

Negotiating With An Answering Machine
By Officer Bruce Wind, Retired
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The sound of an answering machine greeting, "Hi, we can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave a message at the sound of the beep, we'll call you back", does not have to be the 'death nail' in your negotiations. The answering machine can actually be the signal that you have a captive audience and this can work to your benefit.

Recently, here in Seattle, I have had several negotiations where the answering machine was on. Over the past few years I have developed a plan for 'negotiating' with answering machines. It must work, because we have always obtained the desired result.

First, when you hear the machine answer, don't get frustrated. Don't assume that you will now have to develop some other means of communication, or worse, go tactical.

Second, keep your messages short, remember, the tape supply is limited. Once you run out of tape, then you may have to go to plan B.

Third, your intelligence gathering is now more vital than ever. You will not have the luxury of seeing which subjects will arouse your suspect by talking to him. So you must depend on your intelligence information to find a 'hot button'.

Fourth, since you're not talking to the suspect, say something on the tape, which will leave a burning desire by the suspect to respond. We all want to tell our side of the story, say something, which will make him respond.

An incident our team recently negotiated is a perfect example.

A 38-year-old male, separated from his wife, had visitation rights with his six-year-old son. The suspect returned the son late which prompted a call from the ex-wife telling the police that he had an outstanding domestic violence related felony warrant. The suspect fled taking his son with him and found refuge at his current girlfriend's house. The girlfriend also had an eight year old daughter in the house and when police arrived to contact the suspect, the current girlfriend fled the house, leaving the suspect with the eight and six year old children.

We treated this as a 'barricaded suspect', not believing the children were really in any harm. After 'denying origination' on the phone and establishing a new number, my first phone call was answered by the machine. I told the suspect I was there to talk, and that I was his key to resolving this problem. I ended the call telling him I would call back shortly. After extensive intelligence gathering from numerous sources we learned that much of what the ex-wife had told us was not exactly the truth. She had made him out to be some kind of monster, when in fact, he was a guy 'down on his luck' and wanting to spend some time with his son. The relationship with the son was the key to our continued negotiations, although through the answering machine.

Of course by this time, the field commander was pressing us for some indication of how negotiations were progressing. As taught by Dr. Schlossberg, I told them we were experiencing 'dynamic inactivity', which never fails to leave the supervisors somewhat impressed; yet baffled.

During the subsequent phone calls I would mention some of the 'accusations' being made by his ex-wife. Accusations, which I knew, would prompt the suspect to want to respond.

About the third or fourth phone call, I mentioned to the suspect, on tape of course, that I was getting pressure from my 'bosses' to resolve this situation. I casually mentioned that if I was not able to succeed, the 'tactical guys' would have to come in and get him. Saying this, I painted a mental image of helmeted officers in black uniforms kicking in the door, with big guns and handcuffs, and this was not what he wanted his son to see. I told him that if he walked out the front door he would be taken to a waiting patrol car, and his son would not know the severity of the situation. As a sidebar, I mentioned to him that we were unsure if the 'felony warrant' was still good. There was some information from his current girlfriend that his Dad may have 'taken care' of the warrant. In fact, this may have been true, because I could not locate the warrant in my Mobile Data Terminal. I casually mentioned this before hanging up.

I repeated this same basic phone call numerous times. I kept my phone calls short and to the point. Each time I would mention the 'mental picture' his son would retain if the 'swat guys' came in to get him, and each time I mentioned that I was unsure if the warrant was still good. In short I played on his relationship with his son and gave him some hope that the King County Jail was not in his near future. Briefly, I would also mention something his ex-wife had said about him, hoping he would be forced to respond.

We spaced the phone calls so that he had time to think about what I said. We had no way to know he was listening while I was talking, but we assumed he was. I believe the suspects in our negotiations want to solve the problem as much as we do, we just need to help them come to a decision and show them the way out.

Several hours after I had arrived, the suspect finally answered during one of my taped messages. The suspect was anxious to respond to his ex-wife's allegations, which I gave him the opportunity to do. Venting can be so cleansing. He agreed with me that he did not want his son to see any 'violence' and we negotiated the surrender procedure. He made mention that his father was going to take care of his warrant, but realized he was going to jail that evening whether the warrant was good or not.

The standoff ended peaceably.

When negotiating through an answering machine, keep the following in mind;

- Don't get frustrated. Consider the answering machine as a challenge and assume the suspect is listening.
- Keep your messages short.
- Your intelligence gathering is now more vital than ever. Tell your intelligence negotiators that you are looking for something that will arouse the suspect.
- Leave messages, which will cause the suspect to respond. Remember that we all want to have our side of the story heard.

That said, the next time you hear, 'leave a message at the beep', do just that. Plan your message carefully and negotiating with an answering machine can be a success without much frustration.

Biography
Officer Bruce A. Wind, Retired
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Officer Bruce Wind is a thirty-six veteran of the Seattle Police Department.

Officer Wind has spent his entire career 'working the streets'. Assignments in Patrol, Canine Unit, and the Street Narcotics Team, have kept him at the heart of Seattle's criminal activity.

He was a member of the Hostage Negotiations Team for approximately twenty-four years, during which time he has negotiated a variety of incidents and was the department's senior crisis negotiator. He has received numerous commendations because of his ability to resolve 'high profile' incidents through negotiations.

Officer Wind is a graduate of the FBI's Crisis Negotiations program and has served as an advisor to the FBI during the creation of the National Council of Negotiation Associations.

In addition, he is a certified instructor through the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Center and a nationally published author in the art of police negotiations.

Past responsibilities as a Patrol Officer include; Field Training Officer, Evidence Specialist, and Crime Scene Photographer. He is also a member of the Peer Counselor Group for the Seattle Police Department and continues as such even in retirement.

As a charter member of the Western States Hostage Negotiators' Association, Officer Wind is also the founder and editor of their official newsletter, the Open Line, and serves as WSHNA's Director of Communications.

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