

DECISION MAKING IN DISASTER RESPONSE II



Further Strategies for
Humanitarian Responders

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Enjoy this early sample of

Decision Making in Disaster Response II

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Decision Making in Disaster Response introduced many readers to the concept of Naturalistic Decision Making. Some of the most encouraging feedback has come from highly experienced humanitarian responders – emergency health workers, pilots, cluster coordinators, and other technical specialists – who got in touch with comments like ‘I’ve been acting this way for years, but never really understood why,’ and ‘After reading about making decisions in this way, I feel much more justified in behaving the way I do.’

Clearly, there’s a role for Naturalistic Decision Making at the frontline of disaster response. With that in mind, welcome to some fresh training scenarios. In this latest volume, a number of guest contributors have provided story material and teaching points from their years at the forefront of disaster response. Their guidance is borne out of years of hard-earned experience and is included to help keep the contents as realistic and relevant as possible.

As you work through the pages of this book, it’s important to understand how the naturalistic approach differs from classical decision making. If you’re coming to this book having already finished Book One, you’ll need no further explanation. However, if this concept is new to you, you’ll get a lot more from the rest of the pages if you take a moment to understand some basic principles. Read this [sample chapter](#) of DM-in-DR I for an explanation of how the Recognition-Primed Decision-Making process works.

As a brief reminder, the emphasis is on developing one option at a time, and stopping the moment a good-enough option is reached. Practitioners use experience to recognise patterns in a situation and act accordingly. The whole point of these books is to provide responders with the opportunity to develop experience and recognise patterns within the chaos of disaster response.

Humanitarian work is constantly evolving, and these chapters can’t cover every aspect of disaster response. If there are topics you would like to see covered in the future, feel free to get in touch at jstipper.com with your suggestions.

Scenario One – Momentum

One common feature of humanitarian response is the huge amount of uncertainty and continual change in the days and weeks following a disaster. Respond to enough emergencies, and you will find that you may be told ‘No’ about situations where other groups are told ‘Yes.’ Or, more frustratingly, your ‘Yes’ will suddenly turn into a ‘No’ as a new individual or department takes over an aspect of the response – such as high-level registration, customs waivers, access permission, or security clearance.

The result is that if you accept things every time you’re told ‘No,’ then your efforts to contribute to the humanitarian response are going to be very short-lived. You and your colleagues will end up standing by while more agile groups continue to enact their life-saving actions. Yet there are situations where trying to stick to your ‘rights’ can be counter-productive. Balancing this requires a lot of finesse, and the momentum which propelled your initial efforts can easily be lost if not carefully managed.

You and your colleague arrive at the airport security access gate, driving a vehicle full of cargo. The first rays of sunlight peek over the distant mountain range, casting lengthy shadows across the valley. In the face of such beauty, it’s easy to forget the earthquake which brought so much destruction to this land-locked nation. As a humanitarian logistician, recruited from a nearby town, you’re responsible for sending flights of essential supplies to post-earthquake rehabilitation programs high in the mountains. With the rainy season building, an early start is essential to complete the day’s flights before afternoon storms build up. It’s what you do at least three mornings a week.

A solitary soldier steps forward out of the shadows. You don’t recognise him. “You can’t take that vehicle in.” He points to the access sticker on the windscreen. “That’s last year’s sticker.”

It’s March. Along with every other organisation that regularly brings cargo directly to the aircraft, you’re still waiting for the new year’s passes to be printed.

“You’re right about the sticker.” You indicate the man’s own security ID that hangs around his neck, which also shows last year’s date. “Like you, we’re waiting for the new badges.”

“Well, without a current pass, you can’t bring that vehicle in.”

The man blocking your way is brand new, part of the ever-shifting mix of soldiers, police, and friends of friends who have some murky, undefined level of authority at the regional airport.

Do you insist that you be allowed through?

