
Commentary on "How to Make Terrorists Talk": A Social Influence Perspective

By Anthony McLean, CMCT, Gregory P.M. Neidert, Ph.D. & Robert B. Cialdini, Ph.D.

About the mark-up

This Time Magazine article (http://news.yahoo.com/s/time/20090529/us_time/09171190149100) was located by Dr Robert Cialdini's staff at *INFLUENCE AT WORK* and was circulated to the Cialdini Method Certified Trainers (CMCT) throughout the world for their information.

Anthony McLean, Australia's first CMCT, with a background in interviewing and elicitation within law enforcement, intelligence and national security, marked-up the article to highlight where the Principles of Persuasion were used.

About this article Anthony says ***"For many years Interviewers have intuitively used and at times Bungled away these Principles of Persuasion without understanding the science that sits behind their power. Coupled with the ethical use of Persuasion and by stacking Elicitation and Interview techniques, today's police, intelligence and national security personnel have never been better placed to ethically influence others for the greater good. This article highlights how operational practice is quickly changing and those early adopters are reaping the rewards through the purposeful use of persuasion for the benefit of all. It's scary to think others are still not using this training to better equip their personnel"***.

Anthony referred his interpretation of the principles to Dr Gregory Neidert, Director of Training, *INFLUENCE AT WORK* and Dr. Robert Cialdini, President, *INFLUENCE AT WORK* and together they bring you this insightful article complete with commentary.

How to Make Terrorists Talk

By *BOBBY GHOSH / WASHINGTON Bobby Ghosh / Washington* – Fri May 29, 4:00 am ET (http://news.yahoo.com/s/time/20090529/us_time/09171190149100)

The most successful interrogation of an Al-Qaeda operative by U.S. officials required no sleep deprivation, no slapping or "walling" and no waterboarding. All it took to soften up Abu Jandal, who had been closer to Osama bin Laden than any other terrorist ever captured, was a handful of sugar-free cookies.

Abu Jandal had been in a Yemeni prison for nearly a year when Ali Soufan of the FBI and Robert McFadden of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service arrived to interrogate him in the week after 9/11. Although there was already evidence that al-Qaeda was behind the attacks, American authorities needed conclusive proof, not least to satisfy skeptics like Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, whose support was essential for any action against the terrorist organization. U.S. intelligence agencies also needed a better understanding of al-Qaeda's structure and leadership. Abu Jandal was the perfect source: the Yemeni who grew up in Saudi Arabia had been bin Laden's chief bodyguard, trusted not only to protect him but also to put a bullet in his head rather than let him be captured.

Abu Jandal's guards were so intimidated by him, they wore masks to hide their identities and begged visitors not to refer to them by name in his presence. He had no intention of cooperating with the Americans; at their first meetings, he refused even to look at them and ranted about the evils of the West. Far from confirming al-Qaeda's involvement in 9/11, he insisted the attacks had been orchestrated by Israel's Mossad. While Abu Jandal was venting his spleen, Soufan noticed that he didn't touch any of the cookies that had been served with tea: "He was a diabetic and couldn't eat anything with sugar in it." At their next meeting, the Americans brought him some sugar-free cookies, a gesture that took the edge off Abu Jandal's angry demeanor. "We had showed him respect, and we had done this nice thing for him," Soufan recalls. "So he started talking to us instead of giving us lectures."

It took more questioning, and some interrogators' sleight of hand, before the Yemeni gave up a wealth of information about al-Qaeda - including the identities of seven of the 9/11 bombers - **but the cookies were the turning point.** "

After that, he could no longer think of us as evil Americans," Soufan says. "Now he was thinking of us as human beings."

Soufan, now an international-security consultant, has emerged as a powerful critic of the George W. Bush - era interrogation techniques; he has testified against them in congressional hearings and is an expert witness in cases brought by detainees. He has described the techniques as "borderline torture" and "un-American." His larger argument is that methods like waterboarding are wholly unnecessary - traditional interrogation methods, a combination of guile and graft, are the best way to break down even the most stubborn subjects. He told a recent hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee that it was these methods, not the harsh techniques, that prompted al-Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah to give up the identities of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the self-confessed mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, and "dirty bomber" Jose Padilla. Bush Administration officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney, had previously claimed that Abu Zubaydah supplied that information only after he was waterboarded. **But Soufan says once the rough treatment began - administered by CIA-hired private contractors with no interrogation experience - Abu Zubaydah actually stopped cooperating.**

(Read "Dick Cheney: Why So Chatty All of a Sudden?")

