



## ***Role-Playing A Vital Tool in Crisis Negotiation Skills Training***

By VINCENT B. VAN HASSELT, Ph.D.,  
and STEPHEN J. ROMANO, M.A.

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**R**ole-playing has become one of the most frequently used training tools employed by law enforcement agencies. In fact, recent surveys show that over 80 percent of law enforcement agencies use some form of role-playing in their training programs.<sup>1</sup> Also, nearly all survey respondents agreed that role-plays are valuable in a variety of training situations. They involve simulations of real-world situations likely to be encountered by

personnel in a wide range of law enforcement activities (e.g., SWAT operations and interviews/interrogations). Further, role-playing has become a hallmark of law enforcement recruit selection and promotional tests.

In recent years, however, role-playing also has become a mainstay in the evaluation and training of crisis negotiation skills. With a history dating back over 30 years, crisis negotiation has led to the “successful resolution of tens of thousands of

hostage, barricade, attempted suicide, and kidnapping cases throughout the world.”<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the pioneering work of the New York City Police Department, crisis negotiation offered the first “soft” approach to conflict and dispute resolution, which was a marked departure from previous “hard” tactical methods.<sup>3</sup> Crisis negotiation emphasizes the “slowing down” of an incident, thus expanding the timeframe, allowing the subject to vent feelings (anger,

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frustration, anxiety) and, in turn, defusing a negative emotional state. To accomplish this, investigators use active listening skills that have proven critical in establishing rapport with subjects and defusing strong emotions in high-risk crisis situations.

Training law enforcement personnel in crisis negotiation can be a challenging enterprise. "...police officers are taught to take charge—to act quickly and with authority. The principles of hostage negotiation fly in the face of that training. A negotiator must fight the inner urge to 'act.' Instead, he or she must sit back and use words to diffuse critical, life-and-death situations."<sup>4</sup> To train law enforcement officers to resist the urge to act and employ effective listening skills can take considerable time and training; practice and repetition are crucial. While direct observation of actual negotiations is a preferred approach for evaluation and training of skill level, the risks of these encounters make such an approach unrealistic. Further, the frequency of such events usually is too low to provide sufficient opportunities for skill practice and acquisition. Therefore, role-playing is the next best approach.

### Development

Role-playing, as employed in crisis negotiation skills training, can take various forms and be brief or lengthy in format. Managers can develop detailed

scenarios or keep them sketchy. Some role-play situations are based on actual incidents that have occurred, while others may be designed in anticipation of situations likely to happen in the future. The Crisis Negotiation Unit (CNU) of the FBI's Critical Incident Response Group uses a combination of role-play scenarios in its National Crisis Negotiation Course (NCNC) taught at the FBI Academy to agents, as well as to law enforcement officers from all over the world. To facilitate training, the CNU developed sets of role-play scenarios adapted to hostage, barricaded, suicide, and kidnapping incidents, which occurred over the past several years that necessitated a law enforcement response. In their

role as the negotiation arm of the U.S. government domestically and internationally and due to their direct involvement in numerous critical incidents over the past 25 years, CNU personnel have unique, extensive expertise in crisis negotiation and management.

One set of role-play scenarios developed by the CNU describes crisis negotiation situations in family/domestic, workplace, and suicide categories. Further, each scenario includes prearranged prompts delivered by an actor portraying a subject, which helps extend and standardize the interactions and make them more similar to real-life encounters.

Role-play scenarios can last from 1 to several minutes. Instructors ask students to respond



*Dr. Van Hasselt is professor of psychology at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and is a certified police officer.*



*Special Agent Romano is the chief of the Crisis Negotiation Unit of the Critical Incident Response Group at the FBI Academy.*

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the same way they would if the situation actually was occurring. While obviously much shorter than most real-world crisis situations, the format of these relatively brief scenarios allows for immediate and frequent instructor feedback of targeted negotiation skills. Feedback is especially helpful in the early phases of negotiation training given the importance of the practice and repetition usually required for new negotiators to gain these skills.

The NCNC also carries out lengthier role-plays of critical incidents in Hogan's Alley, the FBI Academy's mock city that provides a variety of naturalistic settings (e.g., hotel, drug store, and apartment building) for training. Scenarios at this level usually last about 40 minutes. They provide the opportunity for negotiators to apply their newly learned skills but now in an increasingly more realistic situation. For example, negotiators might be asked to respond to a bank robbery gone awry in which the perpetrator has barricaded with hostages. Facilitators provide students with a scenario/incident overview, including some background on the perpetrator and the setting. Students must make contact with the subject and attempt to resolve the situation peacefully. Further, they rotate through a series of such scenarios, with team members taking turns in

different negotiator roles (primary negotiator, coach, situation board member, intelligence gatherer, team leader, command post liaison) in each.

