

# TO FACE OR NOT

One of the most common, difficult and dangerous decisions made by the crisis negotiator and tactical (or on-scene) commander is whether to expose the negotiator to a face-to-face meeting with the hostage-taker. This tactic has advantages and hazards (Figure 1). The danger usually outweighs the expeditious advantages. This mode of negotiations is far from the preferred way of communicating with an armed hostage-taker and is not commonly done (Report 1983; San Jose 1994). However, the first responder to a siege often goes face-to-face (Dolan and Fusilier 1989; San Jose 1993). Typically the first responder sets the tone for the contacts that follow. If he or she does not negotiate from a protected position, subsequent negotiators may have difficulty when they insist on providing the hostage-taker with a crisis phone to ensure the safety of everyone involved (Dolan and Fusilier 1989).

For the purpose of this article, face-to-face negotiations means talking to the hostage-taker from a position that does not afford the negotiator adequate and immediate cover.

There is a history of this tactic in our legacy. One of the earliest accounts of face-to-face negotiations in the United States occurred in October 1859 during the siege at Harpers Ferry. After his ill-conceived and poorly implemented plan to initiate a slave rebellion, John Brown held a few dozen townspeople hostage in the armory fire station and attempted to negotiate their freedom. The face-to-face negotiator was U.S. Army Lt. J.E.B.

Stuart, under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee, who was also in charge of a detachment of U.S. Marines who became his tactical team. After protracted negotiations, Stuart gave the signal and the Marines attacked. They captured John Brown and rescued the hostages. The telephone had not yet been invented at that time, but had Robert E. Lee known the following points in 1859, he might not have approved face-to-face negotiations with John Brown.

In the course of 25 years of lectures and discussions with experienced FBI and police crisis negotiators, the following 19 points regarding face-to-face

“ **One of the most common, difficult and dangerous decisions made by the crisis negotiator and tactical (or on-scene) commander is whether to expose the negotiator to a face-to-face meeting with the hostage-taker.** ”

negotiations have been developed. They are intended as guidelines and should be reviewed by the decision-making team prior to deciding whether to allow the exposure of the crisis negotiator to possible hostile fire.

Figure 1

## Advantages and hazards of face-to-face crisis negotiations

Telephone conversations	Face-to-face meetings
Safety of the negotiator ensured on the phone Easier to say no or be evasive Can conclude contact quickly	Ensured only with SWAT support Can read each other's body language Must walk back
Can initiate contact quickly Secondary negotiator is there for immediate help	Must safely set up each meeting Primary may be alone
Electronic problems can help conclude conversations Recording is not a problem Line can always be open	Limited excuses to conclude conversations Recording requires wires Gain intelligence only when talking
Controlled interruptions Weapons irrelevant Location irrelevant	Uncontrolled environment Weapons a problem Location specified

# TO FACE

BY TOM STRENTZ

**“ How well have you assessed your anxiety? If your inner voice is telling you that this is not a good idea, it isn't. That voice may be a subconscious alarm to dangers you cannot fully articulate.**

Before even considering such a response, it is important for the negotiator to know the strengths and limitations of the tactical element of the crisis response team. Cross training is an excellent way to accomplish this. Again, going face-to-face is a tactical move and must have the approval and support of the tactical team. Further, once the plan is in place the negotiator cannot make changes, like going a few feet further or straying off the prescribed path agreed to by the tactical element. To do so invites disaster (Ragsdale 2012).

Face-to-face crisis negotiations are generally considered a deviation from the usual police practice in resolving a hostage crisis (Strentz and Birge 1994) and these guidelines are offered as one means to help insure the safe and secure deviation from the norm. One way to help insure the safety of a tactic fraught with dangerous possibilities is to consider the following questions and guidelines prior to engaging in this act.

## Psychological aspects

1. One may find it necessary for tactical reasons to walk in harm's way to help ensure the preservation of human life.

Crisis negotiators should ask themselves why they are being told to do this. Is it expedient, an emergency or is it the ego of the negotiator that is the motivating force? It may be more expedient to walk up to and speak with a hostage-taker. If the decision to face an armed adversary is motivated by deep-seated psychological needs of the negotiator to prove his or her bravery, insanity or to exhibit suicidal tendencies, the telephone is a better tactic.

Who suggested this method and what were their reasons? Why is it being considered now instead of later? Was it suggested earlier and completed or rejected? If so, how and why? Did the hostage-taker suggest that both of you meet in the open? This is an anomaly — hostage-takers are usually wary about coming out into the open. Did the hostage-taker suggest that the negotiator stand in the open while he spoke from cover? Why do they want you to do this? Is this the act of a clear thinking person? Can the negotiator articulate the logical reasons for this deviation from the usual procedures? If not, one may be unnecessarily placing him or herself in danger.

2. If a face-to-face discussion is being considered, one does not want to venture out into the open too early. How

**“ Do not venture into harm's way with a weapon pointed at you. The weapon of the hostage-taker must not be in his hand, tied to him, on his person or in his view.**

well have you assessed the subject? Can you trust him? Have you been talking with him long enough to feel comfortable with him?

