

# GETTING BACK TO WORK

Reintegration to the workplace



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**BACK TO WORK**

## HELPING RETURNING HOSTAGES BACK TO THE WORKPLACE

Having a staff member or contractor kidnapped is a disruptive and challenging event for any organization. Not only will you have had to deal with the crisis response to the kidnap itself, you will have been supporting the hostage's family and colleagues. It can take an emotional and physical toll on everyone concerned.

The hard work does not end when hostages return home safely. They are likely to be suffering the impacts of their captivity; the initial release period may feel surreal for them, they may struggle to sleep, experience flashbacks and nightmares, they may be hyper-vigilant, feel angry, or have a heightened sense of emotions. They might want to avoid doing things that remind them of what has happened to them. These things are all normal, and most will pass over time.

As a result of this, many hostages find it difficult to return to work. As an employer, there is a lot you can do to make this process easier. Not only will this enable the returning hostage to get back on their feet quickly, it is also likely to reduce the

impact on their colleagues and the work of the organization overall.

Based on over a decade's experience of supporting returning hostages, this guide offers some simple advice about how organizations can help to make the reintegration process as positive and constructive as possible. Each individual is different so there is no one-size-fits-all approach, but there are a number of common elements that can be adopted in the workplace and adapted as necessary.

Hostage UK also offers bespoke training for organizations who would like to learn more about reintegration into the workplace following traumatic incidents as well as effective family support during a kidnapping. Contact us if you would like to discuss training services.

This document is for guidance only.

**RETURNING HOME**

## THE FIRST DAYS AND WEEKS BACK HOME OFTEN REPRESENT A DIFFICULT TIME FOR HOSTAGES

They might be physically injured, exhausted and feel disconnected from the home life they left behind before they were kidnapped. Many feel overwhelmed, struggle to make even basic decisions, and minor everyday stresses become a source of major anxiety. This is a normal reaction to a traumatic experience.

Employers can make a positive contribution to a returning hostage's first phase back home by offering space and support, being responsive to their needs.

On their immediate return home...

- Work with their family to make a release plan. Ensure they pack a bag with size appropriate clothes and essential items. Work out who will meet them when they are released, being careful not to overwhelm them. Ensure they have accommodation and transport. It is important that you allow the family to take the lead so they can feel they are contributing to the safe return of their loved one.

- If the hostage is returning from abroad on their release, coordinate with the airport to ensure they are able to move through customs and baggage control with minimum stress or attention.

Helping with practical things...

- They may have immediate practical needs. You can remove unwelcome stress for them and their family by offering this support. They may need to replace lost or damaged items, such as phones or laptops. Ensure they have cell phone service contracts and internet connections. Not only will this remove the stress of making these arrangements, it will also ensure they are able to stay connected to friends and family.
- They might need interim accommodation, especially if they are trying to avoid unwanted media attention.

## RETURNING HOME (CONTINUED)

- They might require help with paperwork, medical insurance authorizations, bills or suppliers. Some families might not have been able to stay on top of these things, or may not have been aware of everything that needed to be done. If they live alone, check they have gas and electricity supply and that their phone line is working.

#### Providing a single point of contact...

- The returning hostage is likely to be overwhelmed and struggle to retain information. You can help their immediate transition by offering them a single point of contact to simplify communication. As well as minimising stress for the individual, it will also help your organization to better understand what they need and ensure they are receiving the necessary support as one person will have an overview.
- Make the individual aware of their situation in relation to salary and benefits. A lack of clarity will create uncertainty that could increase stress and worry further. As they may

struggle to retain information, you might need to repeat this and other pieces of key information a number of times. Follow up in writing, too.

- Some organizations might not be able to ensure these benefits remain in force indefinitely. If a formal end date of employment or return to work is approaching, have an open discussion in a personal way through the nominated point of contact. It will help to keep the timelines as open and long as possible.

#### Looking after medical needs and wellbeing...

- It is essential that all hostages receive a full medical check up after their release, even if they have only been held for a short period of time. They may be suffering from malnutrition or muscle wastage, they may have picked up bugs or tropical diseases, and they may have been sexually assaulted. They should also see a dentist. Many hostages neglect their health after being released and leave it too late to get checked out. Arrange a medical examination and

## RETURNING HOME (CONTINUED)

encourage them to see their regular physician.

- Some hostages may need assistance to cope with the psychological impacts of their captivity. You should arrange for them to be assessed a few days after their return and again one and three months later and periodically thereafter. Hostage US can offer contacts for experienced professionals.
- While assessments are important, do not assume that the hostage will need counseling or similar medical treatment. Many people recover through self help without any expert intervention.
- Be clear about what ongoing medical care and counseling you are able to provide. Ensure you follow up with this information in writing.
- While most people who require treatment respond well, some may need treatment for an extended period of time. Be responsive to the individual. Support should be offered for as long as it is needed.