The debate over the CIA's interrogation techniques and their effectiveness has intensified since President Barack Obama's decision to release Bush Administration memos authorizing the use of waterboarding and other harsh methods. Defenders of the Bush program, most notably Cheney, say the use of waterboarding produced actionable intelligence that helped the U.S. disrupt terrorist plots. But the experiences of officials like Soufan suggest that the utility of torture is limited at best and counterproductive at worst. Put simply, there's no definitive evidence that torture works.

The crucial question going forward is, What does? How does an interrogator break down a hardened terrorist without using violence? TIME spoke with

Comment [e1]: [Note: This demonstrates Soufan's use of Dr Robert Cialdini's Principle of Reciprocation – respect begets respect. Anthony McLean (AM)].

Comment [e2]: [Note: That this seemingly small favor was potent because it incorporated the three features of a gift that produce the most return on investment—it was meaningful, unexpected, and personalized to the recipient. Robert Cialdini (RBC)]

Comment [e3]: [Note: It could be argued the thoughtfulness shown by Soufan activated another of Dr Cialdini's Principles of Influence – Liking. AM]

Comment [e4]: [Note: According to the Core Motives Model of Social Influence, when you have no relationship with individuals, your effectiveness in influencing them is reduced. In order to initiate, build, maintain and repair relationships, the two most powerful principles to use as the core of your approach are Reciprocity and Liking. As you will notice throughout the article, these two Principles of Influence are the ones that were most used to successfully "break the ice" with the terrorists and allowed the interrogators to move forward in their work using the other Principles of Influence. Gregory Neidert (GPMN)].

Comment [e5]: [Note: The power of any relationship that was formed by the previous interrogators was eroded by the heavy handed tactics employed by the CIA contractor. Furthermore, the reciprocity that was at play with the new interrogators was the reciprocation of disrespect, power assertion, and control tactics. AM & GPMN]

Comment [e6]: [Note: A dominant response to coercion is resistance. The negative approach the interrogators used was reciprocated by Abu Zubaydah with the deliberate and determined withholding of what the interrogators were so doggedly seeking. The use of coercion and force actually thwarts interrogators' attempts to get the information they want. Put differently, it is an unintelligent way of obtaining intelligence. GPMN]

several interrogators who have worked for the U.S. military as well as others who have recently retired from the intelligence services (the CIA and FBI turned down requests for interviews with current staffers). All agreed with Soufan: the best way to get intelligence from even the most recalcitrant subject is to apply the subtle arts of interrogation rather than the blunt instruments of torture. "There is nothing intelligent about torture," says Eric Maddox, an Army staff sergeant whose book *Mission: Black List #1* chronicles his interrogations in Iraq that ultimately led to the capture of Saddam Hussein. "If you have to inflict pain, then you've lost control of the situation, the subject and yourself."

[Read about a top interrogator who is against torture.](#)

[See pictures of the aftershocks from the Abu Ghraib scandal.](#)

The Rules of the Game

There is no definitive textbook on interrogation. The U.S. Army field manual, updated in 2006, lists 19 interrogation techniques, ranging from offering "real or emotional reward" for truthful answers to repeating questions again and again "until the source becomes so thoroughly bored with the procedure, he answers questions fully and candidly." (Obama has ordered the CIA to follow the Army manual until a review of its interrogation policies has been completed.)

Some of the most interesting techniques are classified as "emotional approaches."

Interrogators may flatter a detainee's ego by praising some particular skill.

Alternatively, the interrogators may attack the detainee's ego by accusing him of incompetence, goading him to defend himself and possibly give up information in the process.

