

Role Playing

Applications in Hostage and Crisis Negotiation Skills Training

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Role playing has been a mainstay of behavioral assessment for decades. In recent years, however, this analogue strategy has also enjoyed widespread application in the field of law enforcement. Most notably, role-play procedures have become an integral component of assessment and training efforts in hostage and crisis negotiation, which attempts to resolve high-risk and often volatile situations in a peaceful, nonviolent manner when possible. The purpose of this paper is to (a) describe development and validation of a role-play test specifically geared toward law enforcement negotiators, (b) present different role-play formats that have been incorporated in law enforcement negotiation training, and (c) discuss limitations and considerations in use of these instruments. Suggestions for directions that future efforts in this area might take are offered. The heuristic value of role playing in crisis management, counterterrorism, and emergency and mass casualty disaster training exercises is also underscored.

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Nearly every week in the United States, a standoff occurs wherein a person is taken captive against his or her will by another for tangible

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reasons, such as leverage to obtain something of value, or for intangible reasons, most notably, aggression aimed at causing physical or emotional harm to the captive. These captive situations are termed "hostage" in barricaded hostage situations, and "victim" in barricaded crisis situations (Vecchi, Van Hasselt, & Romano, 2005).

Hostage-taking is the holding of one or more persons against their will with the actual or implied use of force, and there is no significant emotional bond between the subject and hostage (Lanceley, 2003; Strentz, 2006). Hostage-taking involves holding a person captive for instrumental or tangible reasons in situations such as an act of terrorism, a crime (e.g., failed bank robbery), and jail or prison riots (Rogan, Hammer, & Van Zandt, 1997; Romano, 1998). In hostage situations, negotiators rely more on bargaining or problem-solving techniques to influence behavior change (Vecchi et al., 2005). More common, however, are barricaded crisis incidents in which the subject is holding another person for expressive or intangible reasons, and there is a significant emotional bond between the subject and victim. Some examples include an altered murder-suicide pact, school or workplace violence events, or domestic situations, such as a rejected spouse trying to reconcile, or revenge for a perceived slight (see Rogan et al., 1997; Romano, 1998; Van Hasselt, Flood et al., 2005). These incidents are described as "situations in which a person has isolated himself in a protected position, has a weapon that can harm others, and is threatening to use it. . . . However, the majority of barricaded subjects are people who are in emotional crisis . . . [and] threaten others as a way of getting attention or of getting police to kill them" (McMains & Mullins, 2006, p. 42). In barricaded crisis situations, negotiators rely on crisis intervention techniques to influence behavior change (Strentz, 2006; Vecchi et al., 2005).

Hostage and Crisis Negotiation

The field of hostage and crisis negotiation has emerged over the past several years as an effort by law enforcement professionals to resolve high-risk situations in a peaceful, nonviolent manner when possible. According to Regini (2002), "Crisis [hostage] negotiation is one of law enforcement's most effective tools. The successful resolution of tens of thousands of hostage, crisis, attempted suicide, and kidnapping cases throughout the world repeatedly has demonstrated its value" (p. 1). This contention is supported by data from the Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS) established by the Crisis Negotiation Unit (CNU) of the Federal Bureau of

Investigation (FBI). HOBAS serves as a database on hostage/crisis incidents through the systematic collection of cases (postincident) from law enforcement agencies across the country. In an analysis of HOBAS data from 2002 to 2003, results showed that approximately 82% of reported incidents were resolved without death or injury to the subject or the victim (Flood, 2003).

