

Keeping Your Team Relevant

BY PAT DOERING



CRISIS
NEGOTIATIONS

It seems as if every agency has been dealing with staffing issues as well as trying to find ways to keep officers trained in this pandemic environment. With these challenges, it is important to do our due diligence to use our crisis negotiation teams to their maximum capabilities and maintain the high level of training to ensure our team's professionalism and competence.

We all should be aware of what our basic duties as crisis negotiators should be:

- High-risk search warrants
- Hostage barricades/criminal barricades
- Suicide intervention

In place of these incidents, what else can our teams be doing to stay sharp and practice their skills?

NEGOTIATOR DUTIES

Mobile suicidal subjects: We need to start thinking of other ways that we can use our crisis negotiators in other functions. On any typical day in most jurisdictions, there is at least one incident where agencies will receive information about a suicidal subject that has left the area in a vehicle. Most agencies will put out a be on the lookout with the subject's name and description of the vehicle. Why not be proactive in these incidents and see if there may be a contact number for that subject? Have your negotiators attempt to call them. Most subjects want someone to listen to them and sometimes there may have been no actual threat of suicide. Most individuals will agree to meet the negotiator at their station or a hospital to receive care or clear up any misunderstandings that may have happened.

Demonstrations/protests: Utilize your negotiators in interacting with protest/demonstration groups. Have your negotiators research information and background on the groups and the participants. Have them contact the organizers and arrange meetings before any scheduled events. In these meetings, they should try and educate and establish expectations as well as provide guidelines for lawful activity. Exchange contact information so that the organizers have a direct line of communication. Negotiators have a knack for building rapport and establishing relationships with individuals. Use these skills. Use your negotiators as liaisons between the group and the department. If these relationships are formed and there is a good

line of communication the less likely it will be that these demonstrations/protests will go astray.

In-house training: Conduct in-service training for others in your department. Every single employee could benefit from being exposed to active listening skills. Whether it is a few minutes at roll call or an actual classroom setting, take the time to provide your fellow employees with some of the knowledge and skills you have obtained.

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NEGOTIATOR TRAINING

Since we are on the topic of training, what can we do if we are limited by classroom size, training funds, travel funds, and manpower issues?

Zoom training: One positive coming out of this pandemic is that we have learned to use Zoom and other online meeting applications. Back-to-back exercises are probably the easiest yet most effective way to maintain our skills. Having the ability to use these online platforms now means we no longer even have to be at the same location to conduct these events.

Scenario training also can be done via Zoom. The NTOA has developed a 40-hour online basic negotiators course with a full day of scenario training. We have had international students, as well as students all across North America, participate and by the end of the day, it is hard to notice that they aren't in the same room together. The NTOA has a library of scenarios already set up and ready to use, just check them out in the resource section of our website.

Other training ideas: With more and more agencies going to body cameras there are plenty of videos that you can find of negotiations. Why not use these as a training reference and discuss them as a team? More agencies are doing critical incident debrief videos to inform the public of what transpired in an incident; these are great learning tools and could incorporate a good discussion of the incident.

The NTOA's professional journal, *The Tactical Edge*, has an archive of articles dating back to 1983. Additionally, from 2001 to 2012 the NTOA published the *Crisis Negotiator*, a newsletter devoted entirely to negotiations topics. Pick a trending topic that your agency may be dealing with and more than likely there is an article to be found in the NTOA publications archives that will provide answers and research opportunities. (The NTOA's archives may be accessed at ntoa.org/tacticaledge.)

There are plenty of law enforcement and business-related negotiation books out there. Choose a book or chapter of a book and have a team discussion on it, or listen to negotiation podcasts. A lot of podcasts invite law enforcement negotiators on their show to discuss the topic.

Look up reports and recordings of past incidents. There may be several new negotiators who could benefit from the experience of an incident that occurred with current team members. Have those involved members give a briefing of the incident and then have the newer members handle the situation as if they were called to the scene.

HOUSE CLEANING

There always needs to be some checks and balances on a team. Make it a point to review these topics at least once a year if not more.

Equipment: Hopefully, everyone is breaking out their gear at least twice a year to make sure the batteries are charged, the cords are still there, and everyone is familiar with the functions and capabilities of the equipment. See what other teams in the area may be using. Explore what other technology might be out there and beneficial to your team. There are several cell-based systems out there so you don't have to rely on the old corded phone that tends to get tangled and twisted up.

Policies: When is the last time you broke out your team policies? Review them and see if they are still relevant or if procedures have changed but no one has addressed it in a policy. Is there new case law that may need to be looked at? Is there a new trend that needs to be addressed in policy? Review policies at least annually to make sure these issues are addressed.

Selection: Are you selecting your team-on-team needs?

- Foreign languages
- Life experience
- Military
- Social media/technology savvy

What does your selection process look like? Are you incorporating scenarios in the process? Do members have a say in who gets on the team or not? Team chemistry is sometimes that overlooked item that can derail a team if not handled properly. Once the new member is selected, is there an onboarding process? We have a field training program for new officers, why not one for new negotiators? Assign them a mentor who can help in their development.

Be involved in the field: Attend conferences. The NTOA holds an annual crisis negotiation conference with experienced speakers from across the country. Write articles and share your knowledge with others in the field. Be a proponent of the craft; educate officers, dispatchers, and command staff on what your team's capabilities are and what you can offer them.

We must be vigilant and advocate for our team's professionalism and competence. We must make sure our teams are maintaining a high level of training. We should utilize our negotiators in outside-the-box assignments and not allow things to fall through the cracks. This means keeping policies, selection and equipment up to date. In doing so we keep our team relevant and prepared to face today's challenges.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Doering has been employed in law enforcement since 1996 with the Lake St. Louis (MO) Police Department. He is a graduate of the FBI National Academy, the FBI National Crisis Negotiation Course, and the London Metropolitan Police (Scotland Yard) National Negotiators course. Doering is the former president and co-founder of the Missouri Association of Crisis Negotiators. He has presented case studies at several negotiation conferences across the country. He has a master's degree in Criminal Justice Administration from Lindenwood University. He is currently the Crisis Negotiation section chair for the NTOA.