People

Lesson in negotiation with scissors to throat

Words are more powerful than guns, says clinical psychologist and hostage negotiator

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As a psychotic man held a pair of scissors against his throat in a hospital emergency room, clinical psychologist George Kohlriesser said he knew he had a few options - he could call the nearby police or turn the scissors to the psychologist who had been sent in to negotiate.

Dr Kohlriesser, 72, told The Straits Times that his only real option in the July 1970 incident in Dayton, Ohio, was to keep talking.

His immediate reaction was to scream that he wanted to kill everyone, and he pressed the scissors against his throat, but the connection had been cut off.

Incident. He later stated that the first-time hostage-taker had not been held in use words as my weapon, and my way of dealing with people.

Dr Kohlriesser has been training and establishing hostage-negotiation teams in the United States for more than 20 years, as a professor of leadership and organisational behaviour at IMD. His study of human relationships and finding connections with hostage-takers quickly showed him that these strategies were also core to leadership behaviour.

For example, both leaders and hostage negotiators should provide options, ask questions and understand motivation, he said.

Leaders should also be trusted so that, in an organisational setting, employees are empowered to learn and improve rather than be held hostage by their employers.

His travels have taken him to countries such as Holland, Germany and Italy. While the cultures varied widely - in Holland, for example, there is a less aggressive towards superior as compared with America - some things remained constant.

"Bonding is fundamental to human behaviour," he said. And the awareness of a bond or attachment can change the perspective of hostage-takers who feel cornered and desperate. Just one important connection, or even a pet at home, can be enough to show them there is something worth living for, he said.

But what of terrorists who have been trained to dehumanise other humans? "Those are very, extremely difficult cases," he said.

He said terrorists would go to a camp and be trained to create detachment from other humans.

And the situation has changed with terror groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, he said. Besides dehumanisation, they are motivated by strong ideological beliefs that alienate those who do not subscribe to the same beliefs.

But he believes anything that touches the human heart can still possibly reach them.

He said: "If you have a mother, a father, a brother or a sister, and there's a good bond, it's very unlikely that you're going to step out of that unless something very serious happens. Always have hope in humanity."

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