Yes: go to 1

Maybe: go to 2

Otherwise go to 3

1 Surely this man can see the evidence in front of him. His own ID is proof that new badges aren’t available.

“We come in all the time,” you insist. “We need to get through and do our work.”

A second soldier appears. Maybe a colleague, maybe a supervisor. “Move the car out of the entrance,” he says. “Back out there, in the car park.”

This is slowing you down. You have the same badge as everyone else.

Do you insist on your rights?

Yes: go to 4

Otherwise go to 5

2 You stay in your seat, trying to see past the soldier for anyone else you know. But the only person around is another unfamiliar soldier.

He approaches the car and both soldiers become aggressive. You do your best to calm them down, and reverse out to the nearby car park.

Go to 5

3 You decide not to antagonise the gate guard. Leaving the vehicle in the nearby car park, you enter the airport through the passenger gate. At a small office near the runway you find the head of Civil Aviation, a woman you’ve got to know well over the months you’ve worked there. You recently helped her send a small load of cargo to a relative on one of the flights you’d chartered.

You explain what happened and she is furious. “All these new guys,” she fumes, “they think they can make up their own rules. Let’s go together and I’ll bring him down to size.”

Do you encourage her to reprimand the man?

Yes: go to 7

Otherwise go to 8

4 We have a right to enter, you decide. No-one’s pass is up-to-date, but that is just how things are here. “We need to get in to do our work,” you insist.

The soldier calls out, and a few moments later several armed men surround your vehicle. They pull you out roughly and drag you to a nearby building, along with your colleagues.

It’s several hours before you’re finally released, after the intervention of officials who show their displeasure at being disturbed. You’re concerned about the impression on these officials who see you being blocked from doing your work.

The flight you had booked has already been assigned to another client, and you have no chance of flying out materials during the rest of the day.

Despite the confrontation, you’re glad you stuck to your principles. Still, you spend the whole evening rearranging bookings to make up for your missed flight, and you worry about how things will go when you turn up for the tomorrow’s flight.

Go to 9

5 You return to the car park. As you are parking, you see two other NGO vehicles driving towards the airside entrance. A different soldier has appeared on duty, and after half a glance at the vehicles he waves them through.

Do you try to follow the vehicles through?

Yes: go to 6

Otherwise go to 3

6 You decide that if others are going in, you can too. No-one's pass is up-to-date, but that is just how things are here.

You swing in behind the other vehicle which is driving through. The soldier who stopped you previously steps back into view.

"We need to get in to do our work," you insist.

The soldier calls out, and a few moments later several armed men surround your vehicle. They pull you out roughly and drag you to a nearby building, along with your colleagues.

It's several hours before you're finally released, after the intervention of officials who show their displeasure at being disturbed. You're concerned about the impression on these officials who see you being blocked from doing your work.

The flight you had booked has already been assigned to another client, and you have no chance of flying out materials during the rest of the day.

Despite the bruising encounter, you're glad you stuck to your principles. Still, you spend the whole evening rearranging bookings to make up for your missed flight, and you worry about how things will go when you turn up for the tomorrow's flight.

Go to 9

7 You tag along behind the head of Civil Aviation. She finds the soldier who stopped you, who is standing with several others. She starts yelling at him, in front of everyone else. There's no question who's in charge.

Minutes later you're inside the airport grounds. You're glad you found support, but you worry about the coming days. The soldier who stopped you lost a lot of face. You know he'll be looking out for opportunities to make your life difficult whenever he can.

Go to 9

8 You're glad to have the support. But you worry about blowback if the problem gets resolved out in the open. "I don't want to make enemies here," you explain, and she immediately understands. "Just bring your vehicle," she says. "I'll be at the gate."

As you drive back to the gate a few minutes later the head of Civil Aviation is standing beside the soldier who stopped you. She smiles in greeting and waves you through. You see the look of shock on the soldier's face, but he covers it and waves you through as well. Inwardly you relax. Now he knows you're a friend of his boss, he won't bother you. He knows, and you know, that you could have made his life very difficult. Going forwards, you know you'll have no more trouble with the man.

