Managing Complex and High-Stakes Negotiations:
A Senior Executive Course

2026 Course Description

Background

For many organizations working in humanitarian action, public policy and global health, negotiation is a core part of operating in complex environments and a constant source of institutional risks and concerns for their leadership.

Senior managers and lead negotiators face growing internal misalignment and polarization when mission delivery requires engagement with counterparts holding opposing interests, values, or power positions. Operational effectiveness in complex and adversarial environments depends on the ability of negotiators to manage trade-offs around core principles and policies. This creates a permanent structural tension that leadership must learn to navigate over time.

Most senior managers bring valuable experience as frontline negotiators from direct engagement with difficult counterparts at the negotiation table. At senior level, however, negotiation is no longer primarily about conducting dialogue with counterparts. It is about governing negotiation as an institutional process—defining mandates, managing risk, preserving legitimacy and reputation of the organization, arbitrating compromise, and making consequential decisions under high levels of uncertainty and public scrutiny. These responsibilities sit at the core of executive leadership.

This advanced course builds on key tactical negotiation tools covered in previous courses and emphasizes careful planning and structured frameworks for complex negotiations. It focuses on the senior management role in guiding negotiation processes, authorizing compromises, and managing risk in polarized and interdependent environments.

Purpose of the Course

The purpose of this course is to equip senior managers and lead negotiators with the capacity to navigate complex and high-stakes negotiations as a strategic leadership function.

Building on existing negotiation knowledge, experiences and tools, the course focuses on how leaders design and govern negotiation processes within their organizations. Participants will examine how mandates are constructed, how negotiation teams are empowered and protected, how risk and precedent are managed, and how final decisions on compromise are made in alignment with institutional policies and long-term legitimacy.

Using case-based exercises and structured tools and frameworks drawn from frontline experience, the course will equip senior leaders with practical navigation skills that enable them to direct complex negotiations in challenging and uncertain environments.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this five-day, twenty-hour course, participants will be able to:

1. **Navigate complex and adversarial negotiation as an ongoing leadership responsibility**
   Recognizing negotiation as a structural feature of executive responsibility, the course will guide participants to navigate the enduring tension between principles, compromise, and operational relevance.

2. **Design and govern negotiation processes at senior level**
   The course will assist participants in structuring negotiation architectures that clarify delegation, sequencing, and accountability, while enabling effective engagement on the frontlines.

3. **Formulate and manage robust negotiation mandates**
   Participants will acquire necessary tools to clarify goals, define red lines, agree on what can be compromised (and what should remain non-negotiable), and establish who is accountable. They will learn to design mandates to protect negotiators, support their legitimacy, and strengthen their position.

4. **Authorize risk and arbitrate compromise**
   Participants will learn to assess proposed compromises against the organization's values, past commitments and long-term risks, and decide whether to approve them even when information is incomplete.

5. **Manage legitimacy, reputation, and internal alignment**
   Final Simulation exercises will help participants to navigate internal legitimacy issues with governing boards and staff while maintaining external credibility and flexibility.

Course Methodology

The methodology is grounded in the premise that effective leadership in negotiation cannot be developed through tools or theory alone, but requires practice-based learning, structured reflection, and repeated exposure to difficult executive decisions under uncertainty.

The course focuses on how senior leaders design, govern, and authorize negotiation processes, rather than how negotiations are conducted at the table.

1. Experiential and Case-Based Executive Learning

The course is built around realistic, high-stakes cases and simulations drawn from complex negotiation environments where organizations face political, reputational, operational, and institutional risk. Rather than presenting ideal models or best practices, participants are placed in situations where:

- information is incomplete,
- interests conflict internally and externally,
- principles, policies, and operational needs collide, and
- decisions have visible consequences.

Each segment combines:

1. Short conceptual inputs focused on executive responsibilities,
2. Applied exercises and case work, and
3. Structured debriefs centered on judgment, trade-offs, and institutional impact.

The emphasis is on learning through decision-making, not on mastering predefined solutions.

2. Executive Judgment and Decision-Making

The methodology places executive judgment at the center of the learning process.

Participants will be asked to:

- clarify objectives, red lines, and acceptable compromise,
- assess risk across multiple dimensions,
- arbitrate between competing institutional priorities,
- authorize or reject compromises under uncertainty, and
- take responsibility for the consequences of their decisions.

