

**COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS  
AND HOSTAGE NEGOTIATIONS**

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Second Edition

# COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS AND HOSTAGE NEGOTIATIONS

Practical Communication Techniques,  
Stratagems, and Strategies for Law Enforcement,  
Corrections and Emergency Service Personnel  
in Managing Critical Incidents

*By*

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*To Paula, for all that you are. To Matthew, Chen-I, and  
Zoe and to Robert, Judy, and Ava for being in my life.  
I love you all more than I ever thought myself capable.*



## FOREWORD

Art has made countless contributions to the Hostage Negotiating Team. He volunteers untold hours, not only in our monthly training sessions, but during the times the team is called upon to negotiate in hostage situations, barricaded persons, and threatened suicides. Art's expertise and down-to-earth approach to crisis intervention have proved invaluable.

Art writes in a common sense approach in the handling of crises by law enforcement negotiators. He gives practical examples to assist both the new and seasoned negotiator. His chapter on Negotiating With Subject Types describes various personality disorders in everyday language and how to negotiate with each of them.

His inclusion of The HNT Game makes this book a "must have" for any law enforcement crisis negotiator to sharpen their skills or to train new negotiators. I highly recommend it.

LT. JOHN C. MILLS, COMMANDER  
Hostage Negotiating Team  
Louisville Metro Police Department  
Louisville, KY





## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

*C*ommunication in Crisis and Hostage Negotiations is in nearly seventy international university and institutional libraries. It is in the library of the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. All of this is very gratifying; after all, it's there where active Negotiators and students of criminal justice and other emergency services, can check it out. It was written for them. What I do not know is if it is being read.

What I do know from my own observations, and from a study by Mike Webster (2004, "Do Crisis Negotiators Practice What they Preach?" *The Canadian Review of Policing Research*,1.) that corroborates my findings, is that Negotiators are hardly using the active listening techniques typically taught in Negotiations 101. When they do, they are most likely to use the simplest ones such as "minimal encouragers." Dismal and disappointing. If the very basic techniques are barely being employed how then could my enhanced techniques be faring?

Active listening is as critical to crisis negotiations as it is basic; it is a universal medium for any human transactions. As you will see, it is rich in its range of responses and its utility. It has been proven effective for over forty years. With active listening we convey far more than the simple content of the communication. We convey to the other that they and what they say count—that they and what they say is really being heard. As such, it builds rapport and encourages elaboration, among other positive effects. For these reasons alone it is especially well-suited for crisis communications. Oddly, in many cases the content (what's said) may be the least important element of the whole communication. All the rest that active listening conveys to the speaker may trump the words themselves. In Chapter 2 you will learn the enhanced techniques taught here, that is, the extended range and variety that goes well beyond that which is normally taught, and the whys,

hows and wherefores of their employment by crisis and hostage negotiators. You will learn just how powerful and critical active listening is in this application.

What is presented here is an elaborated and enhanced scheme that goes far beyond the scant few stereotypical responses normally taught such as “Hum” and “I hear you.” It has more depth and variety and does not make the Negotiator sound like a robot. As such, it is demanding. It takes study and practice to learn all of the techniques and to feel comfortable using them. It is for this reason that I developed the HNT Game. The HNT Game is a simulation—a role play—in which the techniques learned earlier are tested. Learning the techniques and practicing them should be done gradually and piecemeal. Focus on one or two at a time and seek opportunities to practice them inside and outside of the Game. Let them build on each other naturally. They work well at home too! See if your relationships across the board improve measurably as you work to master the enhanced techniques and make them yours.

There is an old joke (a very old joke) about a tourist in New York for the first time. Lost, he stops a kindly looking New Yorker and asks: “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” The helpful New Yorker replies, “Practice, practice, practice.” That’s my advice to you, too.

A.A.S.

