

THE COST OF CONTROL:

Why Crisis Negotiators Must Reframe Power to Win BY ALLA ADAM

It starts the same way almost every time: someone barricaded, armed, angry — or worse, silent. The negotiator shows up, radio crackling, profile notes in hand, adrenaline slightly elevated but under control. Training kicks in. Talk them down. Gain rapport. Buy time. Stay safe. Stay calm. But then, nothing.

Silence on the other end. Or circular talk. Or bravado. Or what I call “emotional ping-pong,” where every word you say bounces back warped, weaponized or ignored. That’s when most negotiators either push harder or pull rank. Because in tactical culture, control is king. Except... it isn’t. Not in crisis negotiations. Not if the goal is resolution over domination.

Let’s talk about why control is the most expensive currency you can spend in a standoff, and what to spend instead.

Command vs. contact

Command and control work well in most law enforcement situations. It aligns units, ensures procedures are followed and reduces risks. It’s the rhythm that holds large, high-stakes systems together. But once you enter a high-emotion, low-logic space — say, a barricaded subject with nothing to lose — command doesn’t reach them. It repels them.

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What reaches them is contact. Not just words. Real contact. The kind that requires curiosity, not certainty. Patience, not performance.

The paradox? To connect, you have to temporarily surrender control. Not authority. Not safety. Just the illusion that you can steer this situation like a SWAT truck.

Contact asks: “What’s happening under the surface?”

Control asks: “How fast can we shut this down?”

If you’re trying to build rapport while telegraphing urgency and judgment, it’s like trying to knit underwater. Tension multiplies. Resistance grows. And just like

that, the gap between tactical team and subject goes from bridgeable to combustible.

Control is loud, power is quiet

Seasoned negotiators learn fast that the harder you push, the more people dig in. Think of power as a lever. Control grabs the lever and yanks. Power slides it subtly, precisely. Power plays the long game, and in crisis situations, the long game often wins.

Here are a few field-proven shifts:

Use calibrated questions: “What’s the biggest thing getting in the way of you leaving safely today?”

Use labeling: “Sounds like you don’t trust anyone right now.”

Use strategic silence: Let discomfort do the heavy lifting. People want to fill space — it’s human.

When you stop treating power as volume and start using it like gravity, things begin to shift. The situation slows. The emotional engine cools, and the subject starts listening back.

The civilian parallel: Boardrooms burn, too

I work with startup founders, venture capitalists and Fortune 500 executives. Crisis shows up there, too — it just wears cufflinks and hides in calendar invites. I’ve seen more than a few deals implode over bruised egos and uncalibrated pushes.

One founder I worked with sold their company for over \$250 million to a multinational. The earnout clause, a multi-million-dollar incentive, was included in a side agreement. Fast forward eight months: no payout. Why? The buyer “misplaced” the document. The founder is now suing across the U.S., Ireland and Australia.

Moral of the story? Whether it’s a hostage negotiation or a contract negotiation, people mistake force for leverage. But leverage is almost always behavioral, not positional. I’m telling you this not to romanticize business, but to emphasize a shared truth: When power becomes about pride instead of positioning, outcomes suffer.

Tactical empathy is not soft

Let’s clear something up: Tactical empathy isn’t a weakness; it’s an operational tool.



It's also one of the most misunderstood concepts among high-performing leaders — law enforcement or CEOs. Think of it as a mirror with intent. You reflect what the subject feels — not to validate the behavior, but to own the tempo. You pace their world until you can lead them into yours. This isn't theoretical. It's physics.

Control says: Comply or else.

Empathy says: Follow me.

The latter takes longer but pays off stronger. Because once the subject starts to feel understood, even 2 percent, they'll give you something most threats won't: their attention.

Negotiation is behavioral chess

Let me give you a visual. Picture every interaction as a three-move sequence:

1. **Regulate** — your energy, your tone, your urgency.
2. **Relate** — name what you're seeing.
3. **Redirect** — “What would make this feel safer to you?”

Do that well, and you start steering the narrative without resistance. Skip a step, especially the regulation, and you're just another suit or badge telling them what to do.

Here's a tactical mindset shift: “If I'm talking more than they are, I've probably lost the frame.” Good negotiators get their subjects talking. Great ones get them thinking. And they do that by treating control like salt: used sparingly, never the main ingredient.

Practicing without roleplay fatigue

I know, roleplaying gets old. But so does being stuck in the same loop in the field. Here are four drills to sharpen your negotiation instincts:

1. **Practice the 5-second pause.** Before responding, count five seconds in your head. Watch what people do with that silence. It'll teach you more than any transcript.
2. **Swap control statements for curiosity prompts.** Instead of “You need to calm down,” try “What's making this feel out of control for you right now?”
3. **Review body language in the mirror.** Seriously. Practice labeling your own tension. The more awareness you build in calm, the better you deploy it under pressure.
4. **Listen to conversations like an editor.** Replay your own phone calls or team huddles. Where did you switch from pacing to leading? Did it land? The best negotiators aren't the ones who speak the most — they're the ones who hear what the room isn't saying.

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The Emotion Equation: Fear + Isolation = Risk

Crisis behavior is almost never about logic. It's about emotional math. Most standoffs are powered by a combination of:

- Fear of consequence
- Shame about failure
- Isolation that's lasted way longer than anyone realized

Your job isn't to erase those factors. It's to acknowledge them, so they stop dominating the board. Once someone feels seen, even briefly, they'll recalibrate faster than expected.

Surrender the illusion

In a crisis, your badge doesn't guarantee compliance. Your training doesn't guarantee resolution. What guarantees progress is your ability to resist the urge to dominate and instead to learn to steer through attunement.

The best negotiators aren't chasing a quick win. They're playing to outlast the story the subject is stuck in. Power isn't taken. It's given. And in the field of crisis, it's given to those who can listen longer than their ego wants to.

Final thought: From tactical to transformational

Every agency has its own doctrine. Every team has its thresholds. The negotiator's edge comes not from enforcing control, but from understanding how people cling to it, and helping them release it just enough to make a different choice.

Crisis negotiation isn't about talking someone down. It's about holding the door open to a future they thought was not possible and making space for a choice that doesn't end in destruction. That's how you win.

About the author

Alla Adam is an investor, a certified strategic, international and crisis negotiator, the founder of the Adam Impact Institute, and a pilot. She has completed crisis negotiation training with the NTOA and advises across the U.S., Europe, Australia and New Zealand on high-stakes negotiations — from boardroom to barricade. Her work blends behavioral psychology, tactical pacing and real-world decision-making under pressure.

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