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What can mediators learn from crisis negotiators?

Nadja Alexander (Editor) (Singapore International Dispute Resolution Academy)/May 10, 2014

Next week I am going to interview one of Hong Kong's leading police negotiators, Dr Gilbert Wong, Commanding Officer of the Police Negotiation Cadre (PNC). When I first emailed with Gilbert, I was struck by the signature line of his email: "Who Cares Wins". While it could be a mediator's tagline, it is in fact, the motto of the PNC.

As the **South China Morning Post** reported this month, most of Gilbert's negotiations are with people who are so emotionally distraught and without hope that they are threatening to commit suicide. Now, in anyone's book, that's a tough negotiation.

So what is the key to crisis negotiating? According to the SCMP, it's first about identifying what's important for people — and doing so quickly. What is the unfulfilled wish, the hidden desire, the deep human need of the outwardly successful financial executive about to jump off a corporate rooftop?

How does a police negotiator bring people in such desperately dangerous situations to a place where they can recognise that there is another perspective, even if they don't agree with it; that they have a choice, however limited; that there is hope, however slight; that there is a future, however uncertain.

In mediation we may find ourselves trying to assist parties to make similar shifts, although hopefully without the life-and-death urgency of our police colleagues. We encourage parties to consider other perspectives, to re-evaluate their understanding of the conflict, to take responsibility and make a decision to move forward into a future they perceive as less than ideal. There seem to be many parallels to the work of crisis negotiators.

As mediators, we have inherited the tagline "Win-Win". I'm wondering what we can learn from the police negotiators' "Who Cares Wins".

So, if you are reading this blog posting and have some burning questions or themes you would like me to explore with Dr Gilbert Wong next week, please leave a comment on this posting. I'll be reporting back to the Blog next month.