## INTRODUCTION

Crisis negotiation has always been part of a patrol officer's, correctional officer's, or emergency services officer's job. In the course of a career an officer will encounter troubled people in troubled circumstances, often of their own making, in very public crises. Untrained police officers, and others, have managed these incidents with varying degrees of skill and success long before the emergence of what has become the field and the art and science of crisis and hostage negotiation. Officers with a natural talent, sincerity, and a gift of gab may have fared better than their less gifted co-workers.

With the early successes of the NYPD and the FBI in hostage situations it came to be recognized that there were less lethal alternatives to tactical assault and better ways of communicating with people in crisis versus worse ways, and that those ways could be studied and taught to others. Training for negotiators became more widespread and today it is not only widespread but universal. Crisis and hostage negotiators speak a common language. That language comes largely from the fields of psychology and counseling where effective communication is at the heart of treatment. Negotiation has come in to its own—today negotiation almost always precedes tactical assault—and the culture has been changed forever.

At the heart of negotiation and negotiator trained skills is “active listening,” a way in which a listener communicates demonstrably that he is listening—no, more than listening—that he acknowledges the other person, is taking in what is being said, is trying to understand what is being said, and cares about the person saying it. By listening actively the listener acknowledges the speaker's existence and that he or she is indeed being heard. We all need to be acknowledged and heard.

Active listening began as a treatment modality in the guidance and counseling field. It is still the principal means by which a counselor

gathers information, conveys caring, and seeks to influence desirable changes in the client. It is not an exaggeration to say that active listening is the principal means and mode of effective communication in all human transactions. Every negotiator training course pays homage to active listening, but little else.

Active listening is presented to novice negotiators as of principal importance but, there is a mixed message there in that instructors or curriculum writers allow insufficient time for skills practice, or they themselves are insufficiently knowledgeable or skilled to teach the subject *in-depth*. Officers are introduced to the subject but are not trained to proficiency nor encouraged to keep up their practice. Or, is it that, while embraced by law enforcement trainers, active listening is still considered too alien (“psychobabble”) to be embraced fully. Any and all of these flaws can be fixed by employing instructors who are thoroughly knowledgeable and trained to a high degree of proficiency, unambiguous valuing (no mixed messages or a wink and a nod), fearless modeling, sufficient trainee practice time, training to proficiency criterion, and ongoing reinforcement of active listening. *Communication in Crisis and Hostage Negotiations* meets these compelling requirements.

Active listening is presented here in an enhanced form<sup>1</sup> with several important innovations: basic communication techniques are taught in depth with an eye to fully explain its purpose, rationale, and application; advanced techniques are introduced; the training is geared specifically to police, corrections, and emergency service officers; several means of skills practice are made available to the trainer or reader; advanced strategies and stratagems drawn from psychology, law, and business extend the effectiveness of communication and negotiation.

*Communications In Crisis and Hostage Negotiations* was written as a practical guide for law enforcement, corrections, and emergency service officers who frequently encounter people in public crises. Material is drawn from over thirty years of practical experience in psychological counseling, crisis intervention, and hostage negotiations. It is intended as a sourcebook for basic and advanced communication techniques and negotiation strategies. It is not intended as a comprehensive text of crisis and hostage negotiation as there are already sev-

1. Thanks to the work of Nancy Cunningham, Ph.D., teacher and mentor extraordinaire.

eral such books in publication. The focus here is more narrowly on the approaches, stratagems, and techniques that can be employed by crisis negotiators on the front lines in approaching and managing difficult persons in difficult circumstances. It is a guide, resource, workbook, handbook, and companion reference for trainers and trainees. While much of this material was originally developed for hostage negotiators, hostage taking is but one critical incident that a law enforcement negotiator is likely to encounter. In recent years a policy shift in the field has taken place—hostage negotiation has come to be called crisis negotiation in recognition of its' wider applicability and use. Statistically, relatively few incidents today involve actual hostage taking. Most negotiable public crises are barricade situations (e.g., emotionally overwrought or mentally ill persons, domestic partners in conflict, and felons resisting warrants or submission to legal authority) and dramatic public suicide threats.