Analytical tools, frameworks, and (where relevant) AI-supported analysis are treated strictly as decision-support instruments, never as substitutes for leadership judgment. Accountability for decisions always remains with the senior leader.

3. Collective Leadership and Internal Alignment

Negotiation at senior level is inherently collective. Decisions are shaped by boards, senior leadership teams, legal and policy constraints, operational realities, and external stakeholders. Accordingly, the course emphasizes collective executive work, with participants operating in leadership teams rather than as individuals. Group work focuses on:

- aligning senior leadership perspectives,
- managing disagreement within leadership teams,
- coordinating across departments, and
- maintaining coherence between governance, management, and operations.

Peer discussion is a core element of the methodology, allowing participants to learn from different organizational cultures, leadership styles, and risk tolerances.

4. Risk Management in Negotiation as an Executive Discipline

Risk is treated as a core leadership responsibility, not as a technical or compliance issue.

Participants work with structured approaches to:

- identify operational, security, reputational, legal, financial, and precedent-related risks,
- assess likelihood, severity, and vulnerability,
- define organizational risk appetite, and
- translate risk decisions into mandates and governance arrangements.

The methodology explicitly challenges default risk avoidance by giving participants tools to assess and authorize acceptable risk in line with mission, values, and long-term positioning of their organization.

Target Audience and Participant Selection
This course is designed for senior managers and organizational leaders whose roles involve governing complex negotiations and authorizing high-stakes decisions under uncertainty.

It is specifically intended for individuals who hold, or are preparing to hold, responsibilities such as:

- members of senior management teams,
- heads of departments or functions (e.g. operations, policy, legal, finance, partnerships),
- country or regional directors,

- members of executive committees or governing bodies,
- chief negotiators with decision-making authority over mandates and risk.

The course is not aimed at frontline negotiators or technical specialists seeking tactical negotiation training. Its focus is on executive responsibility, including mandate design, risk authorization, institutional alignment, and final decision-making.

Importance of Participant Selection

Given the nature of the course, a selection process is essential to ensure that participants' profiles align with the learning objectives and the level of responsibility addressed.

The course relies heavily on:

- peer-to-peer learning among senior managers,
- realistic executive-level case work,
- collective decision-making under pressure, and
- reflection on institutional responsibility and posture.

Participants who do not hold, or have not held, senior-level responsibilities may find the course content misaligned with their current role. Conversely, the quality and relevance of the learning experience depend on participants being able to draw on real organizational authority, exposure to risk, and experience with high-stakes decision-making.

Selection Criteria

Participants are expected to demonstrate:

- current or recent senior management responsibility within an organization,
- experience with complex negotiations or institutional decision-making,
- exposure to political, reputational, operational, or security risk,
- the ability to engage in strategic discussion and collective leadership work,
- willingness to reflect critically on leadership choices and trade-offs.

Selection is not based on sector alone. Participants may come from humanitarian action, public policy, global health, diplomacy, development, security, or related fields, provided their role involves governing negotiation processes rather than conducting them tactically. By carefully selecting participants whose professional responsibilities correspond to the course objectives, the program ensures a rigorous learning environment and a high level of practical value for senior leaders navigating complex negotiation challenges.

This advanced professional course is composed of 5 modules. Each of these modules aims at a specific set of competences and skills for senior managers and lead negotiators.

Module 1: Governing Compromise: The Executive Ethos of Senior Managers in Frontline Negotiation

Duration: 4 hours (Day 1)

This opening segment frames negotiation as a permanent leadership responsibility and introduces the executive ethos required to govern compromise on principles, values, and norms without undermining institutional identity.

Senior managers are routinely required to authorize compromises that sit in tension with the stated principles and mission of their organization. This tension is structural and unavoidable. The challenge for leadership is not to resolve it, but to navigate it with clarity, confidence, and discipline, ensuring that compromises are governed as part of institutional policy rather than experienced as deviation or leadership failure.

This segment focuses on the conditions under which senior managers can guide their organization toward becoming "good negotiating organizations"—able to operate between two risks:

1. a rigid, utopian adherence to principles that leads to operational paralysis; and
2. a pragmatic drift that erodes core identity, values, and legitimacy.