Go to 9

9 The next afternoon, you drive away from your office to complete some errands. Most of your time is spent with other colleagues, and you appreciate the chance to be alone with your thoughts for a change. Old plastic bottles and other debris line the edges of the dusty road. You've only driven two streets from your office when something strikes the vehicle.

You glance in your rear-view mirror. A few teenagers stand in the street. As you watch, one throws a stone at your vehicle. You're astonished. This has never happened before.

Do you stop to investigate?

Yes: go to 10

Otherwise go to 11

10 You slow down, intending to stop. Two more loud cracks ring out as more stones hit the car. More teenagers join the group.

You decide it's not safe to get out here after all.

Go to 11

11 You drive on and make a couple of turns. Soon there is some distance between you and the group who threw the stones.

You have never known anything like this before. Has something happened which you are unaware of? Is it safe to be driving around? You'll have to come back this way eventually, to get home.

Do you stop to call your colleague?

Yes: go to 12

Otherwise go to 16

12 You pull over and call your colleague. “I’m glad you called,” they say. “I’ve just got back from the market. One of the shopkeepers told me that an NGO vehicle had been speeding, and had hit a pedestrian. They drove off without stopping. There’s a lot of tension in the area.”

You’re not sure how to take your colleague’s response. They grew up here, so they know the city well. However you’ve noticed that your colleague often over-dramatizes events, exaggerating things to be part of the conversation. Local knowledge can be helpful, but you also need a way to de-escalate situations, rather than reading chaos into every event.

Do you ask for their advice?

Yes: go to 13

Otherwise go to 16

13 You ask your colleague for advice. “Well...” They sound surprised. “I’m not used to being asked my opinion. What I think is, I can come out and meet you. It’s only five minutes’ walk.”

A few minutes later they arrive. Together, you go and talk to the local shopkeepers. Your colleague explains that it wasn’t your vehicle in the accident.

After a brief discussion, one shopkeeper calls out and some teenagers approach the shop’s veranda, looking ashamed. The shopkeeper barks a few words and makes them apologise to you.

“Drive over here –” the shopkeeper indicates the dirt in front of their shop – “and I’ll get them to wash your vehicle.”

You’ve seen youths like this washing vehicles at the airport, from buckets of dirty water. Your vehicle’s fairly new, and the dirt in the water won’t be good for the paintwork.

Do you keep moving with your errands? 14

Yes: go to 14

Otherwise go to 15

14 “That’s thoughtful,” you say, “but I’ve got quite a bit to do this afternoon.” The shopkeeper waves an arm and the youths scatter. “Come and go as you want. They won’t bother you in the future.”

Go to 19

15 You've checked the vehicle, and there's no real damage done. You decide to accept the group's offer to wash it.

Your colleague nods. "That's good. That way they'll get to know the vehicle well. They won't confuse you with others in the future." They turn to the shopkeeper. "You'll give them clean water? We don't want to scratch the paint."

The shopkeeper nods. "Of course."

You stand on the veranda, watching as the youths sponge off the dirt with wet rags.

"It's a hot day." The shopkeeper smiles. "Let me give you each a soda from the fridge. No charge."

It's a while since you drank any soda. The high sugar content gives you painful stomach cramps. Thankfully, you know how to politely refuse.

Do you politely and gratefully decline?

Yes: go to 17

Otherwise go to 18

16 You decide to keep going with your errands, to stay out of the way and let the tension die down.

Ninety minutes later you're driving home. As you drive along the street where you had problems earlier, more teenagers swarm around your vehicle. More stones are thrown, and two windows crack.

You drive on and get back to your accommodation, shaking.

Your colleague comes out to the vehicle. "On no," they say, "that group clearly thought you were the car that struck a pedestrian earlier. I'm going to have to go and resolve this with the community, and then try to get the car fixed." They sigh. "That's going to take a lot of work."