The symbol **S** for “subject” has been used throughout because of its familiarity to law enforcement personnel. It should be understood to be inclusive, that is, to stand for any of the above persons in a high profile public crisis. Similarly, **N** for “negotiator” has been used as the symbol for any crisis negotiator. An exception to this is in the section on *The HNT Game*<sup>®</sup> where the abbreviations **PN** (Primary Negotiator), **SN** (Secondary Negotiator), **O** (Observer), and **HT** (Hostage Taker) have been maintained for clarity.

The term “crisis negotiation” is preferred by this author over “crisis intervention.” While a crisis negotiator “intervenes” (steps in) in a crisis, what he or she does after is to negotiate—that is, make a connection with the **S**, move him/her to a more rational and/or hopeful state, and bring the crisis to a just conclusion while preserving some measure of the **S**'s self-respect.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**T**his handbook is dedicated to the officers of the Louisville Division of Police (now the Louisville Metro Police) Hostage Negotiating Team with whom I have had the honor and pleasure of serving for nearly fifteen years. Special appreciation is owed to Lt. Fred Browder (ret.), Major Mike Dossett, Lieutenant John Mills, and Sergeant Chuck Cooper for their generosity, openness, acceptance and comradeship over the years. Drs. Roger Bell and Nancy Cunningham, of the University of Louisville, my mentors, have inspired me with their kindness, wisdom, and challenge.





## CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Foreword</i> .....	.vii
<i>Introduction</i> .....	.xi
 <i>Chapter</i>	
1. HOSTAGE AND CRISIS NEGOTIATION .....	.3
Introduction .....	.3
Philosophy .....	.3
Negotiation .....	.4
The Subject .....	.5
The Negotiator .....	.6
Negotiator Stress and Communication .....	.8
General Principles of Crisis Negotiations .....	.9
Communicating Through Third Party	
Intermediaries (TPI) .....	.11
Intra- and Inter-Team Communication .....	.12
First Responder Actions .....	.12
The Situation Book .....	.13
Intelligence in Negotiations .....	.15
Mental Health Consultation .....	.16
2. COMMUNICATION .....	.19
Verbal and Nonverbal Communication .....	.20
Communication Techniques .....	.24
 COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES	
Listening Responses .....	.25
Clarification .....	.25
Paraphrase .....	.26

Reflection . . . . .	.26
Summarization . . . . .	.27
Primary Level Empathy . . . . .	.27
Action Responses . . . . .	.28
Open-Ended Probe . . . . .	.28
Closed Probe . . . . .	.29
Confrontation . . . . .	.29
Interpretation . . . . .	.30
Information-Giving . . . . .	.32
Instructions . . . . .	.31
Sharing Responses . . . . .	.32
Self-Disclosure . . . . .	.32
Immediacy . . . . .	.33
Reinforcement . . . . .	.33
Practice Exercises . . . . .	.35
Exercise 1 . . . . .	.37
Exercise 2 . . . . .	.39
Sample Responses to Exercise 1 . . . . .	.45
Verbal Communication and Phases of the	
Negotiations . . . . .	.48
Phase Time Line . . . . .	.48
Phases of the Negotiations . . . . .	.48
Beginning Phase . . . . .	.49
Middle Phase . . . . .	.49
End Phase . . . . .	.50
Loaded Words, Phrases, Topics . . . . .	.50
Feelings Menu . . . . .	.51
Happy . . . . .	.51
Sad . . . . .	.51
Inadequate . . . . .	.52
Afraid . . . . .	.52
Guilty-Ashamed . . . . .	.52
Confident . . . . .	.52
Angry . . . . .	.53
Hurt . . . . .	.53
3. STRATAGEMS . . . . .	.55
Sincerity . . . . .	.55
Stratagems . . . . .	.56