Participants will explore how executive ethos, institutional posture, and structured processes enable organizations to authorize compromise responsibly, consistently, and transparently over time.

Key Lessons

By the end of this segment, participants will be able to:

- Understand compromise as a governed leadership act, not a tactical concession.
- Recognize the structural tension between principles and pragmatism as an intrinsic feature of executive responsibility.
- Distinguish between compromises that preserve institutional identity and those that erode it.
- Identify how organizational ethos, leadership posture, and internal narratives shape the legitimacy of compromise.
- Understand how compromise can be authorized through institutional processes rather than individualized discretion.

Key Tools and Frameworks

1. Executive Ethos Framework
   A framework to assess leadership posture when authorizing compromise (values, responsibility, coherence, accountability).

2. Principles–Pragmatism Navigation Model
   A structured way to situate decisions between rigid norm compliance and uncontrolled pragmatism.

3. Governed Compromise Process
   A step-by-step approach to embedding compromise authorization within institutional policies, mandates, and decision rules.

4. Legitimacy Lens
   A tool to assess how internal and external legitimacy is gained, maintained, or lost when compromises are authorized.

Case-based Exercise

Exercise focus: Participants work on a simulated case in which a senior manager must authorize a compromise affecting core principles or policies of the organization.

Participants will be asked to:

- Articulate the underlying tension between principles and operational necessity.
- Define the conditions under which compromise could be authorized without undermining institutional identity.
- Identify the leadership posture and institutional process required to legitimize the decision.
- Explain how the compromise would be communicated internally and externally to preserve trust and coherence.

Module 2: Designing a Proper Negotiation Architecture: Objectives and Roles

Duration: 4 hours (Day 2)

This segment focuses on the architecture of negotiation governance: how senior managers structure objectives, policies, mandates, and roles to ensure effective, disciplined, and legitimate negotiation processes in high-stakes environments.

Complex negotiations operate simultaneously at multiple levels—strategic, operational, and tactical. Confusion between these levels weakens governance, exposes

organizations to unnecessary risk, and places unfair pressure on individuals. Effective negotiation therefore depends on a clear architecture that distinguishes:

- Organizational objectives from negotiation objectives;
- Institutional principles and red lines from operational flexibility; and
- The respective responsibilities of senior management, field management, and frontline negotiators.

This segment examines how senior managers design this architecture to protect the organization, safeguard negotiators, and maximize strategic benefit while limiting political, reputational, and operational costs. Participants will explore how clear objectives, policies, and role distribution enable negotiation teams to explore compromise without overstepping their authority or undermining institutional integrity.

Key Lessons

By the end of this segment, participants will be able to:

- Distinguish clearly between organizational objectives, operational objectives, and negotiation objectives.
- Understand the role of institutional policies and red lines in framing, not freezing, negotiation space.
- Recognize how poorly defined objectives and mandates expose organizations and individuals to risk.
- Design role distribution across senior management, field management, and frontline negotiators that protects each level while ensuring overall coherence.
- Appreciate negotiation architecture as a core tool of governance, not a technical detail.

Key Tools and Frameworks (inspired by Iceberg and CSS)

1. Objective Mapping Framework
   A tool to distinguish and align organizational, operational, and negotiation objectives.

2. Policy and Red Line Matrix
   A framework to translate institutional principles and policies into clear boundaries and areas of flexibility.

3. Negotiation Scenario Framework
   A structured approach to exploring possible compromises within policy constraints without creating precedent.

4. Role Distribution Map
   A governance tool clarifying who defines objectives, policies, mandates, and decisions at senior, field, and frontline levels.

Case-based Exercise

Exercise focus: Participants work on a high-stakes negotiation case in which objectives, policies, and roles are contested or unclear.

Participants will be asked to:

- Define organizational, operational, and negotiation objectives for the case.
- Identify institutional principles, policies, and red lines relevant to the negotiation.
- Develop negotiation scenarios that explore acceptable areas of compromise within those boundaries.
- Assign responsibilities across senior management, field management, and frontline negotiators, clarifying who decides what and when.
- Identify coordination and transparency mechanisms required to manage the process.