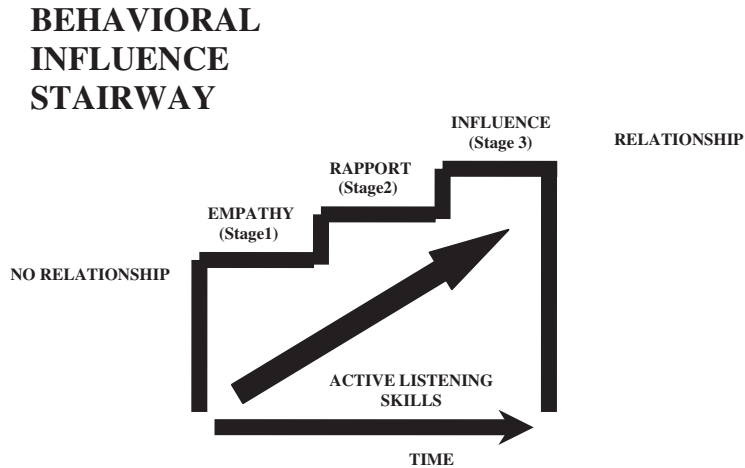
This area has its origins in the pioneering efforts of Frank Bolz and Harvey Schlossberg (e.g., Bolz & Hershey, 1979; Schlossberg, 1979) of the New York City Police Department. Their program (which has served as the basis for most efforts since) involved the first “soft” negotiation approach, incorporating principles of conflict and dispute resolution. The strategy emphasized the “slowing down” of an incident to provide subjects the opportunity to vent his or her feelings (e.g., anger, frustration) and reconsider their actions to defuse an acute emotional state. As Hatcher, Mohandie, Turner, and Gelles (1998) point out, “The goal or mission of barricaded hostage/crisis negotiations is to utilize verbal strategies to buy time and intervene so that the emotions of the perpetrator can decrease and rationality increase” (p. 455). The specific strategies utilized to accomplish this goal are “active listening skills” (e.g., mirroring, emotion labeling, paraphrasing, summarizing, open-ended questions), which have proven crucial in establishing rapport in social and therapeutic relationships (e.g., Cairns, 1979; Johnston, Van Hasselt, & Hersen, 1998), and in resolving volatile confrontations (Dolan & Fuselier, 1989; Noesner & Webster, 1997; Webster, 2003).

Behavioral Influence Stairway Model

Active listening skills also comprise the foundation of the Behavioral Influence Stairway Model (BISM; Vecchi, 2007a), which is an adaptation of a model developed by the FBI/CNU (Vecchi et al., 2005). The BISM outlines the relationship-building process involving the negotiator and subject which culminates in a peaceful resolution of the critical incident (Noesner & Webster, 1997). Development of this relationship between the subject and captive is essential in both barricaded hostage and crisis situations (Vecchi et al., 2005).

The BISM consists of four elements: (1) active listening skills, (2) empathy, (3) rapport, and (4) behavioral influence. Progression occurs sequentially and cumulatively from the empathy stage through the behavioral influence stage, with active listening being the foundation of all the stages (see Figure 1). Specifically, the negotiator continually uses active listening as he or she

Figure 1
Behavioral Influence Stairway



proceeds in sequence from Stage 1 (empathy) to Stage 3 (behavioral influence) at which time a relationship is developed facilitating behavior change (e.g., surrendering). However, in order to influence the subject, empathy must be demonstrated and rapport established. Further, active listening skills need to be maintained by the negotiator throughout the process.

As this process is effectively utilized, the probability of positive behavioral change increases thus becoming a building block toward the successful resolution of the crisis (Vecchi et al., 2005). Moreover, the primary vehicle for assessment and training of active listening, and other skills requisite to progression through BISM has been *role playing* (Van Hasselt & Romano, 2004).

Role Playing: An Overview

Role playing (i.e., simulations of real-world interpersonal encounters, communications, or events) enjoys a rich tradition in the field of behavior therapy (see Bellack, 1983; Bellack & Hersen, 1998). For over a quarter of a century, role-play strategies have been employed as a vehicle to assess and train a variety of interpersonal skills (e.g., assertion, social, job interview, and dating skills) across individuals with diverse social and/or emotional

problems. Some of these groups include: isolated or aggressive children, substance abusers, schizophrenics, sex offenders, and dating-anxious college students, to name but a few (see reviews by Becker & Kaplan, 1993; Bellack & Morrison, 1982; Collins & Collins, 1992; Van Hasselt, Hersen, & Millions, 1978).

In recent years, role playing has also become one of the most frequently utilized tools employed by law enforcement (Slatkin, 2005; Van Hasselt & Romano, 2004). Indeed, a recent survey found that over 80% of law enforcement agencies nationwide use some form of role playing in their training programs (Sharp, 2000). Examples of these are simulated Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) operations, interview/interrogation rehearsal and scenario-based evaluations in recruit selection and police promotional tests. In the context of law enforcement training, role-play procedures have provided a hands-on instructional environment that allows participants to test their ability to perform critical job-related functions under the supervision of expert instructors (Schneid & Collins, 2001; Van Hasselt & Romano, 2004). In other words, role playing maximizes skill acquisition via "learning through doing" (Schneid & Collins, 2001, p. 74).

