

Brawner's Experience on Taking the Crisis Cold Call

Anyone who has been trained to take the “first call” understands the stress involved with answering the phone. Well, this is NOT a primer on taking the first call. It is, however, a quick look at the general nature of the person on the other end of the line and how you can be better prepared to meet their needs. Best of all, I have found that these principles are fairly universal. They apply not only to crisis victims, but to people in general as you deal with those facing tragedy and loss.

REMEMBER: This kind of phone call is generally NOT a hostage or extortion call from an antagonist. This kind of call comes from a person caught in a circumstance or situation requiring you to work as a safety or security consultant; not a hostage negotiator.

Whatever the reason for the call, I hope this little resource is a blessing to you!

Their Perception Is Reality

When the phone rings and the person on the other end of the line is under stress caused by duress, their perception of a situation is what matters at that time.

Regardless of your background, experience, or perspective, it is critical in those first few moments to see and understand the perception of the situation from caller. Probing questions like: “What do you think is going to happen next?” or “What is your perception of the current situation?” and “In your opinion, What do you think the best way to resolve the situation?”

Establish Values

It is critical to establish values early in a crisis call. Most recently in Haiti, a missionary cold caller continued to say “We want to get back to the USA immediately. I will pay for armed security to take us to the airport...” The client was associating ‘home’ with ‘safe’. The problem was, he was actually placing himself (and his team) at greater risk by wanting to be on the roads in the middle of the night in order to arrive at an airport that was closed until morning. I asked the client directly: “What is more important: getting home, or staying safe?” He paused, considered, and said “staying safe.” This common value allowed me to direct him toward a course of action that both kept him and his team safe and got him and his team home without further incident.

Set Common Goals

Once values are agreed on, setting realistic goals for both individuals and teams is critical. Some common goals to set should include the safety/security of the team, accountability of team members, and actions that allow for de-escalation or to disengage from a situation. Don't forget to establish communication goals that ensure regular communication—and redundancy in communication if possible.

Exude Confidence but Maintain Your Humility.

When your phone rings with someone else's crisis, the caller may well find comfort in your past experience in security, law enforcement, military, etc. But NEVER let that experience come across as arrogance (bad) or dominating/controlling (worse). More than once I have had individuals call me and say: “Our last consultant was experienced, but he came off as arrogant and controlling...”

Remember the 80's action movie *Die Hard* with Bruce Willis? Remember the scene when Agent Johnson and Special Agent Johnson from the FBI arrive on the scene with all their bravado and swagger and “take charge” of the situation? Yeah... Best to leave 80's cop attitude and persona where you found them; in the 1980s. Nobody liked that attitude then; they certainly don't appreciate it now.

I have found that if you balance confidence with humility it gets you a lot further than sheer bravado or a dominating spirit. As a follower of Jesus, I see this work being motivated by love. If so, then love is patient, kind, does not envy or boast; it is not proud, self-seeking or easily angered, and it does not dishonor others or keep a record of wrongs—all critical attributes in a crisis manager.

Minimize Social Media and ‘Prayer Blasts’

Friends, I can't say it enough: encourage those on the phone to stay off of social media during a crisis. More than once an email prayer blast or social media post was been picked up by media outlets and caused all sorts of headaches for those in the middle of a situation. When coaching those on the other end of the line about these matters, try to remain positive. Tell them what they CAN say instead of what they can't.

I try to help individuals avoid connecting the dots of what I call the “Triangle of Death” (connecting the dots of Who, Where, and When). These three pieces of information are what a government or criminal need to triangulate on a person. Help the caller by telling them, if they (MUST...) send out a prayer request: “Only share your regional location” (Central Asia, South America, etc.), or (better) ask for friends and loved one to: “Pray for an important unspoken prayer request.” Remember: the goal is to keep prayer requests “personal enough to connect; but general enough to protect...”