Go to 19

17 "That's kind of you," you say, "but I just drank some tea. I'm not thirsty."
The smile fades slightly from the shopkeeper's face

“They’ve been ill,” your colleague says quickly, pointing at you. “But I’ll have one. You’re very kind.”

The shopkeeper nods and heads over to the fridge. They deal with another customer, and by the time they return with the soda for your colleague, the youths have finished washing the vehicle.

The shopkeeper waves an arm and the youths scatter. “They won’t bother you in the future.”

Go to 19

18 The shopkeeper points you to a group of plastic chairs spread out along the shop’s veranda.

You sit gingerly. Your stomach’s going to be spasming with cramps in a few minutes. Still, you take a few sips. Maybe the youths will finish before you get too far through the drink.

“You know that big hardware store by the airport?” the shopkeeper asks, as you all sit watching the youths wash the car. “Our family owns that, too. My sister’s the manager there.”

You know the shop well. They sell good quality building materials. You’ve often see vehicles from some of the bigger agencies parked outside, loading up with supplies. Unfortunately, when you once asked for a quote, they were unwilling to give you a trade discount. As a result, you’ve been purchasing lower-quality products from a different supplier.

“I wanted to shop there,” you say, “but our quantities are too low to get a discount.”

The shopkeeper grins. “Magda drives a hard bargain, no question. But next time you need supplies, go back there. Tell her you spoke to me, and I said you’re doing a good job. She’ll give you the trade discount – I guarantee it.” They scribble a number on a piece of paper. “If she doesn’t, call me. I’ll sort it out.”

You take a sip of soda and run a mental calculation. Your budget’s been stretched thin, and a trade discount will give you another 20% for the same price. You hide a wince as your stomach begins to cramp. It’s uncomfortable, but it’s worth it.

Go to 19

19 The days blur into each other. It's the end of another busy morning, you've dispatched two full loads of cargo, and you're on a side errand for a colleague. They want a flight to go to an airstrip that hasn't been used in years. Doing so will require special permission.

You've asked around, and been told that the person who oversees airstrip permissions has an office near the base of the Air Traffic Control tower.

It's almost midday, and you keep to the shadows as you weave between buildings. It's going to be a blazing hot afternoon.

You find the office you've been told about. Hopefully this will be over quickly. Your colleague mentioned another aircraft flying back this afternoon that could make a test-stop at the unused airstrip. Assuming you get the permission in time.

You knock and enter. As your eyes adjust to the gloom, you see a man seated behind an imposing desk, working away on the computer. He's young, and his fashionable suit matches the sharp edge of his glasses. Another of the young men and women, you suppose, that the government is training as civil servants. The suit's a bit over the top, but the man himself looks competent.

A faded couch fills one side of the office. An old man slouches back in a discoloured shirt, almost lost amongst the thick cushions. He glances up from his newspaper as you enter.

"Do you want to sit for a minute?" he asks.

You know that the culture values respect for the elderly. But time is not on your side. Perhaps there's a way to keep going that won't upset him.

Do you stay focused on the task at hand?

Yes: go to 20

Maybe: go to 21

Otherwise go to 22

20 Getting the airstrip opened is key. The aircraft is already on its way back from a distant flight, and once it takes on fuel at an intermediary stop, it will be too heavy to land on the untested airstrip.

You need to get permission if things are going to work.

Go to 23

21 Respect is important, but so are the deliveries you hope to provide. The landing permission is your highest current priority. At the same time, you hear a little voice in your head, reminding you of the importance of acknowledging people. There must be some reason why the old man is in the room. He doesn't look like another aircraft operator. Could he be a relative of the man behind the desk? If so, how will your behaviour towards him affect the outcome you want?

Do you sit next to the old man?

