

PHOENIX TRAINING GROUP

THE TWELVE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

The following techniques constitute the core elements of the active listening approach. Together, these techniques provide a framework for staff to respond to the immediate emotional needs of subjects, clearing the way for a positive outcome.

1. Emotional Labeling

When an individual is in the midst of crisis and is reacting from a primarily emotional basis, the negotiator needs to tap into the emotional dimensions of what drives the individual's behavior toward the negotiator, or anyone who is the focus of the outburst. Something is always behind the behavior that is fueling the need to grab someone's attention in order to get the message across loud and clearly that the individual is in pain, or angry, so the subject needs to hear or see the situation from the negotiator's point of view. Emotional labeling allows negotiators to help the individual to see that perspective by attaching a tentative label to the feelings expressed or implied by the subject's words and actions. It also helps to attach an overall emotion in the beginning that the individual may be feeling about the issue, such as; *"This must be very frustrating for you" or "I understand, you must be really angry over this."*

This labeling demonstrates that the negotiator is truly paying attention to the emotional aspects of what the subject is conveying, instead of focusing on the attention-based behavior, such as the weapon held by the individual, or the threat to jump from a building, which is putting either the individual, a third party, or the negotiator in peril. This will help the individual in crisis to effectively identify the true feelings that drive their behavior and therefore will tap into the root of the crisis. This will often remove the need to continue with the attention-based behavior as they have successfully gotten someone to realize that the issue is not about the attention-based behavior, but about the emotional need behind it, while providing a label for the overall issue itself.

2. Paraphrasing

The use of this technique is demonstrated by the negotiator repeating in their own words, the meaning of what they believe to be what the individuals is trying to communicate, or the concepts that are key to the situation. For example, the individual might be focusing on what they are losing, or have lost by saying; ***"My wife left me over my drug use and I'm probably going to lose my job over it as well!" My friends have all kicked me out of their lives and I have no family of my own to turn to, so I'm thinking that killing myself looks like my only option at the moment!"*** As the negotiator listens, they should attempt to provide the evidence of their attention by paraphrasing the individual's words by stating; ***"Okay, so you believe your wife has left you, you might have lost your job and you feel like you don't have anyone to turn to, so you feel that ending your life is your only option at the moment...I think I understand."***

The responses by the negotiator should always be within the eyes of an impartial observer, looking at the situation from the outside to help guide the individual's perspective from one which seems hopeless and final, to one in which has room for positive improvement and a better outcome than is being portrayed. This is conveyed by the use of ***"so you believe"*** and ***"you might have"*** and ***"so you're feeling"*** instead of ***"you have."*** This almost subliminal response, allows the individual to hear another perspective from what they believe is from their own words, that might not be so hopeless and final and can sometimes be just enough to implant a subconscious question into the individual's mind of whether they are thinking clearly or not, or making the right decision.

After establishing the overall emotion that blankets the issue, the negotiator might respond with; *"It sounds like you're really angry over your wife leaving you and you're afraid of being fired from your job as a result of what's going on and so it sounds like you want to get your wife's attention by doing this and maybe even make her pay by your actions here today."* At this point, the individual might agree with the negotiator's point of view and thereby validate the labeling assessments. On the other hand, the individual could modify or correct the assessment by firing back another version such as; ***"Sure I'm angry and I'm scared that I'll be fired, but I don't really want to hurt anyone. I just want my wife back."***

By hearing these possible differences back from the individual, the negotiator has learned something very important about the individual's emotional needs behind the behavior that the negotiator can then turn into valuable ammunition within the arsenal of trying to figure out which direction the negotiation should go, while also discovering the true nature of the individual's initial plan.

