

A kidnap negotiator's guide to leadership in crisis

Emily Hough explores *Order out of Chaos* by Scott Walker, delving into negotiation, conflict, and tools that work in other situations...

There is a plethora of books that seek to apply the skills acquired in military, policing, security, and other disciplines to business and leadership, particularly in crisis or high-stakes situations. Some of the contextual juxtapositions in a few of these books have been somewhat tenuous. Not so with this book. "Life is a negotiation," says Walker in his preface, immediately drawing the link between communication and negotiation and adding that: "Words matter."

The author is an experienced kidnap for ransom negotiator, having helped resolve more than 300 cases along with incidents such as piracy and cyber extortion. Walker spent 16 years as a Scotland Yard detective in the UK, engaged in covert, counter-terrorism, and kidnapping operations. Today, he works with organisations, government departments, and private individuals to negotiate the release of hostages around the world.

Importantly, Walker uses his experience to develop an understanding of what makes people think, feel, and act, specifically in times of adversity, conflict, and uncertainty, which are three defining words of our world today.

Order Out of Chaos immerses the reader in all facets of negotiation, peppered with illustrative cases of kidnapping and extortion he has been involved with. As Walker notes, thankfully few people will ever have to face a kidnapping situation. However, this book intends to help leaders and teams understand and use: "The proven tools of successful crisis negotiation."

Divided into five sections, the first chapter introduces the foundations to being a successful negotiator and communicator, which, he says: "Begins in the mind." Walker shares three techniques that he says are crucial to developing a powerful mindset to communicate and negotiate effectively, whatever the circumstances. "Regardless of where in the world the negotiation is taking place, kidnappings are not usually resolved by technology but by highly effective communication between one person and another, back and forth until a deal is struck.

"This is only possible if you can manage your emotional state and keep a level head when everyone else is losing theirs," he continues, explaining the concept of a Red Centre as a place deep within all of us that can be tapped into when faced with unexpected or unpleasant situations. This involves taking control of your internal state and

regulating your emotions, as well as understanding a crucial fact: "It's not about you. It's always about the other side, which is why we must first seek to understand before being understood."

Walker explores the power of emotions and the need to recognise and regulate them, as well as delving into the mindsets of people who have survived long-term hostage situations and went on to live happy lives afterwards.





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He also examines emotional intelligence (EQ), along with the science of stress and its effects on a person, both physically and mentally, before exploring and addressing myths about empathy. Here, I found his words particularly interesting when he describes the difference between empathy, compassion, and sympathy. “Empathy is a doing word,” Walker notes. “It’s something you do in order to tune into another person’s world... It’s how you manage

yourself and your relationship with others, which is key to sustained high performance and outstanding leadership and negotiation.”

Empathetic behaviour is the desire to first understand before being understood. Walker comments that, unfortunately: “Often the default culture within many workplaces today involves people competing with one another, protecting their silos, budgets, or resources, rather

than focusing on deep collaboration with others towards achieving a common goal or outcome; namely, adding more value to their clients and customers than anyone else does, thereby creating an extreme competitive advantage and dominating their particular industry.”

The chapter is filled with tips and exercises to further the reader’s understanding of themselves and others. Further on, in Chapter Three, Walker develops the importance of empathy and compassion: “Both allow us to connect with people by taking their perspectives into consideration, all while making better decisions that influence others. This is particularly important in times of crisis, conflict or uncertainty.

“Yet, there is a difference between the two, and it’s important to understand this, especially from a negotiation or leadership perspective. Being aware of this difference is what either creates that supportive, empowering workplace culture and closing meaningful deals with long-term clients, or failing to challenge poor performance and experiencing emotional burnout.” In hostage negotiations, cognitive empathy is important, enabling the negotiator to understand the other person’s perspective and reflect that understanding back to them: “Without the burden of actually feeling similar emotions to them.” Again, in Chapter Three, Walker notes that empathy is a powerful part of being human: “But, left unchecked, it can get in the way.”

Chapter Two, ‘Preparing to win every negotiation,’ continues the theme of looking inwards and learning how to take things in stride, however overwhelming the circumstances might appear. Walker presents three techniques, including the proven ‘Train hard, fight easy’ concept, as well as ‘Focus on who, rather than how’ so how, establishing a battle rhythm, and immediate action drills.

This chapter seeks to develop anticipation and visualisation – both of success and of what could go wrong as teambuilding and Red Teaming. Walker also emphasises the importance of planning in terms of preventing burnout and becoming overwhelmed.

After examining the importance of developing the right mindset and preparing oneself and one’s team for negotiating, the next chapter examines some of the psychology that underpins negotiation. As the author says: “You will learn the practical tools, grounded in neuroscience and forged in real-life negotiations, that you can apply in everyday life.” Walker looks at the science behind negotiation, including right- and left-brain thinking and techniques to reduce stress. Here, he describes various breathing techniques, cold therapy, and, of course, the vital importance of sleep.

Listening is another critical point that Walker makes when he emphasises: “Being able to master the skill of active listening is fundamental if you want to collaborate with, influence and persuade people anywhere, any time, on anything,” before enumerating the five levels of listening – an area I found particularly compelling. Techniques to deal with highly emotional people involve dealing with their emotions first, because: “They’re physically unable to listen and understand what you’re saying.”

Walker then turns to common mistakes made in negotiations in Chapter Four, including how to overcome subconscious personal barriers and organisational blocks. Unconscious personal barriers to effective communication make for an interesting read; these include, among many others, identifying – referring to everything the other

person says to your own experience – advising, and analysis paralysis, which is a topic that the *CRJ* has often discussed over the years. Walker comments: “You have too much information and detail, which, in turn, can cloud your thinking during the conversation. It’s another form of avoidance too; always seeking more and more information in order to delay the inevitable.” This chapter also outlines what the author terms ‘resistance points’ – essential in any negotiation in any context. “It’s not just a case of us simply playing hardball in order to stroke our egos,” Walker says. What resistant points do is: “Manage the other side’s expectations and signpost them to where we want the negotiation to end up.”

The last chapter is something that I think every single reader in the world can relate to: Negotiating with difficult people. “It’s a fact of life that you will encounter many people through your work or at home who you might classify as ‘difficult’. Others may even think the same of you,” Walker notes. “So, if you can’t avoid these people,

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what’s your best strategy for dealing with them, and particularly, how do you have effective conversations and negotiations with them?”

The author gives useful advice on treading the fine line between feeding the ego of the person you are negotiating with while being mindful of giving them space to save face. When dealing with difficult people, therefore, cognitive empathy is essential.

This chapter also examines planning and risks, which, in this context, also involve ‘difficult’ conversations, something that many of us tend to avoid. Walker provides some useful tips on assessing the risks inherent in a difficult conversation, along with ways of mitigating these risks within a negotiation context. These include: Tolerating the risks; treating the risks; terminating the conversation; or transferring the risk. There are many gems to be found in this chapter.

Finally, presenting his conclusion and a five-step action plan, Walker comments that: “We seem to live in a world more divided than ever, from politics, race, and gender to climate and sexuality. The pragmatic world of the centre ground has given way to tribal extremes... There has never been a more pressing need for you to improve your negotiation and leadership skills to help guide not only yourself but your people through these challenging times.” 

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