Yes: go to 22

Otherwise go to 20

22 The old man gestures you to the far end of the couch. You catch a faint scent of his unwashed shirt as you sink into the seat. You're glad that you aren't any closer. "Won't be long," the old man says.

The young man in the crisp suit rises from behind the desk. "All finished, Director," he says. "The new antivirus is installed and you shouldn't have any more problems."

"I seem to be able to break most computers," the man beside you on the couch says. "Thank goodness we have IT support." He shoves up from the couch as the young man in the suit removes a USB drive from the computer and leaves the office. "Now, what was it you wanted?"

You explain your request, trying to hide your surprise that the old man is the official you were looking for.

"Great timing." The man smiles. "I haven't been able to get to my documents all week. Now I'll be able to get you the form you need." He clicks the mouse a few times and a printer behind him spits out a sheet of paper. "Actually," he says as he hands the form over, "I've been wanting to get out to that airstrip myself for a while. If you're going to be flying there, I'd appreciate a seat."

Inwardly, you groan. Some officials are always trying to get free flights on the aircraft your organisation charters, rather than using their own budgets. Once they're offered the first flight, it sets an expectation that there will be more to follow. As a result, you have developed a few reasons that allow you to refuse such requests.

Do you find an excuse to give the director?

Yes: go to 26

Maybe: go to 27

Otherwise go to 28

23 “Thank you,” you tell the old man on the couch, “but I have to keep going.” You move to the desk and wait for the young man in the suit to look up. To your surprise, he keeps typing and pays no attention to you.

You glance at the clock on the wall. A few more minutes and you’ll miss the window of opportunity to secure the special landing permission.

Do you interrupt the man at the desk?

Yes: go to 24

Otherwise go to 25

24 “Excuse me,” you say, “I’m really in a rush here. I need to get a special landing permission.”

You hear the door close behind you. The man in the suit looks up. “I can’t help you with that. I’m from the IT department. I’m updating the director’s antivirus.” He glances past your shoulder. “The director just left. It’s his lunch time. Why don’t you come back after 2.00pm? He should be back by then.”

You realise that the old man was the person you needed to see. You rush out of the door, but he’s nowhere to be seen. Your chance to get permission is gone. You can come back tomorrow, but your colleagues are going to be disappointed. They had been relying on the test flight this afternoon, so that they could start relief deliveries tomorrow. That means the day after tomorrow, at the very earliest, before your colleagues can send their intended shipment. As they constantly remind you, every day counts in an emergency. They won’t be too pleased.

As you stare at the thunderclouds boiling up over the distant hills, you wonder if the coming rains will delay things even further.

ENDS

25 Two more minutes, you decide, and then you really have to say something, no matter how busy the man at the desk is.

The door opens behind you. You turn to see a woman in high-visibility vest, worn over a pilot’s uniform. She moves straight to the old man on the couch. “Good morning, Director,” she says. “Would it be possible to get the details for that new airstrip in Lacoso?”

“Sure,” the director says. He motions to the young man in the suit. “You can finish updating the antivirus in a minute. I need to print a file.”

You realise the young man behind the desk is an IT helper. The old man is the one you’ve come to see. He clicks the mouse a few times and an old printer whirs to life. The pilot takes the form, thanks the director, and leaves.

The director turns to you. “What was it you wanted?”

You quickly explain your request, and the director looks at the clock.

“I can print you the form, and you can fill it in here. But there won’t be time for the test landing today, I’m afraid. I need quite a few details before I can approve the request.”

He must have seen your face drop, for he smiles encouragingly. “Bring it back this afternoon, and you’ll definitely be able to test the airstrip tomorrow.”

Mentally, you update the timings. A test flight tomorrow, on the back of an afternoon charter. That means the day after tomorrow, at the very earliest, before your colleagues can send their intended shipment. As they constantly remind you, every day counts in an emergency. They won’t be too pleased.

