

The power of negotiation in criminal crises

Patrick Lagadec talks to Christophe Caupenne, head of negotiators in the French elite special operations force, who discusses concerns that hostage takings and sieges might escalate, and how the human dimension must take greater precedence in planning and in society



CHRISTOPHE CAUPENNE HAS JUST published a book on his experiences and thoughts as Chief of Negotiation within RAID – the elite SWAT team of the French Police. Patrick Lagadec (PL) takes up the questions.

PL: From the beginning you underline that this unit would not have been formed – or become so essential – but for the presence of visionary leaders who dared to implement such novel practices.

Christophe Caupenne (CC): Such an innovation called for a breakthrough in our thoughts and current mentality. The traditional logic was that of intervention based on force or violence. We have now switched to a much more peaceful way to resolve such crises. Accepting the negotiators within the heart of high risk operational teams was an admission that to win in such crises ‘soft’ solutions had to be given priority. This proved very effective and rewarding: in more than 80 per cent of cases, our negotiators have succeeded in defusing crises.

Obviously, such a watershed also required a fundamental change within the institution and its leadership.

The first requirement was that of trust. Before the new negotiation team was set up, commanders took all decisions and led the negotiations as best they could. Now the commander has to delegate a substantial part of the crisis handling to trained negotiators although, of course, they still report to him or her. However, this act of delegation involves a solid bond of trust between

Commandant Christophe Caupenne says that the French thinking on hostage situations and sieges has changed – so called ‘soft’ solutions involving specially trained negotiators have led to crises being defused in 80 per cent of cases

FROM THE UNKNOWN

Spearheaded by CRJ Editorial Advisory Board Member Dr Patrick Lagadec, who is Director of Research at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, France, this series is devoted to exploring the challenging issues characterised by 21st Century crises. The aim is to go beyond our usual mindsets, helping to clarify pitfalls, redesigning the new landscapes that must be considered and showcasing creative moves that will help to feed positive dynamics. The goal is not to find ready-made solutions, but to stimulate and feed new ideas, new approaches and new methods of thinking

the commander and the negotiators.

The second requirement is for the commander to act like a conductor of an orchestra. The commander cannot do everything and must delegate. If he or she understands and appreciates the benefit derived from a specific unit being in charge of negotiations, this allows him or her to improve the overall management of the crisis, allowing time for reflection and analysis; in essence, to improve their leadership of the situation. What the commander loses in terms of operational micromanagement is gained in terms of them being able to steer the event, becoming the conductor of the orchestra. Such mutations appear all the more vital for the mega-crises that are emerging today.

PL: So how can you avoid lagging a crisis behind the current one?

CC: Vigilance on all fronts. Let's consider some of them. We must not become trapped by standards; this is a general problem in the risk and safety arena: formal norms are established, and people can tend to forget that excellence does not stem from the juxtaposition of rules, methods, and PowerPoint presentations. Excellence emanates from systemic and human competence. In our specific field, with the surge of crises such as Beslan and Bombay, both massive hostage takings, each country understands that it must develop a certain standard of response (SWAT teams, electronic devices, rapid support teams, etc). But perfection on paper does not equate to real efficiency, which calls for effective training, team cohesion, leadership capacity, and continuous dynamic adaptation and anticipation.

Ethnocentrism can be seriously misleading. Each country has its own culture. Some hold individual human life as sacred; others have a different vision – the victim becomes a combatant (willing or otherwise), pressed into the service of state security. Here again, a quick reading of formal standards leads to the

risk of very serious mistakes being made.

The public psyche becoming numbed to hostage situations is another serious risk. For instance, there has been a resurgence in 'boss-napping'. Individual citizens – even non criminals – might come to feel that it is permissible to act in an illegal manner, owing to a creeping dynamic of contagious imitation. These last few years have seen an increased focus on unconventional and asymmetric conflicts. This could have a drip effect, eventually justifying violence in some people's minds as a legitimate recourse against perceived wrongs, where violent action by an individual or small group is seen by some – however misguidedly – as the underdog fighting the oppressor, the weak standing up to the strong. In effect, some might come to perceive violence as a legitimate means to resolve societal issues.

BEHAVIOURAL EPIDEMIC

If we do not return to the concept of respecting others and if disciplines such as human resources in industry do not re-examine their practices and management, if schools do not improve the way they educate and treat their pupils, there is a high risk that we will be confronted by a surge in behavioural or antisocial epidemics. This surge, in itself, could become an accepted feature of our communities over time, developing into a systemic crisis for societal life.

Also, we must not succumb to the primacy of the unthinkable, as demonstrated by the attacks of September 11 and the Mumbai terrorist shooting. Media attention demands and fosters ever more exceptional events. Hence, we must

“Some hold individual human life as sacred; others have totally different vision – in such incidents, the victim becomes a combatant (willing or otherwise), pressed into the service of state security”

anticipate an escalation of terrorist acts into ever more spectacular atrocities. This is the new scenery of modern terrorism, and there will be no limit: we have to prepare for the worst.

IT and networks are a further area to keep an eye on. Hostage taking in the future will use computer technology, and everything that it controls, as a Trojan horse to conduct attacks on economies, industry and societies. This means we will see a shift from a physical or individual



For 11 years, Commandant Christophe Caupenne has been the head of the Negotiation Unit within RAID (Research, Assistance, Intervention, Dissuasion), the National Intervention Unit of the French Police. He is the National Co-ordinator of all police negotiators in France, who are trained in his unit before their appointment at a regional level. This experienced policeman has been involved in more than 300 operations involving hostage rescues, sieges and suicide incidents, both in France and abroad. Christophe Caupenne's book is: Négociateur au Raid, Préface d'Amaury de Hauteclouque, Le Cherche Midi, Paris, 2010

victim to an institutional or systemic victim.

PL: This negotiation team development has been a major watershed. What kind of other new developments should we consider or implement now?

CC: At the very moment when we see the triumph of standards in our operations, the human dimension has to be totally revisited and reintroduced as being central to our systems. The human element should not be seen as bringing disorder or as a brake, holding things back. In fact, it is the vital element – including within rescue teams. The human factor brings strength to our organisations, systems, actions and strategies. In this arena, a strong effort will be necessary: we have to develop the number of local negotiators who are able to solve all sorts of conflicts from domestic, to criminal and emotional.

It would be a trap, here too, to consider that everything can be solved by centralised bodies, operating with globalised theoretical formats. The more systems develop in complexity, the more decentralised must be the responses and the more empowerment must be cultivated – with a strong development of, and focus upon, the value of a human being.