

'Negotiators are advanced communicators'

Stephen McAllister looks back on a police career focused on mental health and change management

On 21 December 1988 I attended the Lockerbie aircraft disaster – the biggest mass murder incident in UK history. I was 24 years old, and had joined Strathclyde Police just the year before. I was on site for only 17 hours, but it was truly horrific. I knew Lockerbie well... my then partner's brother lived in the town and my uncle worked in a local factory. I played football with the local team. I was a regular visitor to the golf course where many of the bodies lay.

I returned home, and Christmas beckoned. I must confess, I didn't much feel like celebrating. However, it set the tone for the rest of my career. There was almost a morbid fascination in how you attempted to manage a truly awful set of circumstances, and this focused me on a path of crisis management.

From psychology to the police

After completing a degree in Social Science with a Psychology major at Glasgow Caledonian University, I had intended to pursue a career as a Clinical Psychologist. Years as a poor student prompted me to apply for the police as an alternative. In 1980 as a 16-year-old supposedly studying for exams, I had watched the Iranian Embassy hostage crisis and became obsessed with the work of Police Hostage Negotiators. On joining the police, initially based in the West End of Glasgow, I loved the job and threw myself into it, hoping to use some of my academic knowledge in a real-life setting.

Glasgow in the late 80s was a violent place, but any sign of vulnerability amongst colleagues to the stress and strains of the job was dismissed. The 'bad back' was common and alcohol the medication of choice. Police officers retiring after 30 years' service at this time lived an average of just five or

six years after leaving. There was no initial support provided by the organisation for incidents such as Lockerbie; camaraderie and alcohol got us through. I experienced flashbacks and nightmares. Thankfully these never lasted, but others were not so fortunate. One colleague who had a more prolonged exposure to events eventually took his own life after short-term alcohol abuse; two others suffered for years prior to a premature death.



There was an attempt by our welfare department some weeks later to 'debrief' the incident, but with my Psychology background I felt more support should have been available. Discussions with the force Welfare Department and Chief Medical Officer to provide psychological support eventually led to the introduction of critical incident debriefing, which was developed by the Metropolitan Police and subsequently replaced with Trauma Response Incident Management (TRIM) – now used frequently by the Police and Military to help staff cope with the aftermath of traumatic incidents. Through the remainder of my career, I provided support

to a variety of critical incidents, such as the Dunblane massacre and the aftermath of the Balkan conflict, including support to war graves investigations and several protracted and difficult international hostage incidents.

Human behaviour in crisis

I commenced a master's degree in Forensic Psychology by distance learning at Leicester University in 1999, graduating in 2001 – the same year I became a Hostage and Crisis Negotiator. I remained committed to this specialism until I retired from the Police in the summer of 2017. During this time, I deployed to well over a hundred negotiator incidents, both at home

and abroad, in addition to selecting, training, coaching and mentoring negotiators. Throughout my career as a Negotiator I became truly aware of the dynamics of human behaviour in crisis and the steps that can be taken to solve or at least mitigate the impact. As a member of the British Psychological Society and regular reader of *The Psychologist*, I regularly incorporated research into negotiator training: I became aware of the work of Professor Elizabeth Stokoe through the magazine.

As a negotiator more than half of the incidents I attended were suicide interventions, and I learned that the use of active listening skills, empathy and rapport building, to achieve influence and change behaviour, allowed negotiators to achieve a high success rate in saving those intent on taking their own lives.

Change management

On reaching a senior management position with Police Scotland in July 2014 I was promoted to a local policing division, which was transitioning from being a standalone Police service to that of one of the smallest Divisions within Police Scotland. Staff were struggling with the transition: the absence rate was the highest in the organisation at just over 6 per cent, and it was the poorest performing across a range of KPIs, with significant budget overspend. Initial analysis revealed that there was poor adherence to a variety of protocols relating to absence, performance and budgetary oversight. We had a sophisticated absence management system which revealed that just short of 40 per cent of all absence was due to mental ill-health, including anxiety, stress, depression, PTSD, addictions and extended bereavement reactions.

I realised that the most significant issue was that the Division was traumatised as a result of its transition into Police Scotland. There was a palpable sense of loss for the previous organisation. Drawing on my previous experiences, I took a trauma response approach to the circumstances. This included delivering short resilience workshops to groups of staff and deploying negotiator tactics of active listening, empathy and rapport in order to positively influence absence management and alter staff behaviour towards absence and change.

Negotiators are advanced communicators and manage crisis effectively. They use the core concerns of status, role, appreciation, autonomy and affiliation. In addition, they use the weapons of influence, reciprocity, commitment and consistency, authority, liking, scarcity and social proof to change the way we communicate with each other. Such an approach produces influence and creates behavioural change.

Our Divisional Improvement and Wellbeing Group included representatives from all ranks and business areas, with complete autonomy to bring work issues to the forum. Our aim was to take collective responsibility to find solutions. One of these was a simple admission that mental health was a concern. This resulted in a willingness to look at wider solutions

to improving staff mental health, including changes in shift patterns, applying a new operating model, and implementing a blended learning product developed in conjunction with the Psychology Department of Glasgow University and an organisation called Headtorch. This allowed delivery of mental health support via a mixture of e-learning and group meetings to cement this learning and improve group bonding. Such delivery allowed us to reach large numbers of staff across a wide geographic area over a short period of time.

This method was particularly successful as it included elements of crisis negotiation such as active listening skills, use of empathy and rapport building. It was evidence-based. Results were impressive: staff were much more willing to discuss their mental health issues, there was improved knowledge of what creates stress and how to mitigate this, and supervisors had a better understanding of how to have difficult conversations.

Within three years, absence rates were less than 3 per cent and the Division was the best performing in the country, according to an independent assessment (outperforming the previous force!).

After the police

Since leaving the Police I have continued to bring evidence-based decision making into a variety of board positions including the Samaritans, Lifelink (a Glasgow based Social Enterprise who provide stress management and counselling mostly in areas of high social deprivation and all of Glasgow's Secondary schools), two NHS boards, the board of the Risk Management Authority in Scotland and the Scottish Institute of Business Leaders (SIBL). I provide negotiator training through the European Police College, and as an Associate with Headtorch we offer mental health training for public and commercial organisations.

Much of this work has been influenced by my background in Psychology. It helped me focus me on crisis management leading to my role as a negotiator. We seek to understand, listen attentively, not impose an agenda, stick to a tried and tested formula, producing safe, effective, mutual solutions to a variety of crises. Such an approach is cost-effective and can give organisations a competitive edge by cutting absence, and improving productivity and performance. In addition, it makes the workplace a more dynamic and pleasant place, which helps in both attracting staff and retaining them.

Now I look back on a fabulous career which went by in the blink of an eye. I remain full of energy and enthusiasm to take my experiences and knowledge into a variety of arenas, to encourage both personal and professional evidence-based development. Self-care has been important: first responders can't be effective if they don't learn to look after their own wellbeing, both physical and mental.