

VERBAL CONTAINMENT

NEGOTIATION SKILLS FOR THE FIRST-RESPONDING OFFICER

BY SCOTTIE R. FRIER

You've done everything right so far. You inquired from dispatch about prior call history and whether weapons are involved. You parked a couple of houses from the residence. You made a cautious approach, listening intently as you neared the home.

As you approach, you hear an argument in the back yard. As you step through the gate, it all seems to start moving in slow motion. The estranged husband, startled by your presence and armed with a pistol, grabs his wife by the hair. He begins stepping towards the back door, using the wife as a shield and holding the gun to her head. You don't have a shot, and you're forced to get to cover. The husband drags the wife into the house. It gets worse, as you now hear children inside crying and begging, "Please don't hurt my mommy!" As the door slams, he screams, "I swear I'll kill them all if you try to come in!"

You call it in: "Headquarters, I've got

an armed subject who has barricaded himself inside the residence. The subject has multiple hostages. Advise the watch commander, and respond negotiators with the SWAT team ASAP!"

The deployment and response of SWAT officers and negotiators often takes up to an hour and a half to two hours. So what now?

While some agencies encourage delaying the initial contact with the subject until the arrival of specialized units, my advice, as an experienced negotiator and instructor, is for first responders to make contact as soon as possible. Stephen J. Romano, former chief negotiator for the FBI and an expert in crisis negotiations, is also an avid proponent of early initial contact into a crisis site in order to promote verbal containment.

This article will address two main issues. First, it will identify and explain the concepts and tactical benefits behind the verbal-containment

objective. Second, it will provide first-responding officers with some basic communication skills they can use to not only maintain the situation, but also gather beneficial information and intelligence.

Understand the Objective

The main objective of verbal containment is to reduce the likelihood of further violence. Quickly beginning some form of communication with the hostage taker or barricaded individual allows you to occupy the subject's attention in order to prevent them from harming hostages or committing other acts of violence. This will also allow you to project a poised and professional police demeanor in hopes of calming the subject, thereby providing a sense of order. Major John Ferrarro, commander of the South Carolina Department of Corrections' Situation Control unit, also advocates prompt initial contact. Ferrarro explains that other benefits

<< Columbus and Whitehall, Ohio, police stand near the east doors of the Safe Auto Insurance Co. office in Whitehall on March 23, 2005. A gunman held a woman hostage in the building for six hours before fatally shooting himself.

include the ability to distract the subject from further fortifying the crisis site or formulating plans to attack officers.

Setting a realistic goal from the onset is critical for a first responder. Avoid becoming preoccupied with "talking the subject out." Understand that most successfully negotiated situations will take several hours to unfold. An initial chaos or confusion stage will hopefully evolve into a negotiation process and then finally a resolution. As a first responder, success in this situation comes with the ability to begin communication, reduce further violence and gather critical intel. I truly believe the officer or negotiator who can first convince the hostage taker or barricaded subject to communicate deserves as much credit for a successful resolution as the negotiator who worked the surrender.

First Contact

First responding officers who attempt to communicate with subjects in these situations must understand that they must use different communication skills than they might employ in most of their day-to-day duties. The majority of law enforcement communication is often very aggressive, impersonal and intrusive. This often works in our "just the facts" mode, but it can create barriers and cause defensiveness. Hostage takers and barricaded subjects are in a crisis state. They are emotional, irrational and often very scared.

Successful communications during these situations will require an ability on your part to empathize with the subject. The objective here is to communicate in such a way as to build rapport, gain trust and instill a sense of worth to the subject's issues and to the negotiation process.

When contact with the subject is made, identify yourself by first name without stating a rank or title. ("Hello my name is Scottie, and I'm with the sheriff's department. How are you doing in there?") Begin asking open-ended questions that will enable the subject to let you know what is happening. ("What happened today that

caused this?" "What's going on in there?") Ask about the hostages. ("Is everyone in there with you OK?") If you know the name or relationship of the hostages, use this to personalize them. ("How are your wife and children doing in there?") Allow the subject to talk as much as he will without interruption. Listen intently—everything he says will help explain what's happening and why. And even more importantly, while he's talking to you, it takes his focus away from the hostages.