Module 3: Crafting Mandates: Giving Authority, Setting Limits, and Protecting the Organization

Duration: 4 hours (Day 3)

This segment focuses on how senior managers use mandates to make negotiations work.

A mandate is what gives a negotiator the authority to engage with external actors. At the same time, it sets clear limits to ensure negotiations stay within what senior management considers acceptable. In this sense, the mandate is both a source of power for the negotiator and a safeguard for the organization.

A strong mandate clearly states:

- Who is authorized to negotiate,
- What the negotiator is allowed to explore,
- What decisions the negotiator can make independently,
- What must be referred back to senior management,
- What cannot be negotiated, and
- How accountability and reporting work.

This segment also makes clear that a mandate is not only a written document. While mandates often include written instructions, they function above all as a framework for a trusted relationship between senior management and the negotiator. Like the mandate a governing board gives to an organizational leader, it goes far beyond a job description. It is built through trust, clarity, discipline, and regular dialogue.

Participants will learn how to craft mandates that give negotiators confidence and credibility in difficult environments, while ensuring that senior management retains control over risk, principles, and final decisions.

Key Lessons

By the end of this segment, participants will be able to:

- Use mandates to empower negotiators while protecting the organization.
- Clearly define authority, limits, and decision-making responsibilities.
- Distinguish between what must be written down and what must be managed through ongoing dialogue.
- Understand how mandate protects negotiators from pressure and prevents uncontrolled compromise.
- Manage mandates as living arrangements that can evolve as negotiations develop.

Key Tools and Frameworks

1. Mandate Checklist
   A simple checklist covering authority, scope, red lines, decision thresholds, and accountability.

2. Authority and Escalation Map
   A tool that clarifies which decisions can be taken by the negotiator and which must be escalated.

3. Mandate-in-Relationship Model
   A practical guide to managing trust, communication, and discipline between senior managers and negotiators.

4. Negotiation Update Protocol
   A structured way to keep senior management informed as negotiations evolve.

Case-based Exercise

Exercise focus: Participants design a mandate for a high-stakes negotiation involving political, operational, and reputational risk.

Participants will be asked to:

- Define the negotiator's authority and limits.
- Set clear red lines and areas where compromise may be explored.
- Decide which decisions the negotiator can take independently and which require approval.

- Design a simple accountability and communication process between the negotiator and senior management.

Module4: Assessing Risk and Authorizing Decisions Under Uncertainty

Duration: 4 hours (Day 4)

This segment builds senior managers' capacity to identify, assess, and authorize risk in complex negotiations.

Senior managers are routinely required to decide whether to engage in negotiations, authorize compromises, and approve agreements whose consequences are uncertain. These decisions carry different types of risk—operational, security, reputational, legal, and political. Too often, organizations avoid risk not because it has been properly assessed, but because they lack a clear method to judge what level of risk is acceptable.

This segment introduces a structured risk assessment approach, inspired by standard risk matrices (probability, severity, and vulnerability), adapted to the realities of frontline negotiation. It equips senior managers with practical tools to weigh acceptable risk against organizational values, past commitments, and long-term positioning.

Participants will also examine how organizations define and apply a risk appetite—the level of risk they are willing to accept in pursuit of their mission—and how this risk appetite should be translated into management decisions and negotiation mandates.

Key Lessons

By the end of this segment, participants will be able to:

- Identify different types of institutional risk linked to negotiation, compromise, and agreement.
- Distinguish between frontline risk, operational risk, and senior-level institutional risk.
- Move beyond risk avoidance toward informed and deliberate risk deliberation and authorization.
- Understand how unclear risk appetite leads to inconsistent decisions and internal tension.
- Recognize that risk assessment must combine perspectives from headquarters, field management, and frontline negotiators.

Key Tools and Frameworks

1. Negotiation Risk Matrix
   A practical tool to assess risk based on likelihood, severity, and vulnerability.

2. Risk Appetite Framework
A structured way to define how much risk the organization is willing to accept, and under what conditions.

3. Risk–Value Balance Tool
A method to weigh risk against organizational values, precedent, and long-term positioning.

4. Risk Integration into Mandates
Guidance on how risk decisions are reflected in mandates, delegation, and approval processes.

