

10 Conflict Resolution Lessons from Hostage Negotiators

By Dr. Evan Hoffman

1. Recognize whom you are dealing with: you are most likely dealing with someone whose coping capacities have been or are close to being overwhelmed – if they are viewed as stress containers, they've hit the limit. Therefore, treat them with Caution and Respect.
2. Build Trust - 3 Key Ingredients for Building Trust = 1. Predictability 2. Dependability and 3. Attachment as a result of direct and repeated positive contact (Fisher and Brown, 1998). Since repeated contact is not likely possible, be Honest to build trust.
3. One of the greatest tools of hostage negotiators is their Attitude and Personality. Suspend your ego and convey a warm, caring and interested attitude. Speak in a calm and natural tone.
4. Build and convey Empathy (not Sympathy). Empathy = to see through the other's eyes. Sympathy is to feel sorry for someone.
5. Ask Questions. Asking questions, which puts the other person in listening mode, can reduce physiological arousal to help de-escalate a tense situation. Important new info can surface as well.
6. Listen, Listen, Listen! Listening requires that we give the other person our full and undivided attention and we aren't simply waiting for our turn to talk. Use "minimal encouragers" to keep the forward momentum of the conversation going and to affirm that you are listening.
7. Strategic use of Silence. Silence can help calm a situation down, allow everyone the time to reflect/process what has been said and create an opportunity for the other person to share more info. ***Be comfortable with silence and use it strategically.***
8. Quid pro quo is "something for something" in Latin. Request small behavior changes or concessions and offer a reward in return.
9. Know when to draw the line (and call in the SWAT team). At what point do you reasonably and professionally Dis-Engage? How do you do this in a responsible and ethical manner?
10. Always leave the door open for the negotiations to re-start if the other side would to start talking again.