Prepare yourself for the fact that most of the initial communication with the subject will likely involve yelling, screaming, profanities and threats. This is known as a venting phase and can prove very intimidating and unsettling for the first responder. There is, however, an upside: The venting phase allows the subject to get things off his chest. It will also begin to provide you with tremendous insight into the issues, so really focus on what he says despite the way he's saying it.

The venting phase is also physically draining and should take some toll on the subject, which will hopefully cause him to begin to settle somewhat. During this time, let the subject know you are doing everything you can outside to control this situation. Encourage him to work with you by getting everything inside settled and under control.

Active Listening Skills

Trained crisis negotiators use communication tools referred to as active listening skills. These skills are designed to deal with the emotional mindset of someone in crisis.

One of the most important skills that you should try to understand and master is emotion labeling. Is the subject mad, worried, depressed, afraid or angry? What's causing their emotion?

Your ability to show the subject that you recognize how he feels will allow you to move into the critical rapport-building phase. *Example:* You ask, "What happened today?" He responds with, "She served papers on me; I think she has a new boyfriend. I'm going to lose my wife and my kids and I just can't have that." A good response here would be, "You really seem to be afraid that you're going to lose your family." Work hard to recognize what emotion is in play and the root cause. Tell him what you are hearing: "You seem to love your wife and you don't want to lose her." The subject believing that you get it will prove very beneficial at this point.

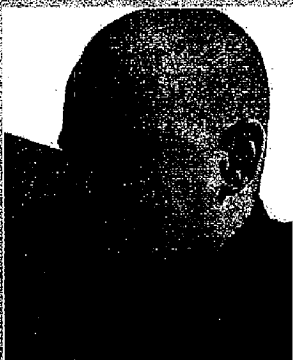
Two other skills that somewhat run hand in hand are paraphrasing and mirroring/reflecting. Paraphrasing refers to simply restating, in your own words, what the subject has been saying to you. This skill displays attentiveness on your part and can help clarify issues. For example, say the subject tells you, "I can't lose my wife; I must be with my children." Paraphrase this statement to sound something like this: "It sounds like your family is →→

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Success Story



ON MAY 9, FIRST-RESPONDER SERGEANT CALEB BLACK of the Lexington County (S.C.) Sheriff's Department negotiated the surrender of an armed rape suspect who was threatening to harm officers and commit suicide. Using information provided by the victim, Black made phone contact with the suspect. While Black was speaking with the suspect on the phone, the shift lieutenant spotted the suspect's vehicle. The suspect began making threats to either harm officers or kill himself. He then began playing a cat-and-mouse game—a stop ping, making threats and then driving away. The suspect drove for several miles before a police road block forced him to stop. Black then began first responder negotiations with the suspect. The suspect armed with a shotgun, made threats against officers and passing cars, forcing deputies to shut down all traffic on the interstate. Black negotiated with him without the benefit of a coach for several hours. Black was able to convince the suspect to throw the weapon out of the vehicle and surrender to the SWAT team.

PHOTO: SCOTTIE HARRIS

important to you and that you love them very much." Mirroring statements repeat back to the subject his last words. *Example:* The subject says, "I might want to come out later, but all those SWAT guys are making me nervous." You respond with, "So, those SWAT guys are making you nervous?"

These skills will help you build a rapport with the subject; he will recognize that you are listening to what he has to say. Remember, your goal here is to project empathy towards the subject and his situation. This is not weakness on your part, or sympathy. You don't have to agree with him, but you can talk to him in a way that projects recognition of his perceptions and concerns.

Perception is reality. That is, the subject's perception of this situation is the reality you must deal with. Show the subject you're trying to understand his plight. This is not always easy—persons in crisis sometimes seem to have lost a sense of reality. Understanding this point can prove crucial when dealing with emotionally disturbed or mentally ill individuals.

