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Management Associates Inc.  
Workplace Violence Specialist

## Crisis Communications

by Heather Gray

### Active Listening Skills for Effectively Communicating with People in Crisis

In a previous article, NEGOTIATION 101 (Blue Line March 2003), we explored the issue of front-line response to critical incidents and some of the fundamental guidelines to employ while awaiting a coordinated tactical and negotiator response. However, there are opportunities every day whereby a front-line officer might take advantage of, and garner valuable experience from, encounters that will serve to hone the skill set that we call 'active listening'.

### Creating a Bond

While it's true that human nature is certainly complicated, it is also true that human beings have typical, and often predictable, responses to crises. When our ability to cope has been exceeded we may act out in ways we wouldn't consider when we are coping well. What we need is someone to engage with us who can guide our thought processes and our emotional upheaval to a point where we can then resolve the issue in a way that allows us to retain our dignity and that will allow us to move beyond the crisis and forward with our life.

We need to come to appreciate the power inherent in understanding how to create a bond with another human being, even someone we've just met, someone with whom we may appear to have nothing in common and who is having a crisis to which we may not be able to relate. We may not even like this person! How do we overcome these challenges and find a human connection?

Gavin de Becker, best-selling author of "The Gift of Fear", considered one of the world's foremost authorities on predicting violent behavior and threat assessment, has discovered that there are certain basic elements that bind us together as human beings. His perspective is that almost all people have a number of things in common as to how we relate to our environment and to one another. For example, we seek connection with others and are saddened by loss. We dislike rejection but we like recognition and attention. We will do more to avoid pain that we will do to

seek pleasure. We dislike ridicule and embarrassment and we care what others think of us. We also seek a degree of control over our lives.

With those in mind we can proceed to communicate with someone knowing that they will respond to the warm acceptance of another human being. This fundamental element will remain true no matter what situation we find ourselves in where we are trying to make a connection with someone and we don't quite know where to begin.

### Communication on Two Levels

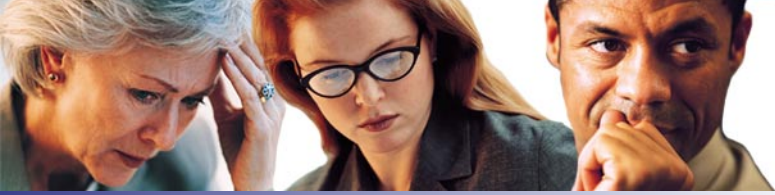
Frederick Lanceley, a retired FBI Crisis Negotiator, has set out a format for active listening in a crisis situation that serves as a good benchmark for basic skills any officer can use. He maintains that people typically communicate on two levels:

1. Content – the simple facts
2. Emotion – the emotional response to the facts

The key here is to listen for the emotion first. To disregard the emotion that the person is conveying is to cheat them, and ourselves, of the real impact of what the person is going through. It is the emotional reaction and the subsequent behavior that make a situation a crisis not the mere facts of the situation. How a person feels about a situation will strongly influence what s/he does, from a behavioral standpoint. That's where police become involved. Guiding a subject's emotional reaction will help to control the subject's behavior.

We can understand and make this issue reverberate within us when we stop to think of a time when we were upset about something and we desired to vent to someone we trust (a spouse or a therapist). How therapeutic or cathartic would it have been if that individual we trusted tried to cut off that venting process? We would feel cheated and we would grow frustrated in confiding in them.

None of us want to feel that we will be disrespected when we are trying to communicate our emotions. From the time we are children and we are injured, whether it be hurt feelings or a visible physical injury, we want someone to validate our hurt or frustration and to care enough about us to give comfort. As adults we haven't ventured very far



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from that child within. Even the façade of the career criminal or the tough street kid are the veneer that covers the hurt, scared child beneath. All of us, regardless of what's on the surface, seek a connection with another human being.

In the midst of a crisis situation people are more likely to respond to someone they view as willing to listen, understanding of them and worthy of respect. If we view the delicate dance of crisis intervention with a subject much like an interview/interrogation where we offer up themes for the subject to grasp onto, we are more likely to allow them a mechanism to communicate what's wrong (what they've done or the shame they feel). This allows them to admit to the emotion, own the deed (if in fact they've already done something wrong or illegal) and yet have a way to save face in spite of it all.

Listen for values in a person's description of what's happening to them. This will be a clue to what they feel are important, what they prize. Clarify the person's values for it is these that will influence behavior. Bear in mind that the subject may be caught in a values conflict.

We need to keep in mind that our role is to be accepting and non-judgmental of this person in crisis. It is imperative in this process to allow the subject to express themselves completely without offering up any conclusions about what we think about the situation. There is no gain to be had from injecting our values, beliefs, biases and opinions into the equation. For some front-line police officers, stepping back and allowing someone to express him or herself without jumping in with judgment, opinion and solutions may take some very deliberate practice. The first step is to challenge yourself to practice this at the next call you attend.

