

The Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA)

BATNAsⁱ are elegantly simple in concept, but notoriously difficult to execute. A BATNA is the option a negotiating party might execute should the negotiations fail. The key is that the BATNA must be executed *without the involvement of the opposite*. A BATNA is not the negotiation's "bottom line" – a BATNA is something you may wish to do if an acceptable "bottom line" cannot be achieved during the negotiations. You should always know and update your BATNA and always estimate (and update) the opposite's BATNA. Seek ways to improve your BATNA and make the opposite's BATNA less valuable.

There are three keys to determining a valid BATNA:

1. It must be an option that you can execute unilaterally (without any action or interaction with the other negotiating party). A BATNA is not a BATNA if it requires the participation of the opposite.
2. It must be a real option. It must be something you can and would want to do (have the time, resources, and will to execute).
3. Finally, it must be perceived as credible by the opposite. You may believe you will execute your BATNA, but unless the opposite also believes your BATNA's credibility, it is useless. As an example, if you are negotiating with other base personnel on an office move, and it is getting nowhere, a strong BATNA would be that your current office space is adequate to do the mission, and it is available for the foreseeable future. A weak BATNA would be that your current office area is cramped, the electrical system unsafe, and it is due to be demolished in three weeks. A useless BATNA is telling the other side your current office space is adequate to do the mission, and they know the contract to demolish your building was just awarded and begins in 14 days.

BATNAs may change during the negotiation as information and conditions change. For example, you may be looking for a new car with a good BATNA (your current car is in excellent condition). However, your BATNA would change considerably if your car got sideswiped in tomorrow's commute.

BATNA is brought up here before the detailed discussion of the five negotiating strategies because it is a useful tool in four of the five strategies (Insist, Evade, Settle, Cooperate but not Comply). Of note, in the Cooperative Negotiating Strategy (CNS) there is an extra effort to identify and manage both sides' BATNAs. Additionally, since CNS has relatively more engagement (in both depth and duration) than the other strategies, there is an opportunity within CNS to better manage BATNAs (i.e. work conditions to strengthen your BATNA or weaken the opposite's BATNA). In short, BATNA has applicability in many negotiating strategies, but can be exercised to its fullest potential using the CNS.

BATNA Bumper Sticker: Always know and protect your BATNA– always work to estimate and influence the opposite's BATNA

ⁱ Fisher, Roger and William Ury. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991). Pp 97-106.