

Keep talking

When dealing with persons in crisis, the strategy for police negotiators is to keep the subject talking. If you examine the recordings of these negotiations, however, you will find that “talk” should be avoided. Two researchers, Rein Sikveland and Elizabeth Stokoe, collaborated with British police to analyse recordings of conversations between persons in crisis and crisis negotiators. They saw that negotiators often use “talk” to begin a conversation: “Can we talk about how you are?” But this often gets pushed back by the person in crisis: “No, I don’t want to talk” or “It’s not genuine action, man, you’re just talking”.

Persons in crisis resist the request to talk because, as Stokoe points out, cultural idioms encourage us to put little value on “talk”. After all, “talk is cheap” and “talking the talk” is less meaningful than “walking the walk”. However, a single word substitution could be enough to save a life.

Perhaps because we do not have equivalent cultural idioms, “speak” seems to work. In real conversations between a negotiator and person in crisis, when the negotiator says “speak” (“I wanna come down and I wanna speak to you...”) they get their desired response. In some cases, the person in crisis interrupts the negotiator to begin talking. Despite being near-synonyms, one word is loaded with context that makes it ineffective in these scenarios, while the other is free of those associations.

GROUP 2

Being willing

Mediators have also found power in words to turn around someone who is disengaged. These professional facilitators might assist in business negotiations or family disputes. They are experts in making sure conversations reach as positive a conclusion as possible. In the UK, for example, all people in child custody disputes must first attempt to reach an agreement through a family mediation service.

Usually, an initial call with a mediator follows a set pattern. After introductions, the mediator explains how their service works. They then ask: "Does that sound like something you and the other party want to do?" To which the caller might reply: "Oh, I'm not sure the other party will ever agree to this, they are very difficult to deal with." From a position of looking like the conversation might be shut down, the mediators can turn it around with: "Okay, but you would be willing to come in for a preliminary meeting." "Oh of course," replies the caller, "I was never not willing to try."

The caller is probably not too enthused by the prospect of speaking to a mediator, and has shown that they do not really want to go down this route. Often when we do not want to do something we look to blame someone or something else. Here, they have pinned the blame on the other party – the other parent of the child.

It is effective for several reasons; it is not a question, it is a statement, and it allows the caller to frame themselves as a good person while not having to backtrack on blaming the other party.

"We look at the way things are put by each party – the way they describe their problems – to move from negatives to positives," says Jan Coulton, a professional mediator. "People in conflict can be very focused on the negatives. But when you look there are a lot of matters in common, often the children. They love the kids. We hang the pegs on the positives."

Is there something else?

As with “speak” and “talk”, one word can make all the difference. In one study, physicians in the US were instructed to solicit extra concerns from patients making visits to their practice. One group of physicians were instructed to say “Is there anything else you want to address in the visit today?” and a second group were instructed to say “Is there something else you want to address in the visit today?”. A third group acted as a control and said nothing to solicit further concerns. In doing so, the researchers were able to test the effectiveness of the words “any-“ and “some-“ when used in open-ended questions.

The results were quite clear. “Anything” was as effective at soliciting extra concerns as saying nothing at all – 53% of patients mentioned their additional concern. Clearly, some patients did mention other ailments, but much less frequently than those who were asked the “some-“ question. In this group, 90% of patients with extra concerns raised them.

Conversation analysts, like Loughborough University’s Elizabeth Stokoe, suggest this is because the word “any-“ has a closing-down function. It tends to be used as a token gesture. Think about meetings that end with the chair asking “Any other business?”. How often are other issues raised at this point? Perhaps, with one word substitution, we would be more willing to raise extra concerns – “Is there something else you would like to raise?”