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Negotiation And The Fiji Coup

Most of us watched the recent goings on in Fiji in disbelief. We found it odd that terrorists could come and go from the parliamentary compound, that a hostage was given "Bereavement Leave" by her captors, and that the gun-men can roast a pig in a barbecue like setting among journalists on the grass outside. Were it not for the guns pointed at people being held against their will, the atmosphere might have passed for a sideshow.

You don't have to be an expert to see many of the mistakes that were made in the handling of the coup in Fiji. Even, our government called upon officials there to bring in seasoned counter terrorist negotiators from overseas.

EXPERTS WOULD HAVE HAD HOSTAGES FREED MUCH EARLIER

The first thing a hostage negotiator does is seal off the area. That is routine. The army did this only towards the end. Even so, the terrorists seemed to be allowed to come and go without being arrested. The negotiator asserts his or her own power before establishing a dialogue. This is done by cutting off electricity, water, and any other services to the building. These and needed supplies are then used as currency – every time terrorists make a demand, or request a service, it costs them the release of a hostage. This is a basic of negotiation known as "Trading Off". By itself this tactic would have freed at least some of the hostages very early – perhaps even half of them if the first trade off involved releasing all of the women first. But in reality, not a single hostage was released for many weeks, except for the one already mentioned who negotiated her own bereavement leave.

Some may wonder whether cutting off the utilities is so aggressive that it may endanger the hostages. However, it is made clear to terrorists that any harm done to the hostages will increasingly put their demands in jeopardy, and risk

a full tactical assault. The negotiator assumes those who hurt hostages will likely kill them, so risking lives in a full assault may be warranted. This assumption is made clear to terrorists as a warning. It all shows the hostage taker that the negotiator has power too, with the ability to reward or punish.

INDULGENCE NOT THE ANSWER

Considering terrorist demands at the level of the Great Chiefs, and allowing media interviews is asking for prolonged trouble. This has been proved since officials were doing all of the giving while George Speight kept adding new demands, grabbing the proverbial mile when offered an inch. Terrorists love the media too, because they use it to promote their cause.

Hostage negotiators generally do not get into discussions over political ideology even if they sympathise with the cause. Any political demands are out of police hands, and negotiation is therefore centred around what the law is, rather than what it should be. This makes use of other negotiation tactics known as: "Legitimate Power" and use of "Limited Authority". In other words, "You can only negotiate with us, and we do not have the power to even consider such demands. So the only negotiation remaining is how it might go well for you if you release the hostages".

WHO DID APPLY NEGOTIATION PRINCIPLES

In spite of his dubious background and theories about others pulling his strings, Speight seemed to be the only one applying negotiation principles: he simply kept saying, "No". Officials then ran around trying to come up with a better and better offer. The final outcome closely resembled acceptance of most of his demands. Further, Speight seemed to be prepared to wear them down by refusing to worry about "Time Pressure" appearing to be in complete control.

He also used three obvious negotiation tactics combined known as, "The Claytons Contract", "Nibbling", and "The Salami".

The "Claytons Contract" (remember the drink?) is the "Contract you have when you don't have a contract". The demands/criteria keep changing. The idea is to either wear the other party down, or put the other party off while hiding another agenda. Those subjected to this tactic have to ensure there are no further demands before they agree to negotiate further. Any demands added later could be used to further damage Speight's credibility and support if the media are managed properly. To some extent that did happen. In any case, the army response should either be, "No", or demand for a further "Trade Off" before considering anything new. Speight would learn that every time he demands something new, it costs him another hostage, or other concession.

"Nibbling" is a last minute demand put forward just when a deal is about to be tied up. This catches the other party at a weak moment – they think it is over,

and are now likely to give that last minute concession just to get closure. Seasoned negotiators will simply respond to a "Nibble" with "No".

Use of "The Salami" plays havoc with one's emotions and expectations. It assures the other party, "We have nearly reached an agreement, but there is just one sticking point". Then they proceed to go for a "Slice of the Salami" by introducing a demand masked as a barrier. The other party then has to run around trying to satisfy the demand. Just when they have done that, they get another "slice" calved off – "That's good, we are making progress, but there is this other issue ...". And so it goes on. The one employing "The Salami" will wind up getting everything he/she wants even if it is one slice at a time.

VITAL REQUIREMENT IN ANY NEGOTIATION

There are dozens of other negotiation tactics that could have been used in Fiji. Above all, authorities needed INFORMATION. Information on:

- The terrorists. Who are they, how many are there, and are they likely to carry out their threats?
- The layout of the compound, and possible ways to get in (and out).
- The number of and state of the hostages.
- Where are the hostages and their captors located?
- What kinds of weapons are the terrorists armed with?
- What is the mental condition of the terrorists hour by hour?
- What emotional pressure points do the gun-men have?

To be fair, authorities had some of this information. How they use it is another matter. How can they get such information?

- Talking to the terrorists and to people on the outside who know them.
- Demanding the right to talk with the hostages.
- Debriefing those who were released early.
- Demanding the right to send in medical personnel to check the hostages who can survey the interior and report back.
- Technology such as microphone guns to listen, planting of hidden cameras through covert operations, or use of microwave technology to see inside.

With sufficient information a surprise assault plan can be plotted as a back up in case negotiations fail, giving the negotiator more options even though one of these is a drastic one.

WHAT MAY HAVE BEEN MISSING

It has been said by commentators the odd way this show was handled was indicative of the will of the people of Fiji. Many sympathized with Speight's cause experiencing conflict in dealing with him as a criminal. The question is, how would a hostage situation be handled if no political aspirations are involved – say if it involved a lone gun-man with a personal grievance?

Some feel Speight should be made the head police negotiator of Fiji, since he appears to be the only one who knows how to do it. And who knows – they may need his help for a future crisis. The handling of this only encourages future acts of terrorism. Besides, word has it that prior to the attempted coup, he was ordering books from Amazon.com about “Power Negotiating”.

Funny how the army got him in the end over arms charges though. His apparent breaking of aspects of the agreement null and voids any obligations agreed to by the military. Perhaps the military have also learned a thing or two about negotiation. Cynics may say they deliberately employed a tactic simply known as a “Bluff” to get Speight into the open, and the hostages freed.

For comprehensive training on this subject, ask about, “Negotiate Results”, a two day high intensity programme provided by Advantage. This programme consists of over thirty tactics, and counter tactics, including those used by counter terrorist negotiators. It also subjects participants to pressure situations through in-depth business negotiation simulations. This is a challenging, but enjoyable experience with profitable outcomes.