3. How did you learn his true name? If he lied to you about his name, how can you now trust him when he has promised where he will stand or that he would not shoot?

4. How well have you assessed your anxiety? If your inner voice is telling you that this is not a good idea, it isn't. That voice may be a subconscious alarm to dangers you cannot fully articulate. Further, if you are not comfortable with it, then the hostage-taker may sense your insecurity and suspect a trap that could jeopardized continued negotiations and endanger your life.

## Personal considerations

5. Maintain eye contact with the hostage-taker as you approach and depart. Keep your eyes on him and keep other senses equally alert. This means walk up to him and then back away. Be clear on the path you are going to follow in and out. Do not deviate from this plan or path without prior tactical approval.

6. There are several body space considerations. Be clear on who will stand where. He should be coming out to meet you. Why is he willing to expose himself to potential unfriendly fire? If he will not come out, you should not go up.

7. Do not turn your back and walk away. This could be viewed by the hostage-taker as a social snub and is certainly a tactically unsound move. Even if he says

his weapon is not immediately available, can he really be trusted enough for you to turn your back on him, a potential killer, and casually walk away?

### Subject

8. Elicit a clear promise from him not to shoot. How does he respond to this request? If he equivocated in his response, you should delay your movement. A clear no, which is a direct answer to the question, from the hostage-taker is much more reassuring than a statement like, "I won't shoot if you don't." The emphasis here is on *clear*. This means he says, "I promise not to shoot." This does not mean, "I won't shoot if you don't. Do I look or sound like a person who would shoot? I have never shot a police officer before." Statements that place the responsibility for judging what he really means on others are unacceptable. There must be no doubt in your mind that he will not shoot. If you think he is going to hedge on his promise not to shoot, you should not go face-to-face. If the hostage-taker will not, or cannot, say he won't shoot, he is probably too unstable to face at this time.

9. Do not venture into harm's way with a weapon pointed at you. The weapon of the hostage-taker must not be in his hand, tied to him, on his person or in his view. He must trust the negotiator enough to separate himself from his weapon prior to coming out to the meeting. If he does not completely comply, do not continue. Go back and call again to make certain the subject understands the restrictions of this maneuver. The SWAT team must be positioned to cover you.

10. It is very dangerous to walk up to one of several hostage-takers. While the person with whom you are speaking may be unarmed and may have placed his weapon out of sight, are his associates equally harmless? Can you and he trust his associates? What guarantees can he provide that no one will shoot? Are such guarantees possible to enforce? Meeting face-to-

face with multiple hostage-takers is a very dangerous act and is not recommended.

11. Exchange physical descriptions. Assess his voice while he is describing himself. Do you know who he is and what he looks like? Do you know what he is wearing? What do you know about his hostages? Is he describing himself? Might you find out too late that the person on the porch is a victim and not the hostage-taker?

### Tactical

12. A hostage-taker with a bomb may be the most potentially dangerous person you can meet and talk with. It matters not if this bomb is real, fake or alleged. The use of a bomb in a hostage situation indicates premeditation. If the hostage-taker planned ahead enough to prepare a bomb, what other tactical plans

has he made? Is the face-to-face move a gesture of peace or a plan of escape? Does he want to surrender or could he be planning a suicide by police scenario? People with bombs are dangerous, may be suicidal and have a propensity toward violence (Strentz 1991).

13. Plan ahead. Have an escape plan. Visually walk the route and plan escapes as you move along the designated path. Discuss these moves with SWAT to ensure that they can provide protection. Be certain that you or command has coordinated your escape ideas with the tactical unit.

14. Establish a clear signal to the tactical unit to indicate trouble. Do not rely only on a radio. Be sure that your hand signal is obvious. Make sure it is so simple that no one will forget what it means when you signal.

I.D.F. launches grenades with exceptional GLS accuracy.

# BLOW THE DOOR. NOT YOUR COVER.

## MEPRO GLS

Self-Illuminated Day/Night  
Reflex Sight for 40mm  
Grenade Launchers

**Rapid Target  
Acquisition**

**Built-in Drift  
Compensation**

**No Batteries**

**No Switches**

**MIL-SPEC**

**Lightweight**

**Many Mounting Options**

**High First Hit Probability**



With first-shot-hit accuracy approaching an unprecedented 90%, this grenade launcher blows the doors off all others. With surprise being a key element of breaching, don't settle for a miss that will alert your target, jeopardize your mission and endanger your operatives.

**Call 631 880-3396,  
to learn more about faster  
and safer 40mm grenade  
breaching with the Mepro GLS.**



DEADLY. ACCURATE. INNOVATION.



Chosen by the I.D.F.  
Made in Israel.  
Trusted in America.

[www.themakogroup.com/tem](http://www.themakogroup.com/tem) | 631 880-3396 | [info@themakogroup.com](mailto:info@themakogroup.com) | [f](#)

The full line of Meprolight Optic Sights is available in the USA only from The Mako Group