3. Mirroring

This technique is utilized by repeating only the most important concepts, or the last few words of the individual's dialogue in order to convey to the individual that you are listening closely and also responding back with proof of understanding what they are trying to get across. This can be especially effective during the primary stages of a situation, as it is important to establish a non-confrontational presence, while demonstrating to the individual that the negotiator is trying to gain a better understanding of their core issues and thus, being able to develop a much more effective rapport between the negotiator and individual. For instance, the agitated individual may state; ***"You can't make me leave here!...I need help!"*** whereas, the negotiator can respond with, ***"You need help...I completely understand what you're saying?"***

This technique tends to help the negotiator allow the direction to be somewhat guided by the individual instead of always pushing the conversation in a specific direction. Under pressure of constantly being expected to arrive at the right response or assessments, this method helps to remove some of the pressure from the negotiator and actually helps to develop a partnership of sorts between the negotiator and individual, allowing the individual to vent their issues while providing the negotiator with the ability to learn essential information about where they need to focus without becoming interrogational.

4. Minimal Encouragement

When using encouragements during the negotiation process, the responses by the negotiator do not need to be lengthy, but instead should be brief, well-timed vocal replies. In this way, the negotiator can provide the essential evidence from the negotiator that they are actually listening and understanding to what is being said, rather than simply hearing the words. This is essential and will more often provoke a positive and more effective response from the individual, rather than one in which the individual "shuts down" feeling that the negotiator is just there to accomplish a means to an end instead of being there to actually help. When acknowledging the individual's dialogue, the negotiator should use simple responses such as ***"Alright," "O.K.," "Got it," "I Understand,"*** or ***"I see,"*** to help convince the individual that the negotiator is paying attention. This will help encourage the individual to continue communicating with the negotiator, while allowing the negotiator to slowly begin transferring control of the situation from the individual, over to the negotiator.

5. Open-Ended Questions

This method not only helps the negotiation process to focus on learning what the individual is really thinking and feeling so that the negotiator can develop a roadmap of where to go and what to further focus on in order to de-escalate and resolve the crisis, but if the negotiator provides most of the dialogue, this prevents some important opportunities for the negotiator to learn from and respond to vital information from the individual. The individual in crisis is often hoping either overtly, or subconsciously, that the negotiator is picking up on the true issues behind the attention-based behavior and that they will help locate the real issue during the negotiation process in order to help talk them out of the crisis behavior. This method helps to establish the essential answers to those issues through questioning that guides the process in a specific direction, instead of simply asking obvious queries that might discourage or escalate the individual.

If the negotiator asks; ***“How are you feeling right now?”*** or, ***“Are you feeling angry or depressed at the moment?”*** this will usually provoke a one word answer that won't provide any insight to the issue or how the individual truly feels and therefore, the negotiator will learn nothing vital in order to solve the crisis. Instead, the negotiator should ask questions such as; ***“Can you tell me more about how exactly that made you feel?”*** or ***“Could you tell me more about that?”*** or ***“I'd like to help you and in order to do that, if I could have a little more information on how you feel and what is really going on here, it would help me understand a little more how to help you.”*** This way, the individual is getting the message that the negotiator is really interested in what the issues are that lie beneath the attention-based behavior and not simply on the behavior itself.

Once the individual feels that the negotiator is invested enough to get to the real issues, the individual becomes more comfortable with the communication process and will be more open to resolution. As a side note, the negotiator should stay away from asking ***“Why”*** questions, such as; ***“Why are you feeling that?”*** or ***“Tell me why you did what you did?”*** as this sets up an interrogational dynamic that will not only stall the negotiation process, but will in some cases escalate the individual to the point where the negotiator will have to provide some emotional damage control in order for the process to proceed again.

6. Directive "I" Messaging

By using ***“I”*** messages within the dialogue process, the negotiator can portray a more level playing field and remove themselves from the stiff role as negotiator sometimes, especially when the individual begins feeling that they are on a different level than the negotiator. This provides the individual with the sense that they are just talking with another person, rather than a superior, which can bring the escalation level down somewhat and help build a better rapport between the negotiator and the individual in crisis. In this way, the individual hears the negotiator's own perceptions of the core issues and this will help not only to break down some of the barriers, but also convey to the individual that there is no blame, attitudes or judgments coming from the negotiator. ***“I”*** messages should be made up of three main elements, the first being ***The issue or situation***, the second being ***Your feelings about the issue*** and the third, ***The reason for your concern***.