For example, the Emergency Management Institute, part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (now based in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security) uses a variety of training exercises that feature role playing as an essential part of an "all hazards" approach to emergency and crisis management. These are designed to manage natural and man-made catastrophes, disasters, and terrorist events (Haddow & Bullock, 2006). All exercises are scenario-based, categorized by purpose, and vary in their difficulty and complexity.

There are three primary types of these exercises: (1) tabletop, (2) functional, and (3) partial- and full-scale (see Haddow & Bullock, 2006). Tabletop exercises are discussion-based and designed to evaluate and train senior staff. They include confederates who role play simulated events using field-derived information. Functional exercises target specific areas of emergency and crisis management, such as triage or communications activities, and include role players who enact various problems to assess participants' ability to resolve complications.

Partial- and full-scale exercises use role players to carry out scenarios designed to test and enhance the ability of all stakeholders (i.e., essential personnel) and systems to carry out successful response and recovery operations. The former are reserved for limited objectives over a short time period; the latter evaluate the entire system over an extended time frame (Haddow & Bullock, 2006).

Whichever type of exercise is employed, the scenarios are usually unexpected and cumulative. Specifically, participants are not advised ahead of time of the details and the scenario “story” builds on itself, requiring the participants to react. For example, a scenario might start out as a “routine” convenience store robbery, requiring only the local police to respond. As the scenario unfolds, however, an officer is shot in the femoral artery as two of the three subjects flee the scene, which requires Emergency Medical Service resources to respond. The first subject is shot dead by police, requiring crime scene technicians to respond. A “disturbance” then occurs at a local railroad yard involving a railroad worker who is shot and killed when approaching two suspicious subjects. One of the subjects then climbs a rail car containing chlorine gas and places a backpack on top of it. This triggers the response of the Federal Railroad Administration and Amtrak. The backpack then explodes, rupturing the chlorine tank, sending noxious fumes towards a town, which has to be evacuated by state authorities to locations served by the Red Cross. This changes the scenario from seemingly unrelated incidents to a terrorist attack, which brings in many other agencies such as the FBI, DHS, and the National Transportation Safety Board.

Role Playing in Hostage and Crisis Negotiation

Within the law enforcement profession, however, hostage and crisis negotiation programs have perhaps the longest history of incorporating role-play procedures in evaluations and training of critical competencies. In the following sections we will (a) describe the development and validation of a role-play strategy specifically geared toward the needs of law enforcement negotiators, (b) discuss disparate forms or types of role plays that have been incorporated in law enforcement training efforts in this area, and (c) present suggestions for directions that future work and applications of role-play procedures in law enforcement hostage and crisis negotiation might take.

Role Play Test (RPT) Development and Validation

Background. The CNU, which is part of the FBI’s Critical Incident Response Group, based at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia, is a specialized group that responds to crises worldwide and provides training in law enforcement negotiation skills. The latter is accomplished via their National Crisis Negotiation Course (NCNC). The NCNC was originally instituted by the program to meet the needs of FBI special agents who may be directly involved in hostage, crisis, kidnapping, and/or suicide situations. The 2-week curriculum is comprehensive in scope and covers a wide range

of topics in law enforcement negotiation. A major emphasis, however, is the training of the aforementioned active listening skills, which are the foundation of empathy, rapport, and influence, and ultimately, behavior change through negotiation and conflict resolution.

Further, these skills are honed via brief and extended role play scenarios in high-risk situations requiring negotiation. In this behaviorally based, skill-oriented approach, instructors employ a combination of direct instruction, performance feedback, and positive reinforcement to shape newly trained negotiation skills. Students must demonstrate skill acquisition in a series of practical field exercises to successfully complete the NCNC.

RPT of Law Enforcement Negotiation Skills. CNU personnel developed role-play scenarios specifically designed for evaluation and training of negotiators' conflict resolution skills (Noesner & Romano, 2002). All of these role-play scenarios are narrative adaptations of barricaded hostage or crisis incidents that have actually occurred. CNU personnel are unique in having extensive expertise in law enforcement negotiation and management. The role-play scenarios were derived from their years of experience in the field, and reflect their direct involvement in numerous critical incidents over the past quarter of a century (Romano & McCann, 1997).

