



By Mary Taylor, CEO at Mary Taylor and Associates

Making decisions under extreme pressure

LESSONS FROM PRISON HOSTAGE NEGOTIATIONS

C-suite executives frequently have to make time-critical, high-pressure decisions, but what, if anything, can they learn from the extreme scenario of prison hostage negotiations? Quite a lot, actually. The psychology is virtually identical – anticipating outcomes, assessing risk, and making pivotal decisions in rapidly changing circumstances.

So, what lessons can we bring from prisons into the boardroom? When working in maximum security prisons, you will inevitably encounter critical situations such as hostage-taking. Despite training and protocols, life doesn't always follow the script.

Clinging on grimly to classic negotiation advice, such as 'stall for time', 'establish a rapport' and 'elicit information', is often impossible when you have to make lightning-fast, momentous decisions between hugely risky options, based on incomplete and questionable information.

Failure to take a decision is also a decision in and of itself, with far-reaching consequences.

The only option, of course, is to make the best choice you can under the circumstances. However, this is far easier said than done. Adrenaline, stress, and anxiety obstruct rational thought and result in knee-jerk reactions.

So, is there anything you can do other than 'winging it' and hoping for the best? Yes, absolutely. Here are some techniques that are applicable across many high-pressure, time-poor situations.

ACCEPT THAT THERE IS NO IDEAL OPTION

You are where you are. Deal with it. Even in urgent and critical situations, people often waste time running narratives

such as 'I wish XYZ were happening instead...', 'How did I get myself in this situation...', 'I don't know enough to make this decision...' and so on.

Whilst self-evidently useless, it is hard to avoid thinking like this. But you can choose to accept that there is no change of circumstances that will imminently fall from the sky – and more importantly, understand that you don't need that.

Life is a series of choices between imperfect options. So, whilst what you are currently facing may be more than what you are used to, it is still just along the same scale of numerous other situations you have faced and dealt with many times before.

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Taking a second or two to remind yourself of this reassures you of your capabilities, and it stops you wasting valuable time.

DEAL ONLY WITH WHAT IS DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF YOU

Ideally, we would consider all possible ramifications and consequences of an action before taking it. Whilst this is generally useful, it is not helpful in critical situations.

There are innumerable potential consequences arising from a situation where there are multiple, uncontrollable variables. As events unfold, these potential consequences fluctuate. In extreme situations, calculating the likelihood of these possible consequences must be performed continuously.

So, stick to 'one generation of consequences' in your weighing of options. If you imagine a flow chart, where saying yes or no at any point leads to increasingly numerous possible outcomes further down, try to stick only to the first layer.

The best decisions are made when analysing what is concretely in front of you at that moment in time. Consider

primarily what is happening right now, and the immediate likely consequences of binary actions taken.

The key is to 'put one foot in front of the other' systematically, taking decisions in turn as they arrive based on what is objectively present – in short, don't run too far ahead with imaginary scenarios and guesswork.

YOU ONLY NEED TO GET PAST 50% CERTAINTY

Most people are naturally risk-averse - this is a highly adaptive survival mechanism. However, it is counterproductive when fast, risky, and high-pressure decisions need to be made.

Instead of leaning towards the 'safest' decision, when there is none readily available, your aim should be simply to shorten the odds.

If the decision you are facing was easy or obvious, it would, by definition, not be difficult to take under extreme pressure. In these circumstances, it is not helpful to agonise or procrastinate over trying to get a high degree of certainty or safety; inaction, even for a brief interlude, can be far more damaging.

You need to be more certain than not – in other words, if you have more than 50% certainty of an outcome, the decision is made. To use the legal analogy, you are aiming for the right

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decision on the balance of probabilities, not beyond all reasonable doubt.

So, as surprising as it may seem, there are transferable techniques from maximum-security jails that executives can utilise to help them get ahead. If you move straight past internal dialogue to actioning decisions, deal only with what is immediately in front of you, and shorten the odds as far as possible in your favour, you will make the right decisions more than you make the wrong ones – which is the best possible outcome with critical, time-short, decision-making.

+ ABOUT MARY TAYLOR

Mary Taylor has worked with top executives in many globally recognised brands, including Apple, Cartier, Ferrari, Dior, Pfizer, Prada and Sony, and has a unique understanding of the challenges of corporate life at the top.

Mary's academic and professional background includes working in maximum-security prisons as part of HM Government's Accelerated Promotion Scheme and as a top corporate lawyer. She is also a qualified psychologist.

