Our Approach: Active Listening and Experiential Learning

The Hostage Negotiation Team’s motto is “Talk to me.” Jack spends the majority of his training time working with people on learning active listening skills. He has an arsenal of funny videos to lure you into his sobering case studies of how a lack of active listening can result in tragic miscarriages of justice. Active listening is no joke.

How do we design a class that requires active listening in the learners? We model it. Here are a few of the principles we employed in designing the experiential learning sessions:

1. **This is a project, not a class.** It is something we are making together. The content and material of the class is you.
2. **There is a journey we will steer you through, but most of the details of this are openings, rather than conclusions an authority is driving you toward.**
3. **We will simulate, to a small degree, the quality of uncertainty that characterizes the negotiation of emergent crisis situations:**

   You will be asked to do things you are not expert in.

   You will be paired with people very different from you.

   You will travel to areas of town you are not familiar with.

   You will be asked to do tasks that do not let you attach to a concrete or specific role.
You will be asked to do more than is humanly possible in an incredibly short period of time.

These principles were derived from the intersection of Jack’s experience training Hostage Negotiators and Rachel’s approach to creating collaborative theater. A mutual goal in our work is to achieve individual and group active listening, and to have everyone working toward a common goal that they perceive is more important than any individual stakeholder’s goals. You check your ego at the door and you open yourself to listen to a situation with all of your senses. Engaging the senses was our key to starting on this final section of collaboration.

As mentioned above, the bedrock of Jack’s training for hostage negotiators is active listening. In the following section, he outlines the core ideas he conveys to his colleagues and those entering his field.

**Jack: Core Concepts of Hostage Negotiation**

The most basic tools in a negotiator’s toolbox are active listening communication skills and empathy. Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. These skills help to lower emotions and start the process of developing rapport. Often when people talk to each other, they do not listen attentively. They are easily distracted, half listening, half (usually) thinking about something else.

The negotiator must give specialized attention to matters of importance. If an issue is important to the individual the negotiator is negotiating with, then the negotiator should consider that issue to be important, whether or not it is important to the negotiator.

The negotiator must possess the human qualities of compassion and common sense; these two critical traits, along with empathy, will greatly assist in managing high
emotion. Negotiators must have the ability to remain calm under emotionally demanding circumstances.

Demonstrating self-control is one of their most important attributes. The negotiator is expected to possess the ability to set his or her emotions aside during tense negotiations, be non-judgmental in their approach, and to do so, in most instances, in a harmonious fashion. They are required to bring a lifetime of experience to the table in order to manage potentially volatile situations, and be the calming voice of reason in the most unreasonable and chaotic of situations. Being a negotiator mandates being a mature and stable individual who can adapt to quickly changing circumstances. They do this in highly unpredictable situations, knowing that the stakes are high, understanding that if they fail in their negotiation attempt, lives could very well be lost.

Hostage negotiators generally utilize the behavioral change stairway model (Vecchi et al 2005) developed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The model has five steps that are to be completed in succession for a behavioral change to take place. For example, a negotiator must successfully listen (Step 1) before he or she can express empathy (Step 2). See the chart below for the five stages or steps. Likened to climbing stairs in a house, if you try to bypass a step or two to save time, it can be done, but it will take much more effort to get to the top destination.
A brief description of the five steps follows:

1. **Active Listening**: This first step establishes the foundation for the ensuing steps, and involves techniques aimed at establishing a relationship between the negotiator and person in crisis. Active Listening encourages conversation through the use of open ended questions, paraphrasing their understanding of the individual message, and attempts to identify and confirm emotions expressed by the individual, and it utilizes intentional pauses in the conversation for emphatic effect.

2. **Empathy**: The second step is to convey empathy to the individual in crisis. Empathy suggests the negotiator has an understanding of the perceptions and feelings of the other side. It is not the same as sympathy, which is to feel sorry for someone’s misfortune, and it does not mean that you necessarily agree with the individual. This is an important element in furthering the relationship between the negotiator and individual and can be accomplished through a tone of voice that is genuine and conveys interest and concern. The negotiator’s tone of voice indicates his or her attitude; this speaks louder than words. A calm, controlled demeanor may be more effective than a
brilliant argument. A common negotiator mistake when trying to use empathy wisely is the statement “I know exactly how you feel!” The fact is that we could never really know how someone is exactly feeling.