Handling the debrief process...

- Having survived a trauma like a kidnapping, it can be useful for the returning hostage to take part in a debrief to help them to understand what was done for them by the crisis management team and others. The debrief may also allow closure for family members.
- If there was a group of people directly involved in the incident, consider bringing together this group so they can talk together and share their experiences. Filling the information gaps can be very useful for those involved.

Ahead of their return to work...

- Try to shield the returning hostage from too many well-meaning senior staff and colleagues. Some hostages have talked about being inundated with messages and visits from senior executives, even while they were in the hospital. This can be overwhelming and uncomfortable. It is important that the returning hostage makes decisions about who to see and when.

# RETURNING TO WORK

## FOR THOSE RETURNING FROM BEING HELD HOSTAGE, GOING BACK TO WORK CAN BE DAUNTING

Some may want to return quickly, keen to get on with life. Others may need longer to adjust after their experiences. Others may struggle with the work environment due to its geography or the nature of their role. Everyone is different and needs to take this at their own pace. Be aware of that.

For many, returning to work can provide some normality and much needed routine. However, not all will go back to work. Older people may be able to stop work and retire. Some will have a 'change in outlook' as a result of their kidnapping. This might mean their priorities have changed and they decide to relocate, change jobs, or change sector all together.

Handling the return to work...

- The designated single point of contact will play a critical role in ensuring a smooth return to work.
- While staff turnover may be unavoidable, it must be remembered that in relation to this single point

of contact changing, this will have an impact on a returning hostage who may have built up rapport and trust with someone. Where it is inevitable, ensure there is time for an effective and detailed handover and communicate this in good time to the returning hostage.

- You will need to have a conversation with the individual about whether they want to return to work. Some will want to do this quickly; others may need more time. Do not assume one way or another and allow the hostage time and space to make the right decision for them.
- Be ready to be flexible and patient. The individual might change their mind, struggle to focus to make a decision, or feel a heightened sense of pressure. A fixed return date might add to their anxiety. This is a normal reaction to a traumatic incident.

## RETURNING TO WORK (CONTINUED)

## Being adaptable...

- As a result of their experiences, the returning hostage might not be able to return to their previous position. It might have been an overseas assignment and they do not wish to return to the country where they were kidnapped. Or they might prefer to be closer to family and friends and not travel internationally. If they have been held for a prolonged period, their role might not exist anymore. They might struggle to return to a high pressure role.
- As a result of their experiences, the individual is likely to struggle to concentrate and retain information. As a result, be aware of this and understand it might be necessary to manage their workload and reassign some elements of their role in the first instance.
- It is important to have an open conversation with them about the reality of the situation within the organization and their changed needs or desires from their job. In a large

organization, it might be possible to accommodate role changes. In a smaller organization, this might be more difficult.

- It might not always be possible to find a role that will work. If that is the case, provide specialised career counseling to help them find a new job. This has been done successfully and in those cases where it is necessary, this is a great type of support that the organization can easily offer.

## Returning to the office...

- The office environment can pose challenges to a former hostage. There might be physical triggers in the office environment, such as sights, sounds and smells that remind them of their experiences. For example, if they have been kept isolated or in a dark space, they may struggle to work in a basement office. They may struggle with noisy offices after being kept in solitary confinement. They may find open or closed plan offices better or worse to cope with, depending on their

## RETURNING TO WORK (CONTINUED)

experiences. Try to be as flexible as possible.

- Many former hostages struggle with public transport, especially during the rush hour, as a result of the impacts of trauma. They might also be having trouble sleeping, making it difficult to keep fixed and traditional office hours. Try to offer as much flexibility as possible with working hours.
- You need to be aware that these triggers and patterns can change over time. Be ready to review things on a regular basis and put in place changed arrangements as necessary.
- It can be helpful to conduct a 'return to work interview'. This provides an opportunity to talk about the individual's needs, challenges you may need to manage together in relation to working hours or the office environment, and the nature of their role. This can then be turned into a return to work plan, which can be reviewed together on a regular basis.

Helping colleagues to be supportive...

- Peer support is vital for those

returning to work after being held hostage. But colleagues often struggle to know what to say or do for the best. Everyone is different, so ask the returning hostage how they would prefer their colleagues to behave.