Despite the widespread application of these role-play scenarios, and other similar enactments utilized by police agencies internationally, little attention had been directed to the validation of this procedure. In response to this void, Van Hasselt, Baker et al. (2005) examined the validity of the role-play strategy by determining the extent to which it discriminated expert from nonexpert law enforcement negotiators. The RPT developed by CNU, and employed in their research, consisted of 12 audiotaped, narrated scenarios describing various law enforcement negotiation situations, with four in each of three categories: (1) family domestic, (2) workplace, and (3) suicide. Further, each role play item included four prearranged prompts provided by a role-play partner (confederate) to facilitate an extended interaction, and to make RPT items more similar to real-life encounters (Bellack, 1983). Also, each prompt was sufficiently neutral in content to be appropriate and facilitative, irrespective of the participant's responses.

Examples of RPT items from each of the three categories are provided below.

Family Domestic

Narrator: Jim Smith has abducted his common-law wife and their son from a distant state. She had obtained a court order preventing him from

seeing her or their son. She has repeatedly rejected his efforts at reconciliation, and he has stalked and harassed her in the past. He kidnapped her and the child in the middle of the night from her parent's home and drove her to an unoccupied farmhouse nearby where he ran out of gas. Authorities located his vehicle and then discovered them held up in the farmhouse.

Prompt 1: I'm not letting her take my son away from me.

Prompt 2: I've tried over and over to get her to come back to me.

Prompt 3: My son is what I live for.

Prompt 4: I don't think I can take it any more.

Workplace

Narrator: John Henry is angry because the factory where he has worked for 10 years fired most of the senior workers to reduce payroll and increase profits. He blames the factory manager for the loss of his job. He brought a gun into his office and is threatening to kill him if he doesn't get his job back. He feels he has been treated badly and not given the respect he has earned after 10 years of hard work.

Prompt 1: I've given 10 years of my life to this place.

Prompt 2: It's that damn manager's fault.

Prompt 3: They had no right doing this to me.

Prompt 4: If I can't work, I can't support my family.

Suicide

Narrator: Frank was a successful banker, who had been living the good life. Unfortunately, several of his investments and financial decisions have failed, and he is facing financial ruin. He feels he will bring shame to his family, his wife will leave him, and his possessions will be taken away. He feels hopeless and helpless. He believes that killing himself is the only way out. One of his bank employees observed him with a gun in his office and called the police to intervene.

Prompt 1: I'm ruined; my life is over.

Prompt 2: My family will be so ashamed of me.

Prompt 3: This is hopeless; I can't go on.

Prompt 4: Killing myself is the only answer.

Audiotaped responses to the RPT were subsequently rated on behavioral components of negotiation skill (mirroring, paraphrasing, emotion labeling, summarizing, open-ended questions). In addition, overall active listening skills were calculated by adding the total number of active listening skills. Response duration was also rated in light of previous contentions that a good negotiator is a good listener rather than an overly active speaker (Dolan & Fuselier, 1989).

Results indicated that nonexperts (FBI special agents without formal negotiation training) displayed significantly lower levels of all active listening skills compared to trained (expert) FBI negotiators. Only response duration (not considered an active listening skill) failed to distinguish between groups. In addition, moderate correlations were found between a measure of emotional empathy and some active listening skill components.

In a second study, Van Hasselt et al. (2006) conducted the first empirical assessment of the efficacy of law enforcement negotiation training. Specifically, they used the previously described RPT to evaluate the effectiveness of the NCNC in training skills "requisite to successful negotiations in critical incidents and crisis situations" (p. 65). Forty-five FBI special agents were assessed on the RPT before and after completing the 2-week NCNC. Results showed that participants displayed significantly higher levels of three out of four targeted active listening skills (paraphrasing, emotion labeling, mirroring) and overall active listening skill ratings as a function of training. These findings provided preliminary support for the utility of the FBI NCNC and, by extension, other curricula that include behaviorally based training of negotiation skills.

Other Role-Play Formats. The brief format of the RPT incorporated in the studies above "allows for immediate and frequent instructor feedback of targeted negotiation skills. Feedback is especially helpful in the early phases of negotiation training given the importance of the practice and repetition usually required for new negotiators to gain these skills" (Van Hasselt & Romano, 2004, p. 14). However, lengthier role plays, more like the prolonged events characterizing most real-life barricaded hostage and crisis situations, have also been employed.

