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What does it take to train a good stranger

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Abstract

A good stranger (GS) is a professional who can effectively integrate tact and tactics, and create positive outcomes in social encounters, particularly in situations with others with whom they have little shared history, culture, language, or common ground. For a GS in any field, particularly the military and policing, creating positive social outcomes enhances mission effectiveness and supports broader strategic and tactical objectives. As part of a large Government-funded program to maximize individuals' ability to adapt to and successfully manage high-risk, high-consequence interactions, our team has developed a theoretical structure for GS skills. We consider the flow of an interaction across different categories of GS skills, some involving overt demonstration of behavior and some internal to the individual, to include its cyclical nature. Generally this flow maps to the basic sequencing for most interactions that produce positive end states: An approach; a period of framing, orientation, and sensemaking; engagement in the evolving business of the encounter, often involving necessary rapport-building, adaptation, and trouble recovery; and an appropriate departure.We are exploring effective ways that GS skills can be taught, using innovative training methods and leveraging existing and near-future technologies and techniques. Our methods are scalable to support student throughput, and grounded in providing opportunities to put skills into action in targeted social and tactical situations. We have worked within an Army basic officers'leadercourse to test an implementation of an innovative, scalable, grounded approach for training GS skills.

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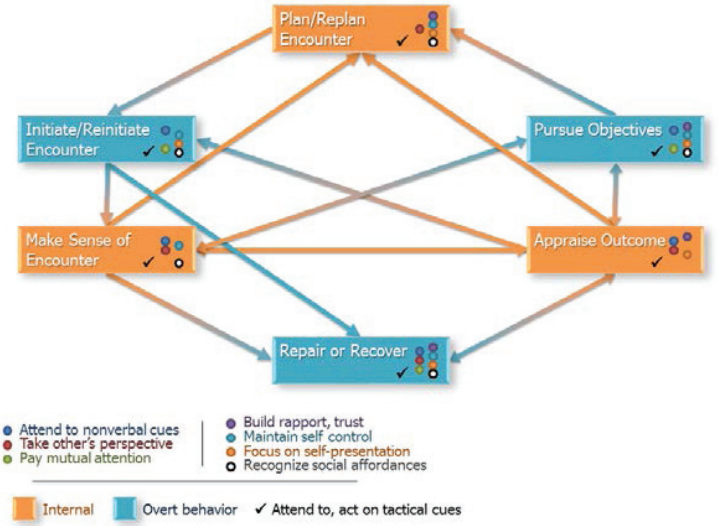

Fig. 1.GS skills categories involved during an interaction. Arrows represent the cooperative and reciprocal nature of any encounter.

1. Introduction

Professionals can create positive outcomes by learning to approach social situations as the dynamic product of thoughts, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. We define as a "good stranger" (GS) a professional who can make sense of unfamiliar, complex, unpredictable, and consequential social encounters and do so competently enough to bring about positive outcomes. For military and police, GS skills also mean integrating tact with tactical competence. Another characterization is someone able to "navigate in complex interpersonal and cross-cultural situations" [1].

1.1. Skills model

This document provides an overview of GS skills identified by our team. The intended audience is anyone interested in how different skills relate to each other in supporting positive outcomes, cultural sensitivity and the importance of social interaction, and approaches that could be taken to train GS skills. Figure 1 depicts the flow of an interaction across different categories of GS skills, showing behaviors that are overt or primarily internal (though these can be done in collaboration with others). In practice, certainly, the stages shown in Figure 1 are not nearly so distinct, but instead are continuous features of encounters; for instance, sensemaking occurs during the framing activity of rapport-building and even during pre-planning. The arrows in the figure represent the cyclical nature of any interaction, how any positive outcome relies on continuous sensemaking, rapport-building, and the like. Nevertheless, to clarify their explanation the skills categories are presented as a series of stages.

Generally this flow maps to the basic sequencing for most interactions that produce positive end states: An approach and opening; a period of framing, orientation, and sensemaking; engagement in the (constantly evolving) business of the encounter, often involving necessary rapport-building and trouble recovery; and an appropriate closing. By way of analogy, our team views the entirety of GS skills as a toolbox, with different compartments in the toolbox (skills categories) containing specific skills (detecting and interpreting nonverbal cues, perspective-taking, etc.), all of which fit into multiple compartments. Application of GS "tools" in a given encounter produces one or more outcomes.