### **The Crisis Communication Skill Set**

Dr. Mike Webster, world renowned psychologist and Crisis Negotiation Trainer, describes the role of the tactical communicator as falling into two distinct categories. The first is the Listening Phase, the second being the Action Phase.

#### **Listening Phase**

##### *1. Emotion Labeling (Attending)*

The intent of emotion-labeling is to respond to the emotions heard. (ie: You sound angry. You seem depressed. I hear sadness in your voice.)

Listen and identify the emotion you are sensing to the subject. The key here is to train yourself to actually hear the emotion that the person is expressing and to state to them what it is that you hear. This demonstrates that you are actually listening to them, that you are tuned in to what they are saying and that you are sensitive to their emotional state. This will help to create a bond, a rapport.

##### *2. Paraphrasing (Restate Content)*

This is merely a summarizing of what the subject just told you. This makes the subject a listener and it allows him/her to hear, maybe for the first time, his/her own thoughts aloud. This can be profound. This creates empathy and rapport because it demonstrates that you have heard and that you understand.

This method clarifies content, checks perception, gives him/her a chance to correct you and it highlights the significant issues (in the subject's mind).

##### *3. Validation (Reflect Feelings)*

We all want our feelings and our responses to life to be validated. It is the role of the crisis communicator (listener) to do that, without judgment, for the person in crisis.

##### *4. Effective Pauses (Silence)*

Become comfortable with silence as a powerful tool. It can serve an effective purpose in that many people are not comfortable with it and will seek to fill it with talk. It can also be used before and after a statement to highlight something of great importance.

##### *5. Minimal Encouragers*

These are the little sounds that let the subject know that you are engaged in the conversation with them but that you are allowing them the opportunity to talk. They may be simple sounds such as "mmm hmmm" or single words or short phrases such as "oh", "really?", "when?", "is that right?" or "go on". They should not interfere with the flow of the conversation. These should serve to keep the subject talking and to keep building rapport.



6. *Express Empathy (Sympathy vs. Empathy)*

Sympathy implies pity. Empathy implies objectivity and understanding that builds trust. Show empathy but only if you actually feel it. Don't try to fake it. The subject will sense this and it will harm the rapport-building process.

**Action Phase**

7. *Probe - Ask Open (vs. Closed) Questions*

Open questions are those that cannot be answered with a yes/no response or other one-word answer. Open questions require the subject to formulate a detailed response to the question. They usually begin with the words how, when, what, where, why. We are trying to get to the subject's point of view, feelings and perspective on the issue. This is going to reveal to us the most likely way to resolve the situation.

Typical sample open questions might be:

- "Help me understand what happened there."
- "Can you tell what went on since I wasn't there?"
- "How may I help you tonight?"

Closed questions are those that require a limited answer and are likely to make the subject feel as if they are being subjected to an interrogation. Closed questions also have the added disadvantage of forcing the interviewer to come up with new questions. Not only is this very draining it is counterproductive to resolving the matter at hand.

8. *Self-Disclosure (Where Appropriate)*

There may be an opportunity in the communication where a little self-disclosure is appropriate. Use discretion on this as one would when doing an interview and using themes to draw out a suspect. One must balance the use of self-disclosure with the overall goal of what is to be accomplished. Ensure, above all, that it does not jeopardize officer safety.

9. *Re-frame (Find the Silver Lining)*

There is always a way to re-state something negative to put a positive spin on it. Whenever one is dealing with a person in a crisis situation and they have revealed many of their beliefs and values and emotions, one has a great deal of

substance from which to craft a spin on whatever it is that they feel bad about. What the crisis responder needs to do is to find the silver lining and re-frame the situation so that the person can see that it isn't as bleak as they believe it to be or that perhaps they've missed some hidden advantage of the situation.

On a cautionary note, do not attempt to do this too early in the crisis and do not be flippant about it or it will erode the rapport that you are working towards with the subject.

10. *Confront (The 'Yes But' Technique)*

This is the art of the gentle confrontation. Professional clinical psychologists are particularly good at this. At this late point in the process the crisis communicator should now be able to gently prod the subject whenever they become stuck in their position of negativity. This is another technique that can build on the re-framing technique. This is to move the subject away from the completely negative view and to see the crisis in a new light.

**Finally**

Into whatever crisis your police calls may take you remember this, you have a wealth of experience right there with you, you always have your wits and you can do this. We as human beings have a commonality of feelings and emotions. That alone gives you insight into what someone else is going through.

All feelings are universal. Experience is not universal. It is possible to understand feelings without having gone through the same experience.

In policing it is very easy to suffer from vicarious trauma, that is where we take on another's pain as if it were our own. Remember that everyone 'owns' their own problem. Each person owns their own emotional reaction and behavioral response to that problem. Don't take on a responsibility that the subject should be taking upon themselves. We can help people to the best of our ability but ultimately people must also help themselves.