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**6 hostage negotiation techniques that will get you what you want**

Do you really know how to listen?

By Eric Barker, *Barking Up The Wrong Tree* | May 7, 2014

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You don't have to be in the FBI to use some of their negotiating techniques. (REUTERS/Chip East)

[http://media.theweek.com/img/generic/BarkingUpTheWrongTree_LOGO.jpg](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/)

**How does hostage negotiation get people to change their minds?**

The *Behavioral Change Stairway Model* was developed by the FBI's hostage negotiation unit, and it shows the five steps to getting someone else to see your point of view and change what they're doing.

It's not something that only works with barricaded criminals wielding assault rifles — it applies to most any form of disagreement.

There are five steps:

1. Active Listening: Listen to their side and make them aware you're listening.  
  
2. Empathy: You get an understanding of where they're coming from and how they feel.

3. Rapport: Empathy is what *you* feel. Rapport is when *they feel it back*. They start to trust you.

4. Influence: Now that they trust you, you've earned the right to work on problem solving with them and recommend a course of action.

5. Behavioral Change: They act. (And maybe come out with their hands up.)

The problem is, you're probably screwing it up.

**What you're doing wrong**

In all likelihood you usually skip the first three steps. You start at step four (Influence) and expect the other person to immediately go to step five (Behavioral Change). And that never works.

Saying "Here's why I'm right and you're wrong" might be effective if people were fundamentally rational. But they're not.

From [my interview with former head of FBI international hostage negotiation, Chris Voss](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2013/01/interview-negotiation-secrets-learn-top-fbi-hostage-negotiator/):

… business negotiations try to pretend that emotions don't exist. What's your best alternative to a negotiated agreement, or 'BATNA'? That's to try to be completely unemotional and rational, which is a fiction about negotiation. Human beings are incapable of being rational, regardless… So instead of pretending emotions don't exist in negotiations, hostage negotiators have actually designed an approach that takes emotions fully into account and uses them to influence situations, which is the reality of the way all negotiations go…

The most critical step in the Behavioral Change Staircase is actually the first part: Active listening. The other steps all follow from it. But most people are *terrible* at listening.

Here's [Chris](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2013/01/interview-negotiation-secrets-learn-top-fbi-hostage-negotiator/) again:

If while you're making your argument, the only time the other side is silent is because they're thinking about their own argument, they've got a voice in their head that's talking to them. They're not listening to you. When they're making their argument to you, you're thinking about your argument, that's the voice in your head that's talking to you. So it's very much like dealing with a schizophrenic.

If your first objective in the negotiation, instead of making your argument, is to hear the other side out, that's the only way you can quiet the voice in the other guy's mind. But most people don't do that. They don't walk into a negotiation wanting to hear what the other side has to say. They walk into a negotiation wanting to make an argument. They don't pay attention to emotions and they don't listen.

The basics of [active listening](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2012/09/what-can-we-learn-from-fbi-hostage-negotiator/) are pretty straightforward:

1. Listen to what they say. *Don't interrupt, disagree, or "evaluate."*

2. Nod your head, and make brief acknowledging comments like "yes" and "uh-huh."

3. Without being awkward, repeat back the gist of what they just said, from their frame of reference.

4. Inquire. Ask questions that show you've been paying attention and that move the discussion forward.

So what six techniques do FBI hostage negotiation professionals use to take it to the next level?

**1. Ask open-ended questions**

You don't want yes/no answers, you want them to open up.

A good open-ended question would be "Sounds like a tough deal. Tell me how it all happened." It is non-judgmental, shows interest, and is likely to lead to more information about the man's situation. A poor response would be "Do you have a gun? What kind? How many bullets do you have?" because it forces the man into one-word answers, gives the impression that the negotiator is more interested in the gun than the man, and communicates a sense of urgency that will build rather than defuse tension. [[*Crisis Negotiations, Fourth Edition: Managing Critical Incidents and Hostage Situations in Law Enforcement and Corrections*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1422463230/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1422463230&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20)]

**2. Effective pauses**

Pausing is powerful. Use it for emphasis, to encourage someone to keep talking or to defuse things when people get emotional.

Eventually, even the most emotionally overwrought subjects will find it difficult to sustain a one-sided argument, and they again will return to meaningful dialogue with negotiators. Thus, by remaining silent at the right times, negotiators actually can move the overall negotiation process forward. [[Gary Noesner](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/fbi/crisis_interven2.htm), author of [*Stalling for Time: My Life as an FBI Hostage Negotiator*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1400067251/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=spacforrent-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399369&creativeASIN=1400067251)]

**3. Minimal encouragers**

Brief statements to let the person know you're listening and to keep them talking.

Even relatively simple phrases, such as "yes," "O.K.," or "I see," effectively convey that a negotiator is paying attention to the subject. These responses will encourage the subject to continue talking and gradually relinquish more control of the situation to the negotiator. [[Gary Noesner](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/fbi/crisis_interven2.htm)]

**4. Mirroring**

Repeating the last word or phrase the person said to show you're listening and engaged. Yes, it's that simple — just repeat the last word or two:

For example, a subject may declare, "I'm sick and tired of being pushed around," to which the negotiator can respond, "Feel pushed, huh?" [[Gary Noesner](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/fbi/crisis_interven2.htm)]

**5. Paraphrasing**

Repeating what the other person is saying back to them in your own words. This powerfully shows you really do understand and aren't merely parroting.

The idea is to really listen to what the other side is saying and feed it back to them. It's kind of a discovery process for both sides. First of all, you're trying to discover what's important to them, and secondly, you're trying to help them hear what they're saying to find out if what they are saying makes sense to them. [Former head of FBI International hostage negotiation, [Chris Voss](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2013/01/interview-negotiation-secrets-learn-top-fbi-hostage-negotiator/)]

**6. Emotional labeling**

Give their feelings a name. It shows you're identifying with how they feel. Don't comment on the *validity* of the feelings — they could be totally crazy — but show them you understand.

A good use of emotional labeling would be "You sound pretty hurt about being left. It doesn't seem fair." because it recognizes the feelings without judging them. It is a good Additive Empathetic response because it identifies the hurt that underlies the anger the woman feels and adds the idea of justice to the actor's message, an idea that can lead to other ways of getting justice.

A poor response would be "You don't need to feel that way. If he was messing around on you, he was not worth the energy." It is judgmental. It tells the subject how not to feel. It minimizes the subject's feelings, which are a major part of who she is. It is Subtractive Empathy. [[*Crisis Negotiations, Fourth Edition: Managing Critical Incidents and Hostage Situations in Law Enforcement and Corrections*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1422463230/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1422463230&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20)]

Curious to learn more?

To get my exclusive full interview with former head of FBI hostage negotiation Chris Voss (where he explains the two words that tell you a negotiation is going very badly) join my free weekly newsletter. Click [here](http://eepurl.com/o6uAD).