- Brief colleagues before the individual's return to work. Provide staff with basic information about the kidnapping to help demystify the situation and help them behave more naturally. Provide them some basic understanding of the potential impacts of a traumatic event, so they can understand changed behaviour or sensitivity about certain situations or places. Where a person's job will be impacted by the returning hostage's changed role or work pattern, be sure to brief them so they understand and can support and accommodate the changes.
- It is important to remind colleagues that, while physical scars are visible, the psychological impacts of trauma may not be seen and can be long lasting. Just because you can't see these problems, it doesn't mean they

## RETURNING TO WORK (CONTINUED)

aren't suffering.

- Request that colleagues don't ask too many questions about the kidnapping as this can be intrusive. Encourage them to concentrate on being as supportive as possible, and provide them with concrete examples of what to say and how to behave. They may not understand how to do this without assistance.
- Consider setting up a buddy system so the individual has someone on their level to turn to and check in on them.
- Encourage staff to incorporate the returning hostage into social activities. This can be one of the first things that colleagues stop doing as they assume the individual won't want to come, or because they feel awkward socialising with them. This can increase their sense of isolation.

## HANDLING THE MEDIA

## MANY HOSTAGES RETURN HOME WITH LITTLE OR NO MEDIA ATTENTION

When the case does generate media interest, this can be a source of stress for the hostage and their family and there is much that organizations can do to offer support.

- If the returning hostage and their family decide they do not wish to comment in the media, you can help by shielding them from calls from journalists. Your media team can offer a very useful function to reduce the stress felt by the returning hostage and their family.
- Where the hostage wishes to comment or a policy of 'no comment' is not possible, consider drafting a joint media strategy with the individual and their family. This might involve a press release or press conference. Having your media team field press calls and enquiries will reduce the stress on the returning hostage and their family.
- Some former hostages choose to tell their story to the media. This is their decision. You can help them by offering the support of your media team. This will help individuals to avoid bad decisions or making statements they will later regret. By working together, you can also help the former hostage to understand your own position in relation to the media and how certain comments from them could be misunderstood. You should be honest about any concerns you might have from an organizational standpoint about your reputation or impact on other staff, for example.
- Consider providing media training and support them in their preparation for interviews. Many former hostages have found this useful and will appreciate your efforts to support them in their decision to speak to the media rather than turning away and leaving them to do this alone.

## HANDLING THE MEDIA (CONTINUED)

Further advice about handling the media and social media can be found in the Hostage US guide: *Handling the media and social media*.

**SUPPORT FOR SUB-CONTRACTORS AND FREELANCERS**

# MANY ORGANIZATIONS WORK MORE AND MORE WITH SUB-CONTRACTORS AND FREELANCERS

Legal versus moral duties...

- As work with sub-contractors and freelancers increases, especially for overseas assignments, there is a larger risk of kidnapping and other security problems for these individuals. Legally speaking, your responsibilities to these people might be different to those of staff.
- Think about your moral duty to these individuals. Also consider the way in which your actions will be viewed by their colleagues, should you treat them in a less supportive way than staff. At times of organizational crisis, staff will be watching closely, looking for clues about how they would be treated if they were in the hostage's place. This is a time when organizations can rise to the challenge and gain the trust and respect of their people and investors by doing – and being seen to do –

the right thing by all people, whether they are employed by the organization as staff or are freelance consultants.

**OTHER STAFF AFTERCARE**

## **WHILE YOUR FOCUS IS RIGHTFULLY ON THE RETURNING HOSTAGE, DON'T FORGET OTHERS IN THE ORGANIZATION THAT MAY HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY THE EVENT**

This can be a close colleague, those in the same location or senior management dealing with the case.

feelings of 'victim guilt'; that it could or should have been them that was abducted.

- Members of the crisis management team handling the case are likely to have been through a difficult and stressful time. They should have access to (or be offered) counseling and support. It can also be helpful to bring this team together for a lessons learned session. This can be beneficial to their recovery post event, as well as providing an opportunity to learn and make recommendations for the future.
- The individuals supporting the hostage's family will also need support, as will the returning hostage's point of contact.
- It is important not to forget staff who work in the same environment as the hostage. Some may experience

## CONTACTS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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Hostage US keeps an up-dated reading list of books, reports and guides on its website:  
<http://www.hostageus.org/resources/>

Hostage US has a wealth of experience, but we are always learning. We would appreciate your feedback so we can continue to improve the support and advice we provide.

Please send your comments and experiences to [info@hostageus.org](mailto:info@hostageus.org)

Hostage US has also produced a guide 'Handling the media and social media' and 'A Life After Captivity: reintegration guide', both are available on our website.

Hostage US has a strict privacy policy; any information you provide will not be shared with anyone without your permission.

For more information about Hostage US or to find out how we can help, please visit our website: [www.hostageus.org](http://www.hostageus.org)

This information is provided for guidance only.

Hostage US 24/7 toll-free helpline 888-284-1010

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