped back to his car, and quietly got the dispatcher on the phone. "Call his wife's room and find out his native Canadian name," he directed. A few minutes later, a message came back.

Gary returned to the tree and said, “I think your name is Running Buffalo.” Immediately, the man threw the noose from his neck and scampered down. Gary took him to the ambulance on scene and, as he warmed up, asked why he’d insisted on the name-guessing game. “Well,” the man said, “I really wanted to come down, but I felt if I did you would win, and I would lose. I wanted to put you through a hoop so that I could be on par with you.” This was the face-saving way out.

Brazil and France – A Business Tug-of-War

Two international executives, one Brazilian, the other French, had become embroiled in a high-stakes dispute over a company in which they were both involved. Both men were spending many millions of dollars to try to beat the other in a tense and destructive negotiation, and neither would back down. Enter an advisor, William. After much digging and exploration, he found that, beyond the money and control, each man also wanted freedom and respect. Each wanted to go back to his normal life of doing business and spending time with family and come out of the fight with his head held high.

William advised them both to focus on maximizing those metrics as their benchmark for success. When they did so, an agreement emerged where one man agreed to leave the board of the company, giving his counterpart the ability to run it as he saw fit. In return, he released the departing executive from a three-year non-compete clause, giving him the freedom to conduct other business, and exchanged his voting shares for non-voting shares so they could be sold in the public equity market. In the end, both men were able to stand in front of their fellow executives and employees, share that they had a deal, and wish each other well.

These cases point to four ways to help you and your negotiating partners preserve or save face:

1. Recognize the critical role face plays in all negotiations.
2. Ask yourself if the solution being proposed will cause a loss of face for any party. If so, that has to be addressed, or the answer to any proposal will be no.
3. Map out all the players involved in the negotiation, and recognize that saving face will be even more important if a negotiator has to take a solution back to certain constituents.
4. When a hidden problem arises in negotiation – one that is hard to grasp or does not seem to make logical sense — think about face as the source.

As in many negotiations, what is visible is important. But what is invisible — and connected to face — may be the key to success.

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