As you leave the office, you remember the words of an experienced colleague, explaining that solutions often come through people, rather than structures. How on earth, you wonder, do you balance the rush to get things done with the time needed to acknowledge people?

ENDS

26 “I’m really sorry,” you say. “The aviation company we’re using aren’t permitted to take passengers on inspection flights. Their insurance is strict on that point. If there’s a problem, they could be liable for all sorts of claims.”

The old man nods, and the smile fades from his face. “I’ve heard they have a good safety record. So I understand that you’re unable to help. Still, it would have been helpful...”

Inwardly, you relax. You’ve been able to refuse the request, without causing offence. Hopefully, the director will still be supportive the next time you need help. You wonder, though, if there was more you could have done to keep him supportive of you. Despite his appearance, he holds an influential role. You leave the office, glad to at least have permission to land at the airstrip.

ENDS

27 The old man must have read your face. “It’s not what you think,” he says. “We had a crash there once, before your time. The community were meant to repair the airstrip. But I don’t know if they’ve done a good job.” You listen closely. You’ve heard of a few near misses when it incidents at remote airstrips.

“It’s fine when you land,” the director says. “But if you take off with a full payload, you need every metre. If the community haven’t graded the end of the strip the way we asked them to, you’ll get bogged down. You could easily strike the propellor.”

As you listen to the director, you realise that he’s genuinely interested in your well-being. A propellor strike would put the aircraft out of action. Your colleagues would be stranded, with the airstrip blocked to other flights. You work through a few logistics in your mind. If the director takes an early afternoon flight to the next city, he’ll be able to join your chartered aircraft when it refuels, before it then inspects the airstrip.

The man in front of you might not look particularly professional, but you realise that he’ll be an important help to your work going forwards. You make a mental note to do what you can to keep working with him.

ENDS

28 Excuses have their place when it comes to the average person looking for a freebie. However, you decide, the man in front of you holds an influential position, and he could be a useful ally if there are problems in the future.

Even if the director is trying to take advantage of the situation, there are reasons to allow it.

Go to 27

Momentum

Picture a vehicle stuck in the mud on carved-up road. Pushing that vehicle free is far easier once it's in motion. But the initial task, while the vehicle is stationary, requires much greater effort. In the same way, regaining lost momentum is much harder once you've come to a halt.

A key skill to embrace as a humanitarian responder at any level – and especially at the frontline of humanitarian response – is the ability to keep moving forward though uncertainty. The skill of learning that 'No' is very rarely 'No.' That doesn't mean being pushy – in many cases, being pushy will only solidify the 'No.' Rather, aim to hold the value of forward momentum in mind in every encounter.

Don't visibly lose momentum

There are phases in any disaster response activity when a sudden change – such as a rotation of border police, or a new manager looking to make an impression – brings all 'normal' humanitarian activities to a halt. Getting publicly and visibly labelled with a 'No' at this point can badly affect your momentum. Everyone in an authority role sees that your group are to be denied. The weight of collective opinion can cause even those who might be sympathetic to you to hold back on their support. Meanwhile, groups who arrive after the pinch-point may be able to carry on unimpeded. In such situations it can be better to hold off a few minutes or even hours, let the 'No' in the situation die down a bit, and then proceed. This applies to everything from gaining operating permission to enter a country to gaining access to sections of a camp.

Understand the context

If you're in a foreign context, being humble and trusting enough to put yourselves in the hands of local colleagues is an essential way to move past the various blocks that you face as a humanitarian worker. This only happens where good relationships exist, so invest as much in relationship building as you do in providing any technical output.

As a newcomer to the area, ask local colleagues to translate the situation. Why have you been denied a certain permission? What's the real issue? Ask for help to understand the power dynamics at work. Most importantly, get their advice about what a good solution looks like. Renewed momentum is certainly a goal, but there may be other aspects to consider as well.