A third type of role-playing involves the use of even lengthier scenarios, often several hours in duration. These more realistic role-plays reflect actual critical incidents that often

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require prolonged negotiation periods for successful resolution. For example, one NCNC scenario involves a subject who hijacked a school bus and is threatening to blow it up and kill everyone inside if the subject's demands are not met. These role-plays require negotiation team members to work together, using all of their new skills.

### **Realism**

To what extent does role-play behavior reflect the negotiator's likely behavior in actual crisis situations? This proves a difficult question to

answer until the negotiator handles real-life critical incidents. Many years of research on this topic has provided several helpful suggestions to enhance realism in role-plays.<sup>5</sup> For example, greater detail in scenario descriptions helps participants “get into” their roles. Of course, giving too much information to negotiators may not be realistic either because negotiators often have limited knowledge about the situation, subject, or hostage when they first arrive on the scene.

Personnel with extensive previous experience in crisis negotiations should provide as much input as possible into scenario content and development. Further, using actors or trained confederates in the various scenario roles provides many benefits. For the NCNC, negotiator-trained special agents and law enforcement officers portray perpetrators and hostages in role-plays conducted during the field training portion of the course. In addition, local college students often are eager to help as role-players. Counseling and clinical psychology graduate students who have developed sound interviewing and active (empathic) listening skills have been especially useful in providing objective feedback concerning negotiators' use of active listening skills in the critique/feedback phase of training.

## Role-Play Scenarios

### Family/Domestic

Jim Smith abducted his common-law wife and their son from a distant state. She had obtained a court order preventing him from seeing their son. She repeatedly rejected his efforts at reconciliation, and he has stalked and harassed her in the past. He kidnapped her and the child in the middle of the night from her parent's home and drove them to an unoccupied nearby farmhouse where he ran out of gas. Authorities located his vehicle and then discovered the family inside the farmhouse.

Prompt 1: "I'm not letting her take my son away from me."

Prompt 2: "I've tried over and over to get her to come back to me."

Prompt 3: "My son is what I live for."

Prompt 4: "I don't think I can take any more."

### Workplace

John Henry became angry because the factory where he had worked for 10 years fired most of the senior workers to reduce payroll and increase profits. He blamed the factory manager for the loss of his job. He brought a gun into his office and threatened to kill the manager if he did not get his job back. He felt that he had been treated badly and not given the respect he deserved after 10 years of hard work.

Prompt 1: "I've given 10 years of my life to this place."

Prompt 2: "It's that damn manager's fault."

Prompt 3: "They had no right doing this to me."

Prompt 4: "If I can't work, I can't support my family."

### Suicide

Frank Jones was a successful banker living the good life. Unfortunately, several of his investments and financial decisions failed, and he faced financial ruin. He thought that he would bring shame to his family, his wife would leave him, and his possessions would be taken away. He felt hopeless and helpless. He believed that killing himself was the only way out. One of his bank employees observed him with a gun in his office and called the police to intervene.

Prompt 1: "I'm ruined; my life is over."

Prompt 2: "My family will be so ashamed of me."

Prompt 3: "This is hopeless; I can't go on."

Prompt 4: "Killing myself is the only answer."

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Finally, instruction from trainers significantly impacts the productiveness of the role-play process. Negotiation instructors must instill a clear sense of the training's importance to students and advise them to perform as if the critical incident was occurring. As with any other aspect of law enforcement instruction, how students perform in training is the best available predictor of performance under real conditions. All participants should take role-playing seriously or, otherwise, implementation problems under actual conditions are more likely to occur.

### Active Listening Skills

Crisis/hostage negotiation seeks to decrease the perpetrator's emotions and increase rationality.<sup>6</sup> The specific verbal strategies used to accomplish this goal fall under the category of active listening skills, which are critical for the establishment of social relationships in general and the development of rapport between negotiator and subject in crisis situations in particular.<sup>7</sup> Further, active listening skills have proven highly effective in peacefully resolving volatile confrontations. Some of the active listening skills trained in the NCNC and similar programs include—

- paraphrasing: repeating in one's own words the

meaning of the subject's messages;

- emotion labeling: attaching a tentative label to the feelings expressed or implied by the subject's words or actions;



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- reflecting/mirroring: using statements indicating the ability to take the subject's perspective; repeating last words or main ideas of the subject's message;
- open-ended questioning: asking questions that stimulate the subject to talk; not eliciting short or one-word answers.

Role-playing serves as a vital tool for training crisis negotiators to use active listening skills. Most notably, role-playing provides the vehicle for the extensive behavior rehearsal necessary for new negotiators to gain proficiency in these skills.

Using active listening skills and acquiring the patience needed to peacefully resolve crises require considerable training and time. Ongoing practice using role-play scenarios as a primary behavior change approach can accomplish this.

### Training Procedures

To get the most value from role-plays, several training tips prove helpful in improving negotiation skill level. These suggestions are borrowed from the field of behavior therapy, which heavily relies on role-playing in behavior-modification efforts, and incorporate common sense. The first is the simplest, and it involves direct instructions to the skills needed (e.g., active listening and surrender instruction) in role-play crisis situations. Usually, instructors initially teach these in the classroom and then review students' use of them immediately prior to and after role-playing scenarios.

Second, feedback and positive reinforcement following role-plays improve and shape targeted skills. Role-plays allow instructors to observe students' behaviors in simulated critical incidents and result in subsequent constructive evaluation of their demonstrated skills. This feedback is most effective in enhancing skill development when instructors provide it immediately after the scenario in as

positive a manner as possible and with specific statements about what was done well or, conversely, what needs more work.

Third, modeling allows the trainer to demonstrate effective crisis negotiation strategies during role-play scenarios. Particularly, when a student appears to have great difficulty learning a skill, observing a veteran negotiator can boost the learning curve considerably.

Finally, videotaping or audiotaping role-play scenarios proves invaluable. It allows team members to observe and self-evaluate their performance in various job functions; reviewing taped negotiations benefits the individual's self-analysis and helps the instructor evaluate each student's strengths and deficits.

## Conclusion

Role-playing has considerable value in crisis negotiation skills training. Most important, it can serve as a primary tool for the evaluation and training of required negotiator behaviors. In particular, active listening skills, widely considered a negotiator's primary weapon, can be most easily trained and shaped in the context of role-play training scenarios.

The best way to predict negotiators' behaviors is to imitate, as closely as possible, the conditions to which they will be

exposed in actual crisis situations. Role-playing provides the opportunity to practice negotiation skills under circumstances designed and manipulated to closely approximate real-world situations. Given the increasingly prominent role of crisis negotiations in law enforcement and the need for more and better-trained negotiators, law enforcement agencies should use, as well as refine, role-play strategies in crisis negotiation training. ♦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Arthur G. Sharp, "The Importance of Role-Playing in Training," *Law and Order*, June 2000, 97-100.

<sup>2</sup> Chuck Regini, "Crisis Negotiation Teams: Selection and Training," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, November 2002, 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Bolz and L. Hershey, *Hostage Cop* (New York, NY: Rawson Wade Publishing, 1979); Harvey Schlossberg, *Police Response to Hostage Situations* (New York, NY: Pergamon Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Michael McMains & Wayman C. Mullins, *Crisis Negotiations: Managing Critical Incidents and Situations in Law Enforcement and Corrections* (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Company, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Alan S. Bellack, "Recurrent Problems in the Behavioral Assessment of Social Skills," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 41 (1983): 29-41.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Hatcher, et. al, "The Role of the Psychologist in Crisis/Hostage Negotiations," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 16 (1998): 455-472.

<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Cairns, *The Analysis of Social Interactions: Methods, Issues, and Illustrations* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979).

## Wanted: Notable Speeches

The *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* seeks transcripts of presentations made by criminal justice professionals for its Notable Speech department. Anyone who has delivered a speech recently and would like to share the information with a wider audience may submit a transcript of the presentation to the *Bulletin* for consideration.

As with article submissions, the *Bulletin* staff will edit the speech for length and clarity, but, realizing that the information was presented orally, maintain as much of the original flavor as possible. Presenters should submit their transcripts typed and double-spaced on 8 1/2- by 11-inch white paper with all pages numbered. When possible, an electronic version of the transcript saved on computer disk should accompany the document. Send the material to:

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FBI Academy  
Madison Building,  
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e-mail: leb@fbiacademy.edu