

The Tacoma Police Department Hostage Negotiator Selection Process

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“So and so has the gift of gab. You should make them a negotiator....” I cannot count the times I’ve heard that phrase associated with hostage negotiations. As any seasoned negotiator can tell you, nothing could be further from the truth. Sure, negotiators need to be versed in many topics, and be quick to offer problem-solving solutions, and I certainly cannot deny that I know many negotiators who love to talk. But by trade, most good negotiators live the mantra of “active listening,” and always strive to “keep them talking.”

How do hostage negotiations teams identify and evaluate those officers who will excel at our trade without using “the gift of gab” as the prevailing litmus test? Team must define desired negotiator traits, and then test applicants based on those qualities. Tactical teams have been testing their prospective team members for as long as I can remember. They test specific skills for the job at hand; precision shooting, physical fitness, team commitment, etc. Based on this reality, negotiators should be tested as well.

Superior negotiators must have the ability to remain calm during emotionally demanding situations. Self-control constitutes one of the most critical attributes of an effective negotiator. Experience shows negotiators should be practiced and knowledgeable officers, as well as composed and articulate interviewers. Time commitment and availability are also significant considerations in selecting individual HNT members.

The application and selection method for the TPD HNT has evolved into a comprehensive evaluation and testing process. Using best police practices and current negotiator industry standards, we have developed an Assessment Center testing process.

Prior to the current selection method, TPD always relied upon applicant interest, known work history, team recommendations, and oral boards consisting of SWAT and HNT command. Although negotiator position openings in Tacoma are very rare (the opening described here is a result of team expansion), it was the general consensus of our HNT that we could do better.

Research and surveys of our peer Hostage Negotiator Teams revealed no other comprehensive examination process existed. Team meetings and individual negotiator input were essential in creating the testing and evaluation system. The job announcement, minimum qualifications, scenario scripts, and standardized rating forms were created. Actor guidelines were clearly spelled out. Safety and security concerns were also coordinated and reviewed.

We believe our process highlights the traits and skills a good negotiator must possess. It can be difficult to judge future performance as a negotiator without initial screening and testing. The purpose of the testing process is to gauge an applicant’s ability to reason and communicate effectively under stress conditions; therefore, applicants’ responses should be based upon their reasonableness, common sense, and ability to articulate, rather than knowledge of actual hostage negotiations techniques. However, additional common qualities of good negotiators can also be observed and identified, thereby helping the team evaluate applicants on their performance during the testing process.

Just as negotiators train using role playing techniques, these tactics can be employed in testing and selection processes. For instance, at the Tacoma Police Department, we have chosen two scenarios which represent typical negotiator responses in a large, urban environment. First, a “face to face negotiation”

with a suicidal individual, and secondly, a telephone negotiation with a barricaded domestic violence suspect. The dynamics of telephone negotiations are much different than those experienced in a “face to face” negotiation; therefore, both types of negotiations should be observed.

Each scenario lasts 10-15 minutes, and HNT applicants are not expected to immediately resolve a situation by employing standard negotiation methods. However, they are evaluated in terms of basic officer safety procedures, active listening skills, establishing rapport, and the ability to calmly respond to a crisis situation.

As stated earlier, applicants are not expected to have any training or knowledge of actual hostage negotiator techniques, but should demonstrate the basic ability to deal calmly and effectively with the crisis at hand. Therefore, hostage scenarios are not used during our testing process. Scenario evaluators (TPD HNT members) rate each applicant on a standard form that delineates positive and negative negotiator traits, as well as basic officer safety concerns.

The Tacoma Police Department is somewhat unique, as our city boasts a 5,979-foot suspension bridge, which is an attraction for suicidal individuals (jumpers), with towers stretching 467 feet above Puget Sound. Our negotiators have, in essence, become cross trained in high angle rescues/negotiations. Therefore, the bridge climb has also been incorporated into the HNT testing process. Applicants are fitted with climbing harnesses and equipment, then given safety briefings and instruction prior to making the climb. Also climbing with the applicants are experienced HNT members, and Tacoma Police urban high angle/search and rescue team members. Medical aid is also staged in the area for emergency situations. Applicants are evaluated on their ability to handle the stress, anxiety, and physical challenges associated with climbing the bridge.

Once the scenarios and bridge climb are completed, applicants complete a written exercise identifying the SWAT and HNT chain of command, and specific elements of the team. The applicants are then asked to describe a specific incident that best illustrates their ability to communicate and de-escalate/resolve a situation. Written exercises are assessed by the oral board members using the applicant’s knowledge of basic SWAT/HNT protocol, and their ability to articulate their responses to real world situations. Evaluators do not expect applicants to have intimate knowledge of SWAT/HNT protocols, but they are expected to be familiar with the police department’s Manual of Rules and Procedures regarding SWAT/HNT.

Finally, the applicant sits through an oral board consisting of the SWAT and HNT leaders and two team negotiators. The oral board interview includes follow-up questions and clarification to the written exercise. It also addresses several negotiator specific duties, such as the ability to respond to after-hour callouts, and the capability to set up a sniper shot, if required. Lastly, the applicant is given the opportunity to express any specific skills, training, or abilities that would make them the top candidate for the job.

All facets of the assessment center occur in succession, creating a full day of stressful activities. The mental and physical fatigue experienced by the applicants mimic the events of a protracted SWAT callout. Multiple times throughout the day, applicants experience high stress, followed by periods of dynamic inactivity. The applicant’s ability to continue functioning at a high level of competence while remaining professional and focused is also an evaluated factor.

Upon successful conclusion of the testing process, the HNT evaluates the assessment center scores, work history, and demeanor of each applicant, and ranks them on an eligibility list. Team openings are filled from the current list for one year. All applicants ranked on the list are eligible to attend the WSCJTC Basic Hostage Negotiations Course.

Once selected to the team, applicants will serve a probationary period to be determined by the SWAT Commander and the HNT Leader. During their probationary period, they are assigned to a senior member of the HNT for evaluation and training, similar to the FTO-Student Officer model. New members train with the team monthly, and assume HNT duties as required by team leadership and their negotiator FTO.

Creating complex training scenarios has always required a great deal of planning, coordination, and hard work. Incorporating the other elements of the assessment center certainly complicates the process. Watching candidates perform in a training environment prior to selection is a great tool of any team looking for perspective members. And it sure beats giving the job to the guy with the “gift of gab”!

End Note

Any agency wishing to learn more about the process Tacoma has developed can contact HNT Sgt. Griswold for more information at dgriswol@cityoftacoma.org.