Let someone else fight your battles

In some cultures, your host is a great way to move past a 'No.' In other situations, where a higher-level blockage is in place, it may be a different governmental department that does your fighting. Aim to cultivate a positive relationship with at least one government agency. Then, when high-level roadblocks arrive, find ways for this agency to take your side. In almost every circumstance, that government agency can exert far more influence than your individual organisation can.

Progress is made on the third encounter

A salesperson explained how he found that the significant result usually came in his third encounter with a prospective client. On the first encounter, the client didn't know him. Even if he was pleasant, the client might think he was just having a good day. The second time they met, he reinforced the message that he was a good person and that he could be trusted. By the third visit, he'd solidified his character in the client's mind and, as a result, the client was ready to work with him. This is especially powerful in relationship-driven contexts. So when you're knocked back on your NGO permit application the first time, and even the second, due to minor shortcomings with your paperwork, see this as just getting the first two visits out of the way. Smile, go jump through the extra hoop required, and come back again. Treat the first two visits as laying the foundation of relationship. If they deliver the actual result, that's simply a bonus.

Never correct someone in authority

Are you likely to change someone's mind by pointing out their error, in front of their staff members? Instead, find a way to acknowledge their point,

while gently referring to your own – not as contradictory, but as somewhat incidental. More on this in Chapter 5 (Negotiation)

Avoid behaviour that causes someone to say 'No.'

You don't always know who influences your momentum. Treat everyone well - from a security guard to a cleaner, from the woman in the smart jacket to the person sweeping the floor. For starters, most people want to be treated with dignity. When you notice someone who normally feels invisible, you make a difference to their day. Humanitarian response doesn't begin at the distribution site - it begins with the first encounter with a human being along the way. Treating all people with dignity also has a side benefit: you're much less likely to overlook the person of influence in a situation. If you're responding within your own context, you're much more likely to spot the hidden people of influence. But if you're operating outside your own country, it's easy to miss the signs. When working to resolve an issue, mentally press 'pause' for a second each time you encounter someone new. Don't dismiss them in the rush to achieve your goals. The person you're glancing past could well hold the key to resolving the situation that's threatening your momentum.

Be present

Most of the actions above involve presence. If you're managing a team, don't expect to do all this from the air-conditioned comfort of your office. Use your presence where needed. It's much easier to judge momentum when you're physically there.

Situations may have arisen as the result of a person in authority trying to save face. Things are much likely to return to normal if that person doesn't have to continue enforcing their decision. In these cases your presence as a senior representative from the organisation can go a long way to regaining a 'Yes.' The fact that you're taking time to discuss the issue can be enough to signal to everyone that the person who stopped your team member's momentum was within their rights. When getting involved in such a situation, dress the part and use power distance – you're a senior ambassador for your organisation. Do this, not to build your ego, but to enable better outcomes for your colleagues.

Be generous

In the chaos that follows a disaster, look for opportunities to do people favours. Of course it's good to help people when you can – the very foundation of disaster response is about helping others. But more than that, helping people also builds up a bank of favours which can be called on when you need them. Doing favours happens in a lot of ways. Where possible, aim to give practical support such as a shared lift, a place on a training course, or an introduction to a person of importance in the community.

Be careful when those favours involve a physical gift, since this can be misconstrued or cause more problems later (see 'Gifts, Bribes and Extortion' in Book One for more on this.)

'No' means 'Not this way.'

Of course, there are occasions when a 'No' must be treated as 'No.' Such as when your continued presence at a project puts colleagues from the area at undue risk. Or when the actions of aid groups are actively harming a local situation. In such situations it would be deeply irresponsible to keep pushing for a 'Yes.' But, generally, a key skill in front-line aid work is learning that 'No' means 'Not this way.' Explore different options to reach your goal. Be resourceful, be respectful, be wise, and most of all, be persistent.

Navigating past a series of 'No's is all in a day's work at the frontline of humanitarian response. As you encounter decision points along the way, remember the value of maintaining momentum.

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