On the other hand, when setting limits for an individual who requires firm direction after acting aggressively, as well as to help to maintain a united team approach, the ***“I”*** should sometimes be replaced with a ***“we”*** in terms of communicating to the individual of what is expected from the subject when setting boundaries for behavior and directions. This way, the individual may not focus on the negotiator as the one who is deciding the individual's fate, but instead recognizes that the request for compliance is shared among the entire crisis team. However, this approach should only be initiated when the negotiator and supporting crisis team has complete control over the situation and no one is in danger of suffering physical consequences from the individual's outburst or attack.

As an example of the ***“I”*** messages, the negotiator can state; ***“You and I have been here now for an hour and I feel as though we're not getting much further than when we started.”*** ***“I'd like for you and I to come to an agreement so you can walk out of here safely.”*** This method can also create a positive atmosphere of emotional control and de-escalation when the individual begins verbally attacking the negotiator during the dialogue by responding with an ***“I”*** message that brings the negotiator to the individual's level and helping to create a sense of stability between the two where they are both on common ground. When verbally attacked, the negotiator can reply with; ***“I'm on your side here and I'm feeling a bit frustrated that you're still yelling at me when all I'm trying to do is help you.”*** or ***“I thought we were making some real progress here, so I'd feel more comfortable if you wouldn't yell at me, so I can help make this situation go away.”*** For the ***“we”*** response, the negotiator might say, ***“We'd like for you to cooperate and walk with us outside so you and I can talk so we can find out what it is that you need and what we can do for you.”*** While employing this skill and all active listening techniques, negotiators must avoid being pulled into an argument or trading personal attacks with a subject. An argumentative, sarcastic, or hostile tone could reinforce the subject's already negative view of the negotiator and support staff and cause the subject to rationalize increased resistance due to a lack of perceived concern on the part of the negotiator.

7. Effective Silence

As a rule, people have a conscious or subconscious reflex to speak in order to fill gaps and spaces within a conversation. The negotiator can develop a substantial amount of information and a true sense of what the individual is thinking and feeling by utilizing silence as a method of encouraging the individual to voluntarily fill the gaps by feeling that they need to speak to overcome the uncomfortable silences provoked by the negotiator. The negotiator can still remain engaged and attentive, but by using well-placed pauses and deliberate silences, this may force the individual to speak in order to nervously create some verbalizations to break the silence. When the individual does this, often the words they choose may not be as well-chosen and calculated and therefore more honest and from their emotions, rather than their heads. This in turn will serve to provide the negotiator with a more authentic roadmap in which to proceed.

Silence can also be a good de-escalating method when confronted with an aggressive or verbally assaultive individual who is in the midst of an emotional outburst. Often, the individual is expecting an equal response from the negotiator in order for the individual to justify their initial actions or emotional instability and therefore can justify the further aggressive response in return toward the negotiator. When the negotiator responds with silence instead of a verbal reaction, then the individual will often realize that there is no need to yell aggressively and at times will instinctually find a calmer way to express their outburst in order to check to see if the negotiator is still listening and to establish groundwork for resolution after realizing that their normal way of expressing communication is not working. Even the most emotionally-charged individuals find it uncomfortable to stay engaged within a one-sided argument and will eventually calm.

8. Perception Checking

This is done by the negotiator in an effort to understand the feelings and emotions behind the words spoken by the individual in crisis, or to tap into the root cause of the aggressive behavior. No matter what behavior the attacker exhibits, there is nearly always something that is going on behind the Attention-Based Behavior, or the behavior that you see that clearly provides you with the message that this is, or could be a crisis. This is called, the *Instrumental Behavior*.

Emotionally-Based Behavior, (or *Expressive Behavior*) on the other hand, is designed to communicate the subject's frustration, outrage, passion, despair, anger, or other feelings that are sometimes stemming from a long-term histrionic dynamic, where the individual feels as though they have not been listened to or understood to the point where they exceed their normal coping abilities. Once you tap into the emotionally-based need that drives the attention-based behavior that is the real cause for the crisis, then the need to exhibit the aggressive behavior sometimes becomes unnecessary and thus, the individual feels less need to display the aggressive, or self-destructive behavior.

