

FIVE TECHNIQUES TO ENHANCE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CRISIS NEGOTIATIONS

By **Michael J. Asken, Ph.D.**

It is well accepted that rapport building through the application of active listening skills is the foundation of successful crisis negotiations. Derived from therapeutic techniques and therapeutic communication, this central core of developing a relationship is thought to be the key to motivating behavior change. In the situation of crisis negotiations, this is compliance with the negotiator's requests for cooperation and surrender into safe custody. However, looking at other areas of human communication, it may be possible to extract and adapt additional techniques that might enhance the persuasive effectiveness of the relationship and active listening skills.

Five potentially influential approaches have been found effective in other areas of behavior change and may well have facilitative effects in negotiations:

1. Using power words
2. Engaging in storytelling
3. Promoting visualization
4. Using the "Three Fs"
5. Crafting a positive response set

These techniques should be used with caution, however, as the application to negotiations will be largely untested. Further, they will require some skill on the part of the negotiator. They may not be appropriate for all crisis situations, especially not in those involving severe mental illness (psychosis) or active substance use.

Power words

We are all aware of the power of words. Ask any attorney! However, there are also some words that have increased power in themselves to attract attention and preface behavior change. It is said the most powerful word is an individual's name. Integrate that with the respect of beginning a negotiation by

calling someone Mr., Mrs., Sir or Ma'am, and then moving to a first name basis with the subject's permission, and you have elicited attention, provided respect, and promoted a degree of trust-enhancing familiarity and intimacy.

Many believe that the next two most powerful phrases (words) are *please* and *thank you*. By politely prodding action (*please*) and also by consistently recognizing and noting positive actions and steps in compliance, further cooperation is promoted. The coupling of politeness and acknowledgement impacts behavior.

Finally, there are words that, at several levels of awareness, can suggest importance and benefits to the subject. These are words such as *advantage*, *comfort*, *right*, *vital*, *safety*, *deserve* and *truth*. For example, a subject may be gratified when told that he or she "deserves to have your strong feelings about..." or "deserves to have your view listened to," or "deserves a choice on how to end the situation (as in whether to exit through the front or the back door when coming out)." Subjects, especially those with personality disorders, may respond to hearing that "it is to your advantage to..." and suggest some advantages. Threading the negotiation with words with a positive emphasis can help create an attentive and compliant mindset.

Storytelling

Frank and open discussion can convey interest and willingness to help. Careful debate of issues can influence attitude and behavior, as can minimal encouragers. But when these are also cloaked in the context of telling a story, the impact can be even greater.

Storytelling is a powerful human communication technique. It has been noted that storytelling derives its power from the interest and anticipation it creates. We all want to hear what will happen next.

Storytelling is a common human experience and one that takes most of us back to a younger age and a safer, more positive time — even if there was just a momentary escape from familial

or developmental strife. Stories resound with common themes like romance, heroism and sacrifice, to which most of us can readily relate. Therefore, storytelling can bypass our adult critical thinking and make us more amenable to accepting what is said. Storytelling can engage our emotions; done well, this will occur in a safe way, allowing expression and defusing.

At one level, storytelling refers simply to the way information is communicated. An example might be a negotiation where it is appropriate to use some self-disclosure to build rapport. If the negotiator wanted to indicate that he or she can relate to the subject's plight, one approach is to simply state that understanding. That could range from the usual "I understand," to partial disclosing "I understand because I've been there too," to a greater disclosure of "I understand because my wife/husband and I just got over a rough patch, ourselves." Disclosing as part of a story, however, may grab attention to a greater degree and enhance rapport by identification or even empathy for the negotiator. If the subject allows you tell your story, it is also probably less likely that your attempt at rapport through disclosure will be met with a "Who cares about *your* problems!" response.

At another level, storytelling can be used to suggest ideas/resolutions or make a point. Just like Hallmark has a card for every occasion, a negotiation team might have a library of stories for different situations. There could be a story modeling positive resolution and desired action for a hostage situation (adult or child, spouse or stranger, intentional or accidental), barricade call out, suicide threat (loss of job, loss of relationship, embarrassment at actions like embezzlement, etc.) and others. The stories can be based on actual incidents or created to make a point to the subject. Stories based on true facts may be best, for created stories will need to be delivered in a sincere, consistent and convincing manner.

Including storytelling in a negotiation can engage the subject at levels not possible by simple discussion. Carefully crafted stories will also have a moral or lesson that may resonate with the subject.

Most often it will be the negotiator who introduces a story. However, the telling of a story by the subject may shed

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light on personal issues and dynamics that can be addressed in the ongoing negotiation.

Promoting visualization

We all can recognize the power of imagination. When reading a book or listening to a story, we have all had the experience of visualizing the characters and action. We can fill our minds with vibrant and powerful images, but just as importantly, these images can also cause our bodies to respond with emotional and physiological changes and even behavioral action.

So asking or inducing a subject to "visualize" actions, scenes or consequences can also reach him or her at another level beyond that of just discussion. Integrating a phrase like, "John, just for a moment can you imagine..." ("how happy your son will be to see you safe," or "how good it will feel to do the right thing,") adds a whole other dimension to the interaction during a negotiation.

While you will have needed to use your negotiation skills to understand what a positive image will be for a specific subject and what images you want to avoid with a given individual, promoting visualization can help sway action in a desired direction.

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The Three Fs

The Three Fs is not a measure of tripled frustration or excessive expletives. It is a phraseology that seems to have an increased effect on moving an individual to agree with the person using its words. The phraseology incorporates the words *feel*, *felt* and *found*. It seeks to reflect how the subject is feeling, generalize that feeling, and then provide an apparently validated alternate course of action.

An example might be, "John, it's clear that you feel betrayed. Other people who have had their wife leave them clearly felt that way, too. But, they found that compassionate counseling helped them move on and find another solid relationship." Or, "John, it seems you're feeling uncertain as to what is the best thing to do next. Other people who have faced dealing with the police in situations like this felt the same way. They found that when they really thought about it, they decided to put down their gun and come out to safety...and felt they did the right thing."

Much like active listening, this phraseology shows awareness and validation of the subject's feelings. Complementing the process of "normalizing" taught in negotiations, it also removes singular guilt or focus on him or her by suggesting that others have such feelings too, and the feelings are not weird or abnormal. Strengthening the relationship and offering alternative action in this context can well lead to a desired response from the subject.

The "yes" response set

A response set is a tendency to answer in a certain direction. An affirmative or positive or *yes* response set is the tendency to answer all questions with a *yes*. The propensity to do this can come from an individual's nature to please others. It can come from complacency or boredom with questions. It can also often be induced or elicited in another person.

The attempt to induce a positive response set may be useful in negotiations, especially when you feel that you and the subject are moving towards the desired action. For example, it might used to elicit or solidify that last agreement to come out or give up. The exchange could look like this:

"John, we've been talking for quite a while now, haven't we?"

"Yes."

"I'm a bit tired, how about you?"

"Yep, me too."

"I've tried to be open and honest, how about you?"

"Yes, I have."

"We've made some good progress here, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"It would be good to wrap this up without any more problems, wouldn't it?"

"Uh-huh."

"So how about putting down the weapon and meeting me in the drive way?"

"OK."

Summary

Rapport and active listening remain the most effective tools of crisis negotiations. Concepts and techniques from other areas of human interaction may be able to polish those tools just a bit and increase their effectiveness. Like any tool, they become even more effective in the hands of a trained and experienced craftsman. ■

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions or policies of the Pennsylvania State Police.

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