

## THE TASER™ CHALLENGE AND NEUROLINGUISTICS

### **Considerations:**

The TASER™ as a tactical weapon presents serious considerations in the crafting of an appropriate perpetrator challenge phrase. As stated in my *Brain Software* lectures to numerous police services, the proper application of neurolinguistics, the science of language and neurology, can have a profound effect in reducing aggression and resistance in tactical situations. On the other hand, poorly crafted challenge phrases can intensify conflict and may actually exacerbate the very problem that the officer was attempting to avoid.

For example, the challenge “*Police! Don’t move!*” was evidently designed with no thought to neurolinguistic processes. Experience in the field among police officers throughout North America has proven the folly of this methodology. It is now well established that the human brain is unable to process negation, only deletion. The old example “*Don’t think of a pink elephant!*” serves to illustrate this concept rather well. In order to comprehend the sentence it becomes necessary to form a mental image of a pink elephant and then delete it. It is actually impossible to understand this command *without doing the very thing one was told not to do*. Any parent with a young child has experienced this phenomenon first hand. The command “*Don’t spill that milk on the carpet!*” will often elicit the very behaviour the parent was proscribing. In order to make sense of the sentence, the child is forced to form an internal (although possibly unconscious) representation of the prohibited action. The action to be avoided, i.e., “Don’t spill that milk...” must now be deleted. The problem lies in the fact that young children will often fulfil a proscribed action *before getting around to deleting it*. Unfortunately, perpetrators of crimes and aggressive suspects will sometimes do the very same thing due to an adrenaline dump in their bloodstream. When confronted by a peace officer certain persons will respond by producing an excess of epinephrine to activate the “fight, flight or freeze” reflex. When the body is thus galvanized for action, the suspect is operating from a visceral, survival instinct and the higher critical thinking functions of the brain are temporarily suspended. Once again, the suspect will process the challenge “Police! Don’t move!” and typically respond by running away.

Another consideration in the choice of an appropriate Taser™ challenge, is the length of the challenge, i.e., the number of words. Since it becomes far more difficult to process long sentences when under stress, as well as harder for an officer to remember a complex command, brevity is an important issue. Generally speaking, *the shorter the command the more effective it will be*. In tactical situations time is of the essence.

Simplicity of language is also vital and overly complex sentences must be avoided. The Taser™ is particularly effective in situations involving psychiatric patients and those under the influence of PCP and other psychotropic drugs. It therefore stands to reason that these are the very situations in which the Taser™ would likely be deployed as the weapon of choice. The challenge phrase must be easily understandable to those whose judgement may be impaired due to substance abuse or psychopathology.

In summary, the choice of words for an effective Taser™ challenge would take into account the neurolinguistic factor, length of phrase, and comprehensibility in a high-stress environment. The underlying aim is to create a neurolinguistically sound challenge that will lead to compliance without the Taser™ being utilized as anything more than a threat deterrent.

As part of my research, I contacted the manufacturer of the Taser™ and was given the following example of a Taser™ challenge that was utilized by the Sheriff's Department in Reno Nevada:

**"I'm Deputy -----, I have with me an Electronic Immobilization Device. If you continue to resist or fail to follow instructions, this device may be used against you. Do you understand?"**

Note that the above challenge fails to meet our criteria in several respects. First, it is not necessary to give one's name as part of the challenge. Perhaps the Reno Sheriff's Department requires the officer to identify himself, but this has no part in our construction of an adequate phrase. It only serves to waste time and adds to the complexity of the communication. Note too that the challenge contains nearly 50 syllables.

Second, the phrase "Electronic Immobilization Device" is at a very high level of complexity on any ease of reading or comprehension scale. Uneducated persons or those whose higher brain functions are adversely affected by drugs may have difficulty sorting and understanding the language in that phrase, especially in the context of a long challenge as above.