At a more advanced stage of training, the NCNC utilizes scenarios lasting nearly an hour. Further, these are conducted at the FBI Academy's "Hogan's Alley," a mock city that provides a variety of naturalistic settings (e.g., drug store, movie theater, hotel, apartment building) for training. This provides students the opportunity to apply their newly acquired negotiation skills in more realistic situations. For example, negotiators might be asked to respond to an attempted robbery at a drug store by an addict trying to get

money and drugs; the situation has somehow gone awry and the perpetrator is barricaded with hostages. Negotiator trainees must make initial contact with the subject and attempt to resolve the situation peacefully.

Still another role-play variation involves even lengthier scenarios, often several hours in duration, which reflect actual critical incidents that usually require extended negotiation. These are generally carried out toward the final stage of training, and require student negotiation teams to use all of their newly acquired skills to accomplish a successful resolution.

Online Applications

The advent of the Internet has resulted in a phenomenal growth of online cyber environments that literally span the globe, such as gaming, e-commerce, research Web sites, search engines, educational opportunities, employment, and even online dating. The common thread that allows individuals to function in cyberspace is the ability to communicate electronically, via e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, bulletin boards, and other electronic venues. Given the increase in cyberspace activities, individuals are now spending more time online than ever before. As online communication becomes more mainstream and normative, it is possible that law enforcement negotiation could occur via the Internet in text form, rather than over the telephone or in person. Moreover, the shift toward more online and distance education has resulted in the need to train negotiation skills virtually, in extra-classroom environments.

The ability to teach and acquire critical negotiation skills in an online environment was demonstrated by Vecchi (2007b) in two online Criminal Justice graduate courses (Crisis Intervention and Negotiation, and Conflict and Crisis Negotiation), which included chat room role plays that simulated barricaded hostage and crisis situations. During these courses, law enforcement and non-law enforcement students were taught the theory and methodology of problem solving and crisis intervention via reading assignments and written, online lectures. Facilitated discussion of the topics was mandated on electronic bulletin boards, which included answering questions posted by the instructor and student-led discussion assignments. Finally, experienced confederates role played barricaded hostage and crisis scenarios in live chat rooms that tested the negotiation skills of each student on an individual basis. Further, all chat room texts were recorded, which enabled the instructor to insert feedback within the text of the dialogue *after the role play* in order to facilitate skill building. An example of a chat room negotiation with feedback is provided below.

Instructions from role player: I will be playing someone who is barricaded inside his office. He has had a really bad day! The door is locked from the inside and he will not come out. You are a first responder (negotiator) who is outside the office door. You will start off by typing “knock, knock.” This is when he will begin timing the scenario.

Student: Knock, knock!

Role player: What!

Student: Hey Justin . . . it’s just me man . . .

[Instructor feedback: It is not a good idea to pretend you know him.]

Role player: Who? Go the hell away and leave me alone! I don’t know you!

Student: True you don’t know me, but I’d like to hang outside this door a while.

[Instructor feedback: State that you are not going away and label an emotion.]

Role player: I locked it! Now go away! Don’t even think about coming in here!

Student: No problem, I don’t want to go in there. I’d just like to talk to you a bit.

Role player: Lady, what the [expletive] are you going to talk to me about? Talking doesn’t do [expletive]!

Student: I don’t know what to talk to you about. So why don’t you tell me a little about what’s goin’ on?

[Instructor feedback: Talk about emotions, not content at this point.]

Role player: This day has been so messed up!

Student: Bad day huh?

[Instructor feedback: Good follow-up. Maybe say, “Tell me more.”]

Role player: No kidding! You wouldn’t believe it!

Student: Believe what? I don’t know anything yet! I’m all ears if you want to tell me a little . . .

[Instructor feedback: Don’t focus on content at this point, only emotions.]

Role player: What are you, a shrink? You gonna fix me up? Just get the [expletive] out of here! I can’t take this no more!

Student: No, I’m not a shrink . . . not sure how I feel about them! Can’t say that I can fix you up or anything . . . but . . . what can’t you take anymore?

[Instructor feedback: Emphasize emotions, not content.]

Role player: All this crazy [expletive]!

Student: Like . . . what happened today?

Role player: I don’t believe this week, this day, this life. I just want it to all go away!

Student: Hmmm . . . this week and this day . . . I want to hear a little about today.

[*Instructor feedback:* You should deal with his subtle suicide message.]