9. Clarifying

This is the process of following up to understand both the content and context of the words or feelings expressed in order for the negotiator to check for the accuracy of understanding or how they perceived any messages from the individual in crisis. To avoid any misunderstandings that may cause a re-escalation of emotions during the negotiation process, the negotiator attempts to clear up any misperceptions that may occur during a very emotionally-charged encounter. As an example, the negotiator might say, ***"I'm a bit confused about what it is that you're needing... Could you explain it so I can make sure I understand?"*** or ***"Are you saying that _____?"*** or ***"Can you tell me again what you meant when you said that you don't feel like yourself."*** It is extremely easy to cause misunderstandings when wrapped up in a volatile situation, so clarification is sometimes necessary when there is even the slightest bit of a question within the negotiator's mind of what the individual truly means by what they're saying in order to avoid the re-escalating of the crisis.

10. Structuring

It is sometimes necessary to create guidelines or parameters for the negotiation process in order for the individual in crisis to feel as though there is a defined direction that the negotiation is going so that there is a sense of purpose and outcome. It is the job of the negotiator to help guide the process in a direction where there are clear priorities to follow and explore, especially when there are several issues, or an array of emotions and feelings at hand. Following the individual's multi-directional, or disjointed rant, the negotiator

might respond with, ***“You mentioned that you do not feel as though this situation is in your best interest and that you’re afraid that your wife will not understand and divorce you, as well as that you’re afraid of losing your job”... “Which should we talk about first?”*** This way, the negotiator directs the individual to a subject that might be the most emotionally-charged and therefore the possible key to what the true cause of the crisis is in the first place. This will reduce the time spent, both time-wise and emotionally and as such, will create a narrower path to a quicker resolution of the crisis.

11. Pinpointing

During the negotiation process, there can be so many emotionally-charged topics that the individual is dealing with internally and externally, that the process itself may become clouded in inconsistencies and attempts to grasp at different perceptions of realities and truths. It is not uncommon, especially when interacting with someone who has reality-impairment, for that individual to skip around to several versions of what they believe is the actual topic, reality, or crisis at hand. Therefore, the negotiator needs to sometimes re-direct the intervention back to the true issue, or at least one in which they can actually obtain results from so that the resolution can be identified and set as a goal. An example would be, ***“I hear you saying that you’re glad you left your husband and that you feel much safer now, but I’m seeing some tears”..... “Can you tell me where those are coming from?”*** In doing this, the negotiator keeps the truth re-directed to where it is most valuable and most relevant to the situation.

12. Body Language and Posturing

This element is one of the most important to anyone who is attempting to de-escalate a situation or convey to an individual that they are actually being listened to and understood. Physical messages, or body language from a negotiator can either validate, or discount the message they are trying to convey and the body language exhibited by the negotiator or the support team can sabotage even the best of intentions by a negotiator, especially when the support team is giving a different message than the negotiator. Body language must be consistent and provide a safe and therapeutic environment for the interaction to become productive. Disinterest in the interaction will only serve to escalate the negotiation process and instill a sense of distrust, disinterest and even hostility toward the individual from the negotiator and support team.

Examples of negative body language would be standing with closed posture, arms crossed over your chest, darting eye contact or looking away, checking your watch, working on an unrelated task, interrupting, fidgeting, sighing or taking a phone call while listening. Others can include standing at the doorway when speaking to an individual, conveying that you would really rather be doing something else and that you’d like to leave as soon as possible. A negotiator can do and say all of the right things and the individual in crisis will still get the wrong message if the support team is portraying a different message by appearing ready for a fight, glaring, looking sarcastically, or talking secretly among themselves. Individuals in crisis will always believe what they see above what they are hearing, so make sure both are consistently present.