The next part of the challenge, "If you continue to resist or fail to follow instructions, this device may be used against you" contains several neurolinguistic infractions. Again, the phrase is simply too long. There is no logical reason to overtax the language center of a possibly confused and potentially violent suspect. Notice too, the focus on the negative. The phrase mentions that the subject might "continue to resist". Hypnotically speaking, this is a very poor choice of words. Depending on how the phrase is spoken, the words "continue to resist" maybe inadvertently marked by a vocal shift and become a hidden command that slips past the critical faculty directly into the unconscious. The same problems arise with the words "fail to follow instructions". Once again, the suspect is forced to create and then delete what it means to "continue to resist" and "fail to follow instructions". There is a very real possibility of the phraseology creating a non-compliant suspect by putting the thought into his mind. Notice too the phrase "this device may be used against you". Then again, it may not...is the clear implication and does little or nothing to ensure compliance. This is not the same as reading the suspect his rights and informing him that anything he says may be used in evidence against him. The suspect must be clearly informed that if he does not comply, then the Taser™ **will** be used against him. The officer's commands must be clear and straight forward with certain absolute consequences following non-compliance.

Finally, the challenge fails by asking "Do you understand?" What is the implication here? If the suspect answers "No, I don't understand" will the Taser™ not be utilized? Will the officer instead sit down with the suspect to explain in greater detail the problem at hand, or will he then resort to a simpler Taser™ challenge to ensure understanding?

Clearly an adequate Taser™ challenge is needed to eliminate these difficulties. For all of the above reasons, I offer the following phrase:

**"Police! Stand still or you will receive a powerful electric shock!"**

The advantages of this challenge are manifold:

It begins by identifying the challenging officer as a policeman / policewoman. There is a paralyzing shock value when the word "Police!" is spoken clearly and loudly. This results in a

brief pause in the subject's mind set as he evaluates the situation and awaits instruction (although the entire challenge is given without a pause.)

The subject is then instructed to "Stand still". Note that he is told in the clearest possible manner **what to do** rather than the negative **what not to do** (i.e., "Don't move", etc.) which would require subsequent deletion on the part of the suspect. (Note too that in a tactical situation, the words "Sit still" or "Lie still" are easily substituted by the officer without having to think through complex alternatives.)

The conjunctive "or" is now presented along with the unpleasant alternative, "you will receive a powerful electric shock". The subject is thus forced into an either/or decision, **neither** of which is pleasant for the subject, but **either** one is acceptable from the peace officer's perspective as compliance is assured. Either the subject stops whatever he's doing and complies, or else he receives a Taser™ shock and complies. From the subject's perspective, although both alternatives are unpleasant, the possibility of receiving a "powerful electric shock" is clearly the worst alternative. It is clearly stated and implied that in order to avoid the shock the subject need merely comply with the officer's request. In neurolinguistic psychology this is known as a **double bind**. (Erickson and Rossi, *The American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis*, January, 1975) Two alternatives are presented, either of which will produce the desired response, in this case compliance. In hypnosis, a therapist may ask "Would you like the hypnosis chair or the trance chair?" Whatever the response, the client has unconsciously agreed to enter a hypnotic state. The subject has the illusion of free choice which tends to depotentiate resistance. In the case of the challenge, he feels "free" to choose to comply and thus avoid the unpleasant alternative of electric shock.

The words "powerful electric shock" are deliberately chosen and should not be substituted. All humans in Western society have some experience with electricity and its dangers. We have heard of those struck by lightning as well as those who have received shocks from defective appliances. Many people go out of their way to avoid even the tiny shocks of static electricity that develop in a dry environment. We know that electricity can burn, render unconscious or even kill. When confronted by a police officer holding a high tech piece of hardware that vaguely resembles a firearm and being warned of an impending "powerful electric shock", all the mythology and respect for electricity moves to the forefront of the mind.

### **Conclusion**

It is my professional opinion that the "*Mandel Taser™ Challenge*" is the best available, and constitutes a profound shift in the direction of suspect compliance. It utilizes the best advanced psychological techniques available, while avoiding the problems inherent in challenges that discount or ignore the neurolinguistic model including unconscious deletion processes.

- MIKE MANDEL C.Ht., CGA, D.C.H.(c) July 4, 2000

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