Role player: My life is over! Everything is gone!

Student: What's gone?

Role player: My life! Everything I have ever worked for is gone! My work, my wife, everything! You can't understand what I'm going through.

Student: No you're right . . . I don't understand yet . . . but I'm getting an idea of how frustrating it's been for you.

Extent of skills acquisition was evaluated by the role-play partners (confederates) who provided behavioral prompts to students and listened for specific behavioral components of active listening (mirroring, paraphrasing, emotion labeling, and summarizing) across role-play scenarios. During the online courses, Vecchi (2007a) found that nearly every student experienced a marked increase in their communication and negotiation skills, particularly in the area of active listening.

Limitations

This paper describes unique applications of a frequently utilized behavioral assessment procedure: role playing. And while this strategy is now enjoying increased utilization in law enforcement negotiation and conflict resolution, several limitations and considerations in the use of role playing in this important area warrant mention. First, empirical research in law enforcement negotiation in general, and assessment strategies, such as RPTs, in particular, remains quite sparse. The few studies that have been conducted by our research team regarding the latter have included FBI personnel as participants. It is possible that disparate findings would emerge if non-FBI law enforcement personnel, with different training backgrounds, were included. Indeed, we are currently replicating our role play investigations with groups of non-FBI police officers.

Second, our work has strongly emphasized assessment of active listening skills in the context of role play scenarios, which might not be as evident in other law enforcement training efforts. Consequently, the generality of results may be limited. Nevertheless, the past several years have witnessed a growing consensus among negotiation experts concerning the importance of such relationship-building skills in successful law enforcement negotiation. As McMains and Mullins (2006) point out, "active listening skills are fundamental to negotiations. They open the door for developing a

relationship with the subject, they give the negotiator a non-threatening way of responding to the subject that is disarming and invites cooperation” (p. 92).

Finally, but hardly least of all, although role playing has received validation support (Van Hasselt, Baker et al., 2005), the external validity (i.e., the relationship between role-play performance and skill in real-world critical incidents) of this procedure has yet to be ascertained. As Van Hasselt, Baker et al. (2005) point out, “Conducting such research is admittedly difficult due to the ‘low-frequency, high-magnitude’ pattern of critical incidents, which limits opportunities for *in vivo* observation of negotiation skill in actual crisis situations” (p. 359). Nevertheless, empirical efforts in this regard are clearly needed. Some suggestions for future endeavors in this area are (a) evaluation of skill acquisition in the previously mentioned lengthier role-play scenarios (40 minutes to several hours each), which may better reflect actual barricaded hostage and crisis situations; (b) assessing negotiation skill in actual critical incidents that have been audiotaped and can be retrospectively rated; and (3) examination of “after-action” reports that would provide at least a broad evaluation of negotiator skill and effectiveness (Van Hasselt et al., 2006).

Interestingly, the validity of RPTs has been a focus of investigative interest for quite some time and with diverse populations (cf. Bellack, Hersen, & Turner, 1978; Bellack, Brown, & Thomas-Lohrman, 2006; Van Hasselt, Hersen, & Bellack, 1981). Our recommendations for enhancing the validity of role plays for law enforcement negotiation training, to a great extent, echo the recommendations of previous research in the area (e.g., Bellack, 1983) and include providing greater detail in scenario descriptions to help participants “get into” their roles, and using actors or trained confederates in scenario roles to enhance realism.

Also, highly realistic role-play scenarios (e.g., actual robbery setting, such as a bank, rather than classroom training), either conducted or closely controlled by experienced negotiators, would seem to improve the validity of this widely employed assessment method. Challenging, yet real-world scripted, practical exercises not only reinforce negotiation concepts, strategies, and techniques, but also significantly enhance a trainee’s confidence level. Further, although practical problems are inherently artificial, if constructed properly, they can create a considerable degree of pressure and anxiety for the trainee. Anecdotally, many former negotiation students have commented that after dealing with realistic role-play scenarios in their training, real-world negotiated critical incidents were challenging but not overwhelming.

Despite the fact that all barricaded hostage and crisis situations are unique, the basic emotions that drive them are universal and predictable. Effective negotiation of such events requires intensive and ongoing training of requisite skills in contexts as similar to the real incidents as possible. Therefore, we anticipate that carefully constructed role plays, incorporating the spectrum of potential emotions, will continue to be widely utilized in this capacity.

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