The Squeeze Play	.58
A Higher Authority	.58
Future Conditional	.59
The Sting	.59
It's Only Fair	.60
Now and Later	.60
Good Cop/Bad Cop	.61
Structuring a Success	.62
Lowering Expectations	.62
The Illusion of Choice	.62
The Yes Set	.63
Ventilating	.64
Deflecting	.65
Using Imagery	.65
Opening Up Possibilities	.66
Pacing and Leading	.67
"I" Statement	.67
Behavior Modification	.68
Silence	.68
Yes, but	.69
Cost/Benefit Analysis	.69
Standard Operating Procedure	.70
Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions	.70
In the Same Boat	.71
One Size Fits All	.71
4. STALEMATE AND DEADLOCK	.73
Techniques Used to Deal with Resistance,	
Impasse, Stalemate, and Deadlock	.74
Listening	.74
Listening with the Third Ear	.74
Make the Silence Cry Out	.75
Giving Permission	.76
Covering the Bases, or All Possibilities are Possible	.76
Tentative and Conditional	.77
Joining Up	.77
Going Soft	.78
Giving Up	.78
Reframing	.79

Now You See It, Now You Don't	.79
Stirring the Pot	.80
5. NEGOTIATING WITH SUBJECT TYPES	.81
Hostage Taker and Barricaded Subject	.82
Characteristics of a Negotiable Incident	.83
The Stockholm Syndrome	.84
General Intervention Strategy	.85
Terrorist Subject	.86
Developmentally Disordered Subject	.89
Mentally Disabled Subject	.91
Schizophrenia	.94
Bipolar and Other Serious Depressive Disorders	.97
Personality Disordered Subject	.99
The Antisocial Personality Type	.100
Paranoid Personality Type	.103
Borderline Personality Type	.104
Inadequate Personality Type	.105
Suicidal Subject	.106
Victim Precipitated Death or "Suicide by Cop"	
(FBI Profile)	.110
Assaultive Subject	.111
Alcohol and Other Drug Impaired Subjects	.112
Why People Drink and Use Drugs	.113
Incarcerated Subject	.116
Foreign Language Speaking Subject	.119
Elderly Subject	.121
6. INTERVIEWING	.125
Introduction	.125
Intelligence	.126
Potential Sources of Information about the	
Subject, Situation and Incident	.128
The Interview	.132
Conducting the Interview	.133
Building Rapport	.135
Active Listening	.137
Asking Questions	.140
Probing Questions	.143

Sample Interview Employing the Enhanced Active Listening Techniques .....	144
<b>7. THE HNT GAME: AN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS TRAINING AND ROLE-PLAY FOR CRISIS RESOLUTION AND HOSTAGE NEGOTIATION .....</b>	<b>153</b>
Introduction .....	153
Practice Exercises .....	155
Exercise 3 .....	157
Exercise 4 .....	163
Sample Responses for Practice Exercise 3 .....	167
Role-Play .....	174
Instructions .....	176
HNT Game Materials .....	176
The Role-Play .....	177
Sample Urban and Corrections Scenarios	
Urban Scenario Card 1 .....	183
Urban Scenario Card 2 .....	185
Urban Scenario Card 3 .....	187
Urban Scenario Card 4 .....	189
Urban Scenario Card 5 .....	191
Corrections Scenario Card 1 .....	193
Corrections Scenario Card 2 .....	195
Corrections Scenario Card 3 .....	197
<i>References</i> .....	199



**COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS  
AND HOSTAGE NEGOTIATIONS**





## Chapter 1

# HOSTAGE AND CRISIS NEGOTIATION

### INTRODUCTION

Crisis negotiation is both science and art. *The science:* there is considerable research from the academic fields of psychology, medicine, and criminal justice that constitutes a body of knowledge about the nature of crises and crisis management. *The art:* there are individuals who are simply better suited and more adept at communicating. Part is native ability or talent—a gift of gab—part is the constellation of personal characteristics that complement the gifts. But, the good news is that both art and science can be learned and improved upon. Knowledge can be gained from study, discussion, observation, lessons learned, mistakes made, successful outcomes, etc. Native ability can be honed by skills practice, feedback, experience, and teaching others.