"That leads me to a touchy subject. If you hear or recognize suicidal thoughts or ideology, ask the subject point blank if he's planning to commit suicide. Don't be afraid to ask this question outright—you aren't going to talk someone into committing suicide. You must recognize what options the subject is considering. If he says, "Maybe I should just end it all, that way I won't have to hurt anymore," ask this question: "Are you telling me you're thinking about committing suicide today?" Suggest that you and he try to work together on other possible solutions to the problem.

Demands & Deadlines

Pay close attention to demands or ultimatums made by the subject. What does he want? What does he think he needs? Be careful to avoid making offers or suggesting demands.

Demands made by the subject will provide negotiators a huge amount of insight into his thought process. Are his demands reasonable? Do they show some intent on his part to work through this situation? We must know that

demands made by the subject reflect his mindset and are not simply thoughts or ideas that were prompted by our suggestions.

Should the subject begin threatening deadlines with demands, use stalling tactics. If, for instance, the subject threatens to hurt someone in 20 minutes if he can't have something, buy some time by telling him you must first get permission from your bosses. Explain it may take some time and effort to locate the item and get it to the scene. Let him know you're working on getting that item for him, but that it may take awhile.

Important: Be honest and realistic with the subject. If he asks for something completely unreasonable, such as "a case of whiskey, a pistol and a fully fueled jet so I can fly to Sweden," inform the subject that you don't think your bosses would ever give approval for something like that. Avoid simply telling the subject what you think he wants to hear. Think about it: An unrealistic demand may be his way of testing whether you will be truthful during

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this process. Getting caught in a lie or making a promise you can't fulfill will seriously jeopardize any trust you may have gained up to this point.

Tactical Assessment

As communications with the subject continue, constantly assess tactical concerns and officer safety issues. Are you in a safe position with adequate cover? Have you notified responding officers and perimeter units of your exact position?

SWAT teams or tactical units will want as much intelligence as possible upon their arrival. Thomas Hamilton, deputy commander of the Lexington County (S.C.) Sheriff's Department SWAT team, suggests that first responders assess some of the following particulars if possible:

- What's the approximate location of the subject within the crisis site?
- Is he moving around, or does he seem localized?
- Did you hear any evidence of the subject barricading entry points or attempting to fortify his position?

- What types of weapons does he appear to have access to?
- Is he familiar with these weapons, or were they just available to him within the crisis site?
- Does he have military or police training?

Not only will this information assist the tactical units, it will also provide negotiators with additional clues regarding the subject's mindset and intentions.

One last thought: Don't simply look at your role in this situation as a temporary fix. If you've established a solid rapport and the subject is comfortable communicating with you, the negotiation commander arriving on scene will likely want to use this to their advantage. First responders are often asked to continue with communications while a trained negotiator serves as their coach. If the situation warrants introducing a new negotiator, use the rapport you have established in order to give credibility to this individual and the ongoing negotiation process.

Conclusion

Our ability to safely resolve or diffuse a crisis without using physical force can greatly enrich the confidence bestowed upon our profession by the citizens we are sworn to protect. The critical need for operational guidelines, policies and training that promotes and encourages a non-violent response to crisis situations becomes apparent when issues regarding public safety, public perception, liability and officer safety are examined or reviewed.

First responders who establish productive preliminary contact into a crisis site greatly enhance the odds of a successful and non-violent resolution. Never underestimate the importance of your role and the influence you may have in these situations. **LOM**

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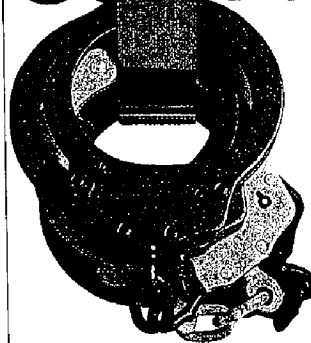
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