If interrogators choose to go on the attack, however, they may not "cross the line into humiliating and degrading treatment of the detainee." ([See pictures of the battle against the Taliban.](#))

But experienced interrogators don't limit themselves to the 19 prescribed techniques. Matthew Alexander, a military interrogator whose efforts in Iraq led to the location and killing of al-Qaeda leader Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi, says old-fashioned criminal-investigation techniques work better than the Army manual. "Often I'll use tricks that are not part of the Army system but that every cop knows," says Alexander. "Like when you bring in two suspects, you take them to separate rooms and offer a deal to the first one who confesses."

(Alexander, one of the authors of *How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality, to Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq*, uses a pseudonym for security purposes.)

Others apply methods familiar to psychologists and those who deprogram cult members. James Fitzsimmons, a retired FBI interviewer who dealt extensively

Comment [e7]: [Note: These are also referred to as Elicitation Techniques, which often involve the application of one or multiple techniques simultaneously to achieve the required purpose. The use of the Principles of Influence further enhances the use of these traditional elicitation approaches and probes. AM]

Comment [e8]: [Note: With praise, the Liking Principle comes into play. RBC]

Comment [e9]: [Note: By goading the prisoner to defend his competence, the interrogators are tapping-in to his desire to be consistent with a positive view of himself to which he feels committed; therefore the interrogators are putting the Commitment/Consistency Principle to work in this case. RBC]

Comment [e10]: [Note: This common technique makes use of the Scarcity Principle. AM]

Comment [e11]: [Note: This creates a mixed-motive situation, where the interests of the group (the two suspects) are pitted against the interests of the individual. In this well-researched scenario (known as the Prisoner's Dilemma), the Principle of Scarcity, embodied in the offer of a deal to the first one who confesses, undermines trust between the group members and each is more powerfully motivated to engage in self-interested behavior and confess to the authorities. GPMN].

with al-Qaeda members, says terrorism suspects often use their membership in a group as a psychological barrier. The interrogator's job, he says, "is to bring them out from the collective identity to the personal identity." To draw them out, Fitzsimmons invites his subjects to talk about their personal histories, all the way back to childhood. This makes them think of themselves as individuals rather than as part of a group.

Ultimately, every interrogation is a cat-and-mouse game, and seasoned interrogators have more than one way to coax, cajole or trick their captives into yielding information. Lying and dissimulation are commonplace.

When a high-ranking insurgent spoke of his spendthrift wife, Alexander said he sympathized because he too had a wife who loved to shop. The two men bonded over this common "problem"; the insurgent never knew that Alexander is single.

The Army manual even includes a "false flag" technique: interrogators may pretend to be of other nationalities if they feel a captive will not cooperate with Americans. (Read "Beyond Waterboarding: What Interrogators Can Still Do.")

Other countries that have experienced insurgencies and terrorism have evolved rules too. From Britain, with its Irish separatists, to Israel, with its Palestinian militants, most such countries have tended to move away from harsh techniques. But institutional relapses can occur: human-rights lawyers and Palestinians with experience in Israeli prisons say some violent interrogation techniques have returned in recent years.

The Tricks of the Trade

Each interrogator has his own idea of how to run an interrogation. Soufan likes to research his captive as thoroughly as possible before entering the interrogation room. "If you can get them to think you know almost everything to know about them - their families, their friends, their movements - then you've got an advantage," he says. "Because then they're thinking, 'Well, this guy already knows so much, there's no point in resisting ... I might as well tell him everything.'"

When Abu Zubaydah tried to conceal his identity after his capture, Soufan stunned him by using the nickname given to him by his mother. "Once I called him 'Hani,' he knew the game was up," Soufan says.

To get Abu Jandal's cooperation, Soufan and McFadden laid a trap. After palliating his rage with the sugar-free cookies, they got him to identify a number of al-Qaeda members from an album of photographs, including Mohamed Atta and six other 9/11 hijackers.