Case-based Exercise

Exercise focus: Participants work on a high-stakes negotiation case involving competing assessments of risk across the organization.

Participants will be asked to:

- Identify frontline, operational, and senior-level risks associated with the negotiation.
- Assess probability, severity, and potential impact of these risks in the particular contexts.
- Compare different risk assessments coming from frontline negotiators, operational managers, and senior leadership.
- Define a clear risk appetite for the case and explain how it should guide decision-making.
- Decide whether and under what conditions a compromise or agreement should be authorized.

Module 5: Executive Simulation: Governing a High-Risk Negotiation

Duration: 4 hours (Day 5)

The final segment is a full-scale simulation designed to bring together all the skills developed in the first four segments.

Participants will act exclusively as senior managers, heads of departments, and members of the governing body of an organization. They may hold roles such as Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Head of Legal and Policy, Head of Communications and Partnerships, or other senior leadership positions. Instructors will play the roles of operational managers and frontline negotiators.

The simulation centers on a high-stakes negotiation that puts the organization's reputation, relevance, security, financial sustainability, and long-term positioning at

risk. The situation is presented from the outset as complex, uncertain, and politically sensitive, with multiple internal and external pressures.

Participants must govern the negotiation from a senior-management perspective: assessing risk, defining objectives, adapting mandates, maintaining internal alignment, and making authorization decisions under pressure. Throughout the simulation, unexpected developments and internal disruptions will test leadership judgment, coordination, and resilience.

Key Lessons

By the end of this segment, participants will be able to:

- Integrate strategic navigation, mandate design, role clarity, and risk assessment into a single decision process.
- Act effectively as senior leaders responsible for governing, not conducting, a negotiation.
- Balance institutional values, operational needs, and acceptable risk under time pressure.
- Maintain internal alignment among senior leadership and governance structures.
- Respond to disruption while preserving coherence, authority, and credibility.

Key Skills Practiced

- Strategic decision-making under uncertainty
- Risk assessment and risk authorization
- Mandate adaptation and escalation management
- Internal coordination across departments and governance bodies
- Executive communication with donors, partners, and internal stakeholders
- Managing competing priorities without losing institutional coherence

Simulation Structure

During the simulation, participants will be required to:

1. Define and adjust strategic, operational, and negotiation objectives
2. Review and compare different risk assessments, including those provided by operational managers and frontline negotiators
3. Decide on acceptable risk in light of organizational values, past commitments, and long-term positioning
4. Adapt negotiation mandates as conditions evolve
5. Develop internal and external communication strategies
6. Respond to two or three disruptive events that challenge alignment and decision-making

All frontline and operational inputs are provided by instructors, ensuring the simulation remains focused on senior-management judgment and leadership, not tactical negotiation skills.

Simulation Outcome

By the end of the simulation, participants should clearly see how the core competencies of senior managers—governing negotiation, authorizing risk, maintaining legitimacy, and ensuring organizational coherence—come together in practice. The exercise reinforces the reality that effective senior leadership in negotiation is not about being at the table, but about holding responsibility for the whole system.

Course Schedule (Spring 2026)

Online (Zoom) · Boston Time (ET)
Monday, March 16 – Friday, March 20

Date	Time (Boston)	Title	Core Focus
Monday, March 16	8:00–12:00	**Module 1: Governing Compromise: The Executive Ethos of Negotiation**	Leadership ethos, principles vs. pragmatism, governing compromise as a permanent executive responsibility
Tuesday, March 17	8:00–12:00	**Module 2: Negotiation Architecture: Objectives, Policies, and Roles**	Strategic, operational, and negotiation objectives; policies, red lines, and role distribution
Wednesday, March 18	8:00–12:00	**Mocule 3: Mandates: Giving Authority, Setting Limits, and Protecting the Organization**	Mandate design as empowerment and safeguard; mandate as a relationship
Thursday, March 19	8:00–12:00	**Module 4: Assessing Risk and Authorizing Decisions Under Uncertainty**	Risk assessment, risk appetite, authorization of compromise, multi-level risk perspectives
Friday, March 20	8:00–12:00	**Module 5: Executive Simulation: Governing a High-Risk Negotiation**	Full-scale senior management simulation integrating all course competencies