Active listening skills can help negotiators demonstrate that the negotiation team sincerely wants to help the subject out of a difficult situation. Negotiators should look at these skills as tools to be applied as deemed appropriate during a crisis situation. The application of active listening skills helps to create an empathic relationship between negotiators and the subject. Demonstrating this empathy tends to build rapport and, in time, will to change the subject's behavior. This approach to crisis intervention represents an effort over a relatively short period of time to stabilize emotions and restore the subject's ability to think more rationally. However, when dealing with expressive subjects, negotiators should avoid the inclination to resolve the problem as rapidly as possible.

Unless there is a clear and imminent danger to themselves or someone else and the only choice is to act quickly, there is no reason to try to resolve the situation prematurely. People tend to listen to and follow the advice of individuals who have influence over them. Negotiators generally achieve peaceful resolutions only after they demonstrate their desire to be non-judgmental, non-threatening, and understanding of the subject's feelings. By projecting that understanding, negotiators show empathy and lead the subject to perceive them, not as the enemy, but as concerned individuals who want to help.

Applying active listening skills and showing empathy establishes a degree of rapport between negotiators and individuals that can lead to the discussion of nonviolent alternatives to resolve incidents. The rapport creates an environment where negotiators can suggest various alternatives that the subject previously could not see or would not consider.

Individuals who turn to the negotiators for help and respond positively to the de-escalation process, have reached a point where, due to the rapport-building efforts of negotiators and are ready to accept advice on the best way to resolve the situation.

Despite the popular notion that listening is a passive behavior, abundant clinical evidence and research suggest that active listening is an effective way to induce behavioral change in others. When truly listened to by others, individuals tend to listen to themselves more carefully and to evaluate and clarify their own thoughts and feelings. In addition, they tend to become better problem solvers, growing less defensive and oppositional and more accepting of other points of view. Subjects who are met with an empathetic ear also become less fearful of being criticized and grow more inclined to adopt a realistic appraisal of their own position.

During any interaction with an individual in crisis, whether they are confused, aggressive, violent, suicidal or just unpredictable, the negotiator who is participating in the interaction must demonstrate that they are truly listening attentively and are focused on the subject's words. The negotiator can effectively convey these qualities through their body language as well as brief verbal replies or questions that relate interest and concern while providing actual evidence to the individual that they are not just being heard, but listened to and understood.

Through the course of a person's development, we construct a set of our own beliefs. In a very general sense, the interaction between beliefs related to self and those related to the world around us determine an individual's behavior in any situation. However, viewpoints related to self, (the person's self-image) represent the most cherished and vital components in the belief system and therefore the most passionately felt, guarded and defended.

Accordingly, an individual may feel threatened by any direct attempt by others to challenge or change their self-images. These perceived threats cause subjects in crisis to defend even more strongly their image of themselves and deny any challenges to it. Objective observers might view these efforts as constricted thinking and rigid behavior. To clients in crisis however, they represent the only avenues open to preserve a sense of themselves amidst the chaos in their lives. Because active listening poses no threat to an individual's self-image, it can help a subject become less defensive, thus, the active listening creates fertile ground for negotiation and, eventually, change and resolution.

If the negotiator hopes to change a subject's behavior in order to restore their emotional stability, or regain control of the situation if it is, or has the potential to become violent, the negotiator must remove themselves as a threat while increasing the subject's ability to think more clearly and act less aggressively,. As long as the subject perceives the atmosphere as threatening and that the negotiator is incapable of, or not going to listen, no meaningful communication can take place. Without effective communication, the negotiator cannot build the rapport necessary to provide the individual with the perception of emotional safety and stability and therefore, will not be able to bring about behavioral change necessary to regain emotional or physical stability to the situation.

Accordingly, the negotiator must avoid intimidating, demanding, demeaning, lecturing, criticizing, and evaluating the subjects that are in crisis, instead creating an atmosphere of empathy, respect, safety and stability. Only in this climate will subjects feel safe enough to consider alternate perspectives and then become receptive to positive suggestions and viewpoints from the negotiator and allow themselves to de-escalate internally.