Next they showed him a local newspaper headline that claimed (erroneously) that more than 200 Yemenis had been killed in the World Trade Center. Abu Jandal agreed that this was a terrible crime and said no Muslim could be behind the attacks. Then Soufan dropped the bombshell: some of the men

Comment [e12]: [Note: Depending on application, this could make use of Reciprocity through sharing of information and Liking in identifying common or shared experiences that could be introduced later, which could foster an atmosphere of cooperation. AM]

Comment [e13]: [Note: Dr Cialdini's comment supports Dr Karl Roberts' work on Identity Theory in Interviewing Terrorists and creating an environment of competing identities where interviewers actively seek to achieve the separation of the individual or their Personal Identity from the group or the Collective Identity. In interviewing a terrorist, unless the Collective Identity is separated, it will take precedence in the hierarchy. AM]

Comment [e14]: [Note: My sense is that this is also an attempt to undermine the action of the Consensus Principle, which has operated to this point within his terrorist organization to validate a particular set of beliefs. By focusing the prisoner on the individual self rather than the collective self, that set of group beliefs becomes less operative. RBCJ]

Comment [e15]: [Note: Dr Cialdini's approach to Persuasion discourages lying and prefers an ethical approach to interviewing to build stronger and more profitable longer term relationships without the use of deception. AM]

Comment [e16]: [Note: Here the Principle of Liking is smuggled into the interaction through the misrepresentation of shared experiences. If the high ranking insurgent discovered the deception, his cooperation with Alexander would likely have diminished. Alexander would have been better advised to have chosen a genuine similarity he shared with the insurgent. AM & GPMNJ]

Comment [e17]: [Note: Subtle application of the Principle of Authority. Credibility is established by introducing information known only to the terrorist's small circle of family and friends. Authority is implied rather than overtly stated. AM]

Comment [e18]: [Note: Being fully prepared, by doing his homework on suspects in advance of his initial meetings with them, allows Soufan to more readily identify and surface the Principles of Influence that are genuinely available to him in his interrogations. GPMNJ]

Comment [e19]: [Note: Here it shows that the simple gift of a cookie did not in of itself achieve the answers, but it did allow for an environment of respect to be established and this allowed for dialogue which was not present earlier. Cultivating relationships in the initial stages of interrogation, using Reciprocity and Liking, allow interrogators to more effectively use the other Principles of Influence in latter stages. AM & GPMNJ]

Abu Jandal had identified in the album had been among the hijackers. Without realizing it, the Yemeni prisoner had admitted that al-Qaeda had been responsible for 9/11: For all his resistance, he had given the Americans what they wanted. "He was broken, completely shattered," Soufan says. From that moment on, Abu Jandal was completely cooperative, giving Soufan and McFadden reams of information - names and descriptions of scores of al-Qaeda operatives, details of training and tactics.

[See pictures of a jihadist's journey.](#)

[See pictures from inside Guantanamo Bay's detention facilities.](#)

Alexander, who conducted more than 300 interrogations and supervised more than 1,000 others in Iraq, says the key to a successful interrogation lies in understanding the subject's motivation. In the spring of 2006, he was interrogating a Sunni imam connected with al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was then run by al-Zarqawi; the imam "blessed" suicide bombers before their final mission. His first words to Alexander were, "If I had a knife right now, I'd slit your throat." Asked why, the imam said the U.S. invasion had empowered Shi'ite thugs who had evicted his family from their home. Humiliated, he had turned to the insurgency. Alexander's response was to offer a personal apology: "I said, 'Look, I'm an American, and I want to say how sorry I am that we made so many mistakes in your country.'"

The imam, Alexander says, broke down in tears. The apology undercut his motivation for hating Americans and allowed him to open up to his interrogator. Alexander then nudged the conversation in a new direction, pointing out that Iraq and the U.S. had a common enemy: Iran. The two countries needed to cooperate in order to prevent Iraq from becoming supplicant to the Shi'ite mullahs in Tehran - a fear commonly expressed by Sunnis.

Eventually the imam gave up the location of a safe house for suicide bombers; a raid on the house led to the capture of an al-Qaeda operative who in turn led U.S. troops to al-Zarqawi. ([See pictures of U.S. troops' 6 years in Iraq.](#))

The Ticking Time Bomb

Proponents of waterboarding and other harsh interrogation techniques say the noncoercive methods are useless in emergencies, when interrogators have just minutes, not days, to extract vital, lifesaving information. The worst-case scenario is often depicted in movies and TV series like *24*: a captured terrorist knows where and when a bomb will go off (in a mall, in a school, on Capitol Hill), and his interrogators must make him talk at once or else risk thousands of innocent lives. It's not just fervid screenwriters who believe that such a scenario calls for the use of brute force. In 2002, Richard Posner, a Court of Appeals judge in Chicago and one of the most respected legal authorities in the U.S., wrote in the *New Republic* that "if torture is the only means of obtaining the information necessary to prevent the detonation of a nuclear

Comment [e20]: [Note: Application of Dr. Cialdini's Consistency Principle. The information that Muslims (who Abu Jandal knew) were directly responsible for, what he believed to be a terrible crime against other Yemenis, was inconsistent with being a good Muslim. By providing these facts, Soufan created in Abu Jandal the powerful internal pressure to act consistently with his beliefs. That pressure compelled Abu Jandal to provide Soufan the reams of intelligence on those who were associated with perpetrating this unholy and terrible crime. GPMN & AM]

Comment [e21]: [Note: Application of the Principle of Liking by offering an apology. An apology also engages the Principle of Authority by increasing one's trustworthiness, and therefore credibility, in the eyes of the other person. AM & GPMN]

Comment [e22]: [Note: A further application of the Principle of Liking. AM]

Comment [e23]: [Note: It is worth noting that in previous examples of the use of the Liking Principle, praise and similarity were employed; in this instance it was cooperation. RBC]

bomb in Times Square, torture should be used ... No one who doubts that this is the case should be in a position of responsibility."

The CIA's controversial methods, argue their defenders, were spawned by precisely that sense of urgency: in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, amid swirling rumors of further attacks to come - including the possibility of a "dirty" nuclear bomb - the Bush Administration had no choice but to authorize the use of whatever means necessary to extract information from suspected terrorists. "We had a lot of blind spots after the attacks on our country," former Vice President Cheney explained in a May 21 speech in Washington. "We didn't know about al-Qaeda's plans, but Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and a few others did know. And with many thousands of innocent lives potentially in the balance, we didn't think it made sense to let the terrorists answer questions in their own good time, if they answered them at all."

But professional interrogators say the ticking-time-bomb scenario is no more than a thought experiment; it rarely, if ever, occurs in real life. It's true that U.S. intelligence managed to extract information about some "aspirational" al-Qaeda plots through interrogation of prisoners captured after 9/11. But none of those plots have been revealed - at least to the public - to have been imminent attacks. And there is still no conclusive proof that any usable intelligence the U.S. did glean through harsh interrogations could not have been extracted using other methods.

In fact, a smart interrogator may be able to turn the ticking-bomb scenario on its head and use a sense of urgency against a captive. During combat raids in Iraq, Maddox grew used to interrogating insurgents on the fly, often at the point of capture. His objective: to quickly extract information on the location of other insurgents hiding out nearby. "I'd say to them, 'As soon as your friends know you've been captured, they'll assume that you're going to give them up, and they'll run for it. So if you want to help yourself, to get a lighter sentence, you've got to tell me everything right now, because in a couple of hours you'll have nothing of value to trade.'"

That trick led to Maddox's finest hour in Iraq. At 6 a.m. on December 13, 2003, the final day of his tour of duty, two hours before his flight out of Baghdad, he began interrogating Mohammed Ibrahim, a midranking Baath Party leader known to be close to Saddam Hussein. More than 40 of Ibrahim's friends and family members associated with the insurgency were already in custody. For an hour and a half, Maddox tried to persuade him that giving up Saddam could lead to the release of his friends and family. Then Maddox played his final card: "I told him he had to talk quickly because Saddam might move," he says. "I also said that once I got on the plane, I would no longer be able to help him. My colleagues would just toss him in prison. Instead of saving 40 of his friends and family, he'd become No. 41."

It worked. That evening, Ibrahim's directions led U.S. forces to Saddam's spider hole.

Comment [e24]: [Note: Maddox employs Dr. Cialdini's Scarcity Principle. AM]

Comment [e25]: [Note: Again, this creates the mixed-motive situation, using the Scarcity Principle, discussed earlier. GPMN]

Comment [e26]: [Note: Maddox provided Ibrahim with a Scarcity double-whammy. He told Ibrahim about his genuinely limited time to cooperate and the very likely loss he would experience as the result of continued non-cooperation with Maddox. GPMN & AM]