A personal note: I once said exactly this to a man standing on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge that links Brooklyn to Staten Island. The man standing on the girder of the bridge retorted that I don’t know exactly how he feels, because if I did, I would be standing right next to him wanting to jump! This man had no family, no friends, no job and no money; I had all of these, so how could I possibly know exactly how he feels; I can’t! I apologized to the man for my insensitive comment, which he accepted and started the process of developing rapport between us, where he ultimately came down off his perch and onto the roadway. I have since modified my approach after that powerful life-lesson encounter to say “I can only imagine how you might be feeling; can you tell me about it?”

3. Rapport: The third step is established through the negotiator’s active listening and expression of empathy, which will lead to increased trust between the parties. The negotiator continues to build rapport through conversation that focuses on face saving for the other side, positive reframing of the situation, and exploring areas of common ground.

4. Influence: Once rapport has been firmly established, the negotiator is in a position to begin to make suggestions to the other side, to explore potential and realistic options to the conflict, and to consider the likely alternatives available to the individual.

5. Behavioral Change: The final step is dependent upon how thoroughly and prudently the negotiator passed through the first four steps. If the negotiator has established a solid relationship with the individual in crisis, then he or she will be able
to propose solutions to the conflict that will, hopefully, effect the desired behavioral change.

It is important not to try to skip any of the steps. As indicated, you can do this — but the overall effort will be that much greater. When negotiators push too hard for a “quick resolve”, then the other side will push back equally as hard, by saying NO, I’m not ready yet! — or by doing something worse.

The project Jack and I were developing arrived at the all-inclusive title, *Emotional Competence in Policing Project*. However, emotions are a bit of a red herring to build a training upon, as they don’t help build reliable technique. They are subjective, fleeting and very difficult to standardize. In theater and other performance training, you learn that trying to create or to perform an emotion itself is a dead end. There are many different pathways into generating the *opportunity* for an emotion to arise, either in the audience or in the performers. However, emotion itself is a useless tool in the staging of a play, because it is an unpredictable by-product of a character’s identifiable situated actions. If, by contrast, we can identify the given circumstances of a character, then we can identify or even manipulate where someone’s actions can lead to a particular outcome.

We don’t need to apply psychological labels to our experiences when we could just pay attention to the impact of the given circumstances on a person, or a group of people in an environment. Because we actually sense things, because we have the input from all of our senses coming in and affecting our beings, we don’t need to think about how we emote in a situation. Instead we can concentrate on the input that’s registering. That becomes a more practical, level playing field. We can see what in our environment affects us bodily, and then move our awareness of our perceptions further in and then further out, to help tune ourselves into understanding what we’re working with in any interpersonal situation.
Jack and I found our “in” to the experiential learning sessions to be focusing on different ways of tuning-in. Our first three sessions focused on the individual, guiding participants toward a greater understanding of their own perceptions, and of how these inform their behavior and perspectives. The final three sessions steered the group toward looking at interpersonal awareness, their perspectives in a social setting, and called on participants to apply their tools of awareness to different contexts. We arrived at a point in the fifth session in which the students themselves declared that the only way to navigate these paths was through compassion — a word we had not yet mentioned. Yet this was where we were intending to arrive. The last session focused on compassion in crisis.
Active Listening Always

Teniece Divya Johnson

Active listening always
Impacts the quality of our relationships
Listening is a skill that takes much practice
Much like a gymnast practicing back flips
Or any sport to become the first round draft pick

Active Listening always builds trust
No defensive backlash, only truth and just (ice)
This will help Get –to- the- point
No need to go around in circles that cause confusion
We need those revolutions to find solutions

Your eyes may tell you one thing
Your ears will share another
Your instinct whispers truth
Patience, Practice and
Wisdom reveal what lies undercover

Freedom beats fear
Release the ego that may cloud causing confusing
Your vulnerability allows
the vibrations to flow unobstructed
– all energies connected
When you give 100% attention
Your eyes may tell you one thing
Your ears will share another
Your instinct whispers truth
Patience, Practice and
Wisdom reveal what lies undercover

Imagine a situation
Where all parties at the end
Are better off and giving thanks
Now that’s a win win