Crisis Negotiation Teams
Selection and Training

By CHUCK REGINI, M.A.

Crisis negotiation is one of law enforcement's most effective tools. The successful resolution of tens of thousands of hostage, barricade, attempted suicide, and kidnapping cases throughout the world repeatedly has demonstrated its value. Developed over 25 years ago, the concept has helped save the lives of countless law enforcement officers, hostages, and suicidal subjects.[1] These successful cases, as well as those that resulted in the loss of fellow officers and hostages, have shown the need for careful deliberation in the selection and training of a crisis negotiation team (CNT).[2] Certain skills and expertise make more successful negotiators, which result in more peaceful resolutions in shorter time frames.

Law enforcement agencies strongly believe in the importance of selecting and training well-staffed and well-equipped tactical teams, but some departments fail to take the same approach with their CNTs. Today, crisis negotiation constitutes a highly refined law enforcement discipline. From a safety and liability aspect, law enforcement administrators must understand how to select, organize, train, and equip teams of crisis negotiators to work with their tactical teams in handling the specific types of incidents that agencies encounter today.[3]

SELECTING TEAM MEMBERS

The CNT Leader

The selection of a leader presents the first consideration in organizing and staffing a CNT. The position of CNT leader, as well as

tactical team leader, may be the most critical in a hostage-barricade incident. CNT leaders must be experienced, knowledgeable, and articulate supervisors or senior investigators. Additionally, they should be well trained in the most current procedures for establishing and maintaining negotiations with a hostage-taker or barricaded subject, interfacing with a tactical team, and assessing the behavioral dynamics in an incident, including risk assessment. CNT leaders also must understand how to devise a flexible negotiation strategy based on this dynamic assessment and effectively articulate this strategy to the incident commander and tactical team leader. They also should have some knowledge of behavioral sciences because an incident assessment entails an understanding of human behavior and often involves communicating with mental health professionals. Further, a familiarization with certain psychological and sociological concepts often proves helpful. This can be attained through college classes, crisis negotiation training sessions, and other professional conferences and seminars, as well as working as a criminal investigator and conducting numerous interviews of hostile and manipulative subjects and witnesses.

CNT leaders optimally should be equal in rank to the tactical team leader to facilitate discussion of alternative courses of action and balance in reaching consensus on strategy recommendations. Frequently, CNT leaders are subordinate to tactical team leaders. Having one team leader higher in rank can act as an inhibiting factor in discussions and result in one team leader dominating the strategy formulation and having more influence with the incident commander.

Availability and time commitment also are important considerations in the selection of a CNT leader. CNT leaders typically will respond to every hostage-barricade incident, which can be a full-time job in many large cities. CNT leaders also have responsibilities even when no ongoing incident exists. They train CNT members, recruit new members, acquire equipment, keep open communication with on-scene commanders and tactical team leaders, document CNT training and operations, maintain a standard operating procedure for crisis negotiations, and stay current in the professional literature on crisis negotiations and recent cases. Additionally, CNT leaders are responsible for the morale of the CNT and should ensure that the team is recognized appropriately for its performance. Working on a CNT can be a demanding and thankless job. Call-outs occur typically during the late evening or early morning and can last for hours, sometimes days. CNT leaders, as well as agency officials, should ensure that CNT members understand that they are appreciated for the sacrifices that they often must make.

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CNT Members

The selection of CNT members proves important as well. The best criminal investigators tend to be the best crisis negotiators. Strong criminal investigators will have had contact with a wide variety of people in diverse, and often stressful and dangerous, circumstances. Further, the nonconfrontational and nonjudgmental approach of a good negotiator typically is found in criminal investigators who possess exceptional interview and interrogation skills.

Good crisis negotiators also must have the ability to remain calm under emotionally demanding situations. Talking to a hostage-taker who is holding a gun to the head of a small child and demanding a car in 5 minutes or he is going to kill the child can raise the emotions of the most seasoned agent or police officer. Yet, a good negotiator will maintain a steady and calm voice while deliberately applying the prescribed negotiation strategy. Self-control constitutes one of the most critical attributes of an effective negotiator.

As with the CNT team leader, availability and time commitment also are important considerations in selecting individual CNT members. They must have the time to participate in training and be available for call-outs, regardless of other responsibilities. Additionally, CNT members who know a foreign language can prove extremely beneficial in communities where residents speak that particular language.

ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITIES

More than one negotiator needs to work an incident. The FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit recommends that agencies use at least three negotiators in each incident. One team member acts as the primary negotiator and engages the subject in dialogue. The second team member acts as the coach, or secondary negotiator, and assists the primary in choosing specific dialogue and communication techniques. The third team member acts as the team leader and assists in formulating the overall negotiation strategy and interfaces with the other crisis response components as they arrive, such as tactical team members, the incident commander, investigators, and a myriad of others, to collect and disseminate information for the negotiators. Some jurisdictions recommend four to six CNT members for smaller incidents.[4] As an incident becomes larger or more protracted, more CNT members will be required as the functions of the CNT increase and communication, coordination, and strategy assessment become more complex and difficult.[5] In a significant protracted hostage incident, as many as 8 to 10 CNT members working two 12-hour shifts may be required, resulting in a total of 16 to 20 negotiators.

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In the initial development of law enforcement crisis negotiations, one or two negotiators handled most incidents. A tactical team would deploy to an incident with a full compliment of well-equipped personnel trained to handle the most common tactical contingencies and would begin to develop a strategy while negotiators simply talked to the subject. Often, negotiators had minimal training, no assistance or intelligence information, and little interaction with the tactical team. Experience has revealed that a properly staffed CNT can more thoroughly assess an incident, generate better strategies, and efficiently perform vital team functions, such as coaching the primary negotiator talking with the subject, maintaining situation boards, keeping a log, communicating with the incident commander and command post, and corresponding with the tactical team. The analysis of thousands of hostage, barricade, and attempted suicide cases in the law enforcement negotiation community has identified these functions as crucial to conducting smooth and effective negotiations. Disasters can occur when agencies ignore any of these functions.

TRAINING THE TEAM

Once an agency has selected a team and assigned responsibilities, they must determine the type of training that members need. What do new, as well as experienced, negotiators and team leaders need to know to effectively handle the types of incidents police negotiators face today? Agency training programs should address the most common types of incidents that the CNT is likely to encounter and reflect the most current proven professional knowledge in the field.[6]

The FBI's Hostage Barricade Statistics (HOBAS) indicate that most police CNTs are not engaged

in conventional hostage incidents in which a subject holds a hostage to obtain some concession from the police or government.[7] These stereotypical hostage incidents involve subjects with substantive demands. Some of the best examples of this type of incident may occur in correctional settings where several inmates take over a portion of a facility and hold staff members hostage to demand better living conditions or transportation for escape. HOBAS indicates that most incidents handled by police CNTs do not involve substantive demands, rather they involve subjects in crisis.[8] These subjects face a seemingly insurmountable problem or loss and are unable to cope with it or solve it. The subject's problem-solving skills to find peaceful alternatives have failed. Typically, the subject will be in a heightened emotional state, exhibiting some form of anger, depression, or frustration.[9] Examples of these crisis situations include domestic violence-based hostage-barricade situations, trapped criminals/fugitives, attempted suicides, and incidents involving subjects with mental illness. These incidents require skills in crisis intervention, not conventional hostage negotiation bargaining to resolve them.[10]

CNT training consists of basic skills training, advanced/specialized skills training, team leader skills training, and regular team and individual skills maintenance training. The FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit recommends that, at a minimum, new CNT members attend a 40-hour basic crisis negotiation course, which should include extensive training in crisis intervention, suicide assessment and intervention, and knowledge of how to work the various positions on a CNT in an incident and how to operate with a tactical team as well. The basic training should include extensive and various role-playing drills and case studies of actual incidents.

Experienced CNT members can use advanced or specialized training for further work in crisis intervention techniques, which could include training in handling manipulative subjects, reframing techniques to put a "different spin" on negative thoughts and perceptions of hostile subjects, and using guided discovery-questioning techniques to augment a negotiator's basic problem-solving skills. Advanced/specialized classes for experienced CNT members and CNT leaders should include further training and practice in risk assessment, legal considerations in hostage-barricade incidents, procedures for handling a protracted/major incident, effects of alcohol and other drugs, kidnap/extortion negotiations, role of the media in crisis negotiations, and use of third-party intermediaries[11] and mental health professionals.

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Experienced negotiators and CNT leaders should practice strategy and risk assessment using actual case studies in assessment drills, as well as role-playing exercises. Strategy and risk assessment are important functions of both CNT and tactical team leaders. Each team leader must analyze the facts and circumstances as they become available and make strategy recommendations to the incident commander based upon proven concepts and previous incidents, not conjecture and anecdotal information.

CNTs also should be familiar with how their agencies' tactical teams operate in certain situations. CNTs regularly should practice delivery, hostage release, and surrender plans with their tactical teams. There are sensitive, and often very dangerous, evolutions during a hostage-barricade situation. The potential for miscommunication between the CNT, hostage-taker, and tactical team is high. A small annual, or semiannual, joint exercise with the CNT, tactical team, and any officials who may find themselves in the role of an incident commander can greatly help alleviate any potential miscommunications.

Attendance at national or regional negotiation conferences and seminars also offers an opportunity for CNT members to review incidents from other agencies, see

the problems encountered, and learn how the respective agencies overcame these problems. It also gives CNT members an opportunity to hear actual negotiation tapes from hostage-barricade incidents. CNT members can observe the high emotional states of the subjects and how other CNTs assessed the situation, formulated strategy, and applied crisis intervention and hostage negotiation skills to resolve the incidents. This is an excellent way to obtain valuable experience in handling these types of subjects. This kind of exposure has an "inoculation" effect on the CNT so that they do not become alarmed or dismayed at the emotions exhibited by subjects in these types of incidents and are better able to maintain composure and self-control while dealing with them.

CONCLUSION

From a liability and safety standpoint, law enforcement agencies must ensure that they carefully select a crisis negotiation team and that the team maintains a high level of proficiency in the application of their skills.[12] Most CNTs do not have enough hostage-barricade incidents to maintain this level of proficiency through operations alone. Just as with tactical teams, mandatory regular periodic training proves vital to sustaining a CNT's proficiency. CNT team leaders also must ensure that this training is well documented in case agencies must demonstrate their efforts to ensure that their crisis response personnel remain at a high level of proficiency.

Modern law enforcement agencies rely on properly trained, equipped, and staffed crisis negotiation teams to work with their tactical teams in handling the critical incidents that may develop. Given the significant role of a police department's CNT in saving the lives of police officers, hostages, and suicidal subjects, agencies must ensure that their CNTs are carefully selected and well trained in the most current techniques and case studies; oversights easily can lead to tragedy. ✦

Endnotes

[1] Gary W. Noesner, "Negotiation Concepts for Commanders," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, January 1999, 6-14.

[2] Based on statistics from the FBI's Hostage Barricade System (HOBAS) database, March 2001.

[3] Anthony Hare, "Training Crisis Negotiators: Updating Negotiation Techniques and Training," in Randall Rogan, Mitchell Hammer, and Clinton R. Van Zandt, *Dynamic Processes of Crisis Negotiations* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 159.

[4] Ray Birge, "Barricade and Hostage Incidents: Team Roles and Structure Provide the Balance," *The Negotiator, Official Publication of the California Association of Hostage Negotiators*, Spring 2001, 1.

[5] FBI, Critical Incident Response Group, Crisis Negotiation Unit, "Negotiation Operations Center Protocols" class.

[6] Supra note 3.

[7] Supra note 2.

[8] Supra note 2.

[9] Michael J. McMains and Wayman C. Mullins, *Crisis Negotiations* (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing, 1996).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Stephen J. Romano, "Third-Party Intermediaries and Crisis Negotiations," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 1998, 20-24.

[12] Jeffrey Higginbotham, "Legal Issues in Crisis Management," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, June 1994, 27-32.

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