### PHILOSOPHY

Crisis intervention is based on the belief that a crisis is a moment in time (although it may last considerably longer); that it is time limited; that it follows a predictable cycle or course; that it is painful and distressing to the individual; and that it can be interrupted (intervened on) from the outside with the aim of changing the trajectory and altering the outcome. When a person experiences life events that are unsettling or overwhelming they may be off-balanced and their ability to cope impaired. Doctor Harvey Schlossberg, the father of hostage negotiation, has said that hostage taking, for example, is an attempt at problem solving, albeit a maladaptive one. Typically, the person in crisis has

acted impulsively, out of desperation, or in their characteristically inept way; consequentially, they have likely made their situation worse. Where there was one problem there are now two, and it is very public.

It is under the stress of critical events that a person may rise to heroic heights or come apart and act irrationally. For most of us, our crises are less public and are managed more constructively. Many subjects who act-out in very public ways have a history of failure, ineptness, and poor problem solving. This event is yet another in a series of melodramas.

Some therapeutic constructs have application here for crisis negotiators whose primary goals are not, strictly speaking, therapeutic: crises are, at the same time, unpleasant states and opportunities for growth and change. It has been said that a crisis is like a doorway that someone may choose not to pass through—to back away from—or to pass through to the other side.

Stepping “through the doorway” means facing up to fearsome and difficult tasks, risking new and better choices, making better decisions in the moment and from that point forward. A tough job for anyone, but with the potential for great rewards. It is for someone in crisis a chance at growth, greater adequacy, self-reliance, and inner strength.

## NEGOTIATION

Crisis negotiation is based upon the principles of joining with the person in crisis, earning a measure of their trust, bargaining for their safety, and, ultimately, aiding them in adaptive problem solving. The idea of “fair market value,” as in a real estate transaction, is a good analogy for crisis negotiators to keep in mind. The fair market value of a house for sale is not the price the seller is asking nor the price the buyer is offering, but the price they willingly agree upon. In this way, each leaves the bargaining table feeling relatively okay about the deal—a win-win model of negotiation).

A man who is suicidal because his wife of fifty years has died stands on a bridge high above the city contemplating jumping into the icy water. The crisis of facing life after the death of a beloved spouse highlights many issues around attachment, dependency, mortality: fears and feelings about our own mortality, worry about our ability to face life without someone with whom we have been intimate over time,

missing a familiar presence—life as we have known it. Suicide is but one “solution” amongst a number of possible solutions. Rather than jump, he can opt for another “solution” that will take him to a higher level of adaptation to life’s changes, learning something about himself in the process.

A crisis can be defined simply as a personal difficulty that overwhelms, or threatens to overwhelm, a person’s resources and coping ability or capacity. It arises from an obstacle in the path of a person’s valued goals, stress, frustration, failed attempts at problem solving, and the perception that this obstacle is insurmountable. A person is off-balanced because he or she has tried and failed by using customary choices and behaviors and does not know what to do next.

The public crises most likely to be encountered by law enforcement include suicidal behavior, barricade situations, hostage taking, and threats of violence by persons resisting legal authority. The **Ss** they encounter are likely to be mentally ill, emotionally overwrought, developmentally disabled, intoxicated/impaired, antisocial/criminal, or overzealous. Often **Ss** will fit into more than one of these categories. What they share in common is poor judgment and dangerousness—(to self or others)—while in their crisis state.

Intervention has two meanings in this context. The first is that by stepping in to help, a person intervenes or inserts himself or herself in the other’s critical moment. The second meaning refers to those things we say and do, the techniques we employ as we seek to interrupt the event and help the person pass through the moment.

## THE SUBJECT

A person in crisis may be undecided about what to do, of two minds about what to do, or convinced of a definite course of action to take. In all of these cases there is, nonetheless, some room for an alliance with someone who can help them through their terrible time by the scant hope suggestions, and rational arguments they bring. For the person in crisis it means “finally” being heard, moving toward rational thought leading to reconsideration of their plans, evaluating alternative courses of action and their consequences, and redecision.

What the **S** really wants (regardless of what he or she says or whether or not is deserving of it) is: