



Handling the Hostage Call

Hostage calls are generally either calls from the hostage taker himself or from someone calling to report a hostage situation. The telecommunicator is the first point of contact, and must fulfill the role of negotiator until one arrives. In this article, we will explore some techniques for gathering information, and handling a telephone call from a hostage taker. It will not make the telecommunicator a hostage negotiator – that takes training and experience- but it will enable the telecommunicator to draw from a body of knowledge to process the call properly.

There are two objectives in handling hostage situations. The primary objective is to preserve life. This includes the lives of hostages, civilians, personnel, and even the hostage taker himself. The secondary objective is the apprehension of the perpetrator, and the recovery of property. It is important to keep these objectives in mind when handling hostage calls.

There are a few principles to keep in mind as well. The hostage, as a person, has no value to the hostage taker other than as a tool to get what he wants. However, it is important to realize that the hostage taker has just as much at stake as authorities do to not let the situation get violent. Getting killed is not going to help the hostage taker unless suicide is his motive.

There are three crucial variables in hostage situations. These are power, information and time-delay. The hostage taker is seeking power over life and over freedom. Perceived power is more important than actual power possessed. Information is vital for authorities to have a clear understanding of the situation.

Time is perhaps the most crucial element in determining the outcome of a hostage situation. The more time passes, the more likely it is that the situation will be resolved without loss of life. There are several reasons for this. Time can reduce stress and anxiety, and increases rationality of the hostage taker. Time also increases the need for basics such as food and drink. Although many hostages think about it, few attempt to escape. The passage of time, however, increases opportunities for hostages to escape.

The passage of time also allows for rapport to develop between the negotiator and the hostage taker, and sometimes the hostage takers' expectations are reduced.

There are negative effects to the passing of time, however. Exhaustion on the part of authorities is a factor, as is a loss of objectivity. Boredom also sets in and can hinder negotiation tactics.

When handling a call from a hostage taker, there are several techniques to keep in mind. The caller may very well be in an emotional or agitated state. One way to calm the caller is to speak in a voice that is softer and slower than the suspects. Do not let your emotions rise to the same level as the suspect.

Relate to the hostage taker on his level. Adapt your conversation to his educational and vocabulary level. Listen for clues as to the subject's emotional state, truthfulness, rationality and willingness to negotiate. Listen also for a change in these things, as well as a change in demands. Again, speak slowly and softly.

One technique to use in taking calls from hostage takers is to ask open-ended questions. In doing so, the hostage taker cannot answer with a simple "yes" or "no". By having to elaborate on his responses, the hostage taker may be able to release some of the anger and frustration he is experiencing. It is also a way to obtain more information from the hostage taker. Once critical information, such as location, has been obtained and personnel have been dispatched, allowing the suspect to "vent" is encouraged. Downplay what the suspect has done so far. Show understanding through your words and tone of voice. Be supportive when the suspect is expressing rational thoughts.

Repeat or paraphrase what the hostage taker tells you. When he is expressing emotions, it is important to label and respond to the emotion. "I understand that you are angry, could you tell me more about it?" Encourage the hostage taker to talk through statements such as, "Oh, I see."... "Is that so?"... "I would like to hear your side"... and "Could you tell me about it?"

There are several things that a telecommunicator must find out in order to effectively help responding personnel with a hostage situation. Some of the questions may vary, depending upon whether one is speaking to the hostage taker himself or someone calling to report a hostage situation.

As is typical in caller interrogation, it is important to find out where the activity is taking place. Then find out what has occurred and who is involved. Who is the suspect? What are his goals? How many hostages are there? What are their physical descriptions? What is their physical condition? Are there any injuries?

Find out when the incident occurred. How long have the hostages been held? What are the hostage taker's demands? What weapons does he have in his possession?

There are many things that a telecommunicator can do to help responding personnel even once a negotiator is on the scene. The telecommunicator can get a description of the building in terms of layout, escape routes and where telephones are located within the building. The telecommunicator can also identify the safest approach and escape routes as well as observation points for responding personnel.

Background information can also be discovered about the suspect in terms of character, intelligence, emotional state, medications or problems he may have been facing. All of these can be an asset to those engaged in negotiations with the suspect.

Since the telecommunicator may play the role of negotiator until one arrives, it is important to be aware of the characteristics of good negotiators.

It is important for a negotiator to have interpersonal sensitivity. This means the ability to sense how another person is feeling, even if that person is engaged in something criminal like the holding of hostages. It also means being tolerant of people whose lifestyle or life choices may be different from the negotiator's own. Cognitive complexity is also a characteristic of a good negotiator. The ability to process several tasks simultaneously is required of the job.

A tolerance of ambiguity is also essential. Nearly everything in a hostage situation is uncertain and unclear. The negotiator may have mixed feelings toward the hostage taker. While sympathizing with the problems that have placed the suspect in that position, that does not necessarily correspond to acceptance of the hostage taker's actions. In addition, the hostage taker is experiencing ambiguous feelings and the negotiator needs to understand and accept this.

A positive self-concept is a crucial characteristic of a good negotiator. A strong self-concept will allow the negotiator to listen to the hostage taker's anger and abuse without reacting to it on a personal level.

It is important for a negotiator to have low authoritarianism. Research has shown that people in positions of authority generally do not make good negotiators. This may be because the person in a position of authority is trying to serve both the department and the suspect at the same time. It is difficult to have two masters. A much better solution is a negotiator who can concentrate all of his or her efforts on the suspect.

Previous interviewing experience is a helpful characteristic. This is because interviewers are trained to listen, a skill crucial to successful negotiation.

Past experience in stressful situations is an asset in hostage negotiations. This will ensure that the negotiator has the emotional stability to handle whatever might occur during a hostage situation.

Verbal skills are a must. While listening is crucial, the negotiator must be able to persuade the hostage taker that the negotiator's point of view is the rational and correct one. The negotiator must be able to use logical arguments to persuade the hostage taker, and must be able to counteract the hostage taker's reasoning.

The negotiator must be able to remain flexible under pressure. The situation can change very quickly in a hostage situation and the negotiator must be willing to flow with the changes.

The negotiator must believe in the power of verbal persuasion and must believe that resolving the situation through negotiation is the best alternative. If the negotiator is thinking, "Gosh, it would be better if we just blew this guy away" there is unlikely to be a successful resolution to the conflict.

Bargaining skills, the ability to compromise, are important. Knowing what can and cannot be negotiated, and convincing the suspect to take less than what he desires takes ability and effort.

The more skills of a successful negotiator that a telecommunicator can incorporate into his/her conversation with a hostage taker, the more likely the situation can be resolved successfully without loss of life.

As mentioned previously, time is one of the most crucial elements of hostage negotiation. The more time that passes, the more likely that the situation will be resolved without loss of life.

One method of stalling for time is to discuss everything in detail. Ask for detailed descriptions. Ask questions that elaborate on information the suspect has given you. It is helpful to keep the perpetrator in a constant decision making status. If the hostage taker wants sandwiches, find out what kind of sandwiches. What type of bread would he like? Obviously, this should not be done to the point of annoyance. The idea is that statements can be elaborated upon to gain time for responding personnel to organize and consider their options.

Open-ended questions can accomplish the same objectives as discussing things in detail. Statements such as "Tell me about when you first started to feel this way" or "What events led up to this?" may encourage the hostage taker to vent and again provide additional time.

The importance of listening has already been discussed. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of not interrupting the hostage taker. Not only might

this lead to aggravating the suspect, but once he has been cut off, he may no longer elaborate on his thoughts. Allow the suspect to ramble on, offering only the usual interjections of "Uh-huh," "I see, " and the like.

Restatement of content, or paraphrasing, is another stalling tactic. Tell the suspect that you want to make sure you understand him, and then repeat the content. Pause to ask questions such as, "Am I correct so far?" This allows the hostage taker to confirm and perhaps elaborate further on what has been said. Both of which buy additional time.

Having the hostage taker reflect upon his feelings can be another delaying tactic. Statements such as, "I understand you are angry, has there been another time when you felt this way? How did you handle it?" or "Why do you think this upset you so much?" Requiring the suspect to reflect on his feelings and emotions also has the added bonus of perhaps calming down the suspect.

By Kathy Schatel, APCO Institute EMD Services Coordinator

Quiz

CDE Article – Hostage Situations

Name: _____ Date: _____

Agency: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

Email: _____

1. The primary objective in hostage situations is:
 - A. To apprehend the perpetrator.
 - B. To recover property.
 - C. To preserve life.
 - D. To resolve the situation quickly.

2. Which is a crucial variable in hostage situations:
 - A. Power
 - B. Time-delay
 - C. Power
 - D. All of the above

3. The telecommunicator's job is done once the negotiator arrives on the scene.
 - A. True
 - B. False

4. A strict and demanding personality type makes the most successful negotiator.
 - A. True
 - B. False

5. One way to obtain more information from the hostage taker is to ask _____ questions.