In examining the range of GS skills (crosscutting skills as well as other supporting skills described throughout), our team is working to identify ways these skills can be taught which are effective, using innovative training methods and leveraging existing and near-future technologies and techniques; scalable, both in terms of student throughput and repetitions of training exercises; and grounded, in providing opportunities to put the skills into action in carefully crafted, targeted social and tactical situations.

2. Skills categories

In this section we examine six skills categories (our "toolbox compartments"): Initiating/reinitiating an encounter; sensemaking; repairing or trouble recovery; appraising interaction outcomes; pursuing interaction objectives; and re-planning. Where and as it makes sense in these descriptions, specific GS skills ("tools") are introduced as well.

2.1. Initiating/reinitiating an encounter

A skilled initial approach by a professional can be critical—even decisive—to an ultimately successful interaction. The GS uses initiating skills to project authority, calmness, and, as appropriate, positivity and respect, and to adapt to identified discomfort or confusion on the part of others that may require changing tactics and de-escalating or recovering from trouble. While always maintaining a tactical advantage and safety, during contact the GS understands it is important to identify and respond to what reasonably appear to be greeting rituals, engage in "immediacy behaviors" such as active listening, mirroring, and seeking common ground, manage self-presentation, and maintain control over body language, voice, eye contact, and facial expression [2-4]. The GS also seeks indicators of a shift in dynamics and changes in demeanor that relate to how to proceed with the encounter. Focusing on these concerns helps build rapport and "greases the wheels" for accomplishing goals such as cooperation and information gathering.

2.2. Sensemaking

Making sense of the current social situation is central to GS behavior. It is a deliberate effort to understand events, involving mental models (or schemas) that people develop for explanations of others' behaviors [1,5]. These models are based on individual experience and social and cultural factors. The GS pays attention to details of the encounter and questions assumptions or discrepancies with expectations to better understand how and why certain activity is occurring. Such deliberate awareness is an ongoing process of challenging one's mental model and the coherency of evidence, and considering alternative explanations.Sensemaking also involves recognizing and mastering social affordances—those opportunities that elicit recognizable, meaningful patterns from the social environment and influence how the GS adapts behavior to reflect good social judgment and adopts a trust frame (described below).

The GS recognizes the potential for competing agendas that can be a source of quickly-escalating conflict. In the interaction, as each individual attempts to pursue his or her own agenda, the other's intentions may be seen as a form of resistance and an indicator of hostility. Especially with the GS who holds some power over the other person, there is an asymmetry between how quickly the pursuit of competing actions can escalate into a full-blown conflict and how long it can take to restore calm to a scene once such a conflict has developed. Escalating conflicts may have tipping points, after which de-escalation is more difficult. During any transition into and out of force, appearing too friendly or equivocating creates an appearance of weakness and/or diminishing control that could result in the need for more force than would have otherwise been required had the GS begun by taking a firmer stance. This reasoning suggests that training emphasize the complex dynamics of encounters.

2.3. Repairing / trouble recovery

Good strangers must remain aware of the inherent instability and malleability of social interactions. A GS mindset encourages the professional to take steps to lower tensions before they rise out of hand; the use of force can compromise existing relationships and harm ongoing relationships. Recovery should be sought whenever it is safe and appropriate to do so, but the GS must always have the agility to move rapidly into and out of force.It is easier for a GS to recover given established rapport with others, or at least an ability to take their perspective. By actively taking control over troubled situations, the GS demonstrates a tendency and ability to manage conflicts peaceably.

Several skills are useful for working in escalating conflicts, or when there is lack of common ground [6,7]. One example is learning to overcome the difficulty of maintaining simultaneous attention to tactical and security issues along with the current interaction. Another is gaining the ability to recognize that trouble has occurred and identify its source, preferably close in time to the trouble source. GS professionals can explicitly address the trouble tactfully

(e.g., acknowledge the other's conflict and engage in calming techniques such as nods and lowering gestures) as well as tactically (e.g., by assigning team members to maintain security).

Mental modeling and perspective-taking provide a means to possibly understand the dynamics underlying the escalation. For example, realizing that conflict stems from differences in motivation allows the GS to reframe the situation to highlight advantages for both sides. In contrast, if the conflict stems from different priorities then it may be helpful to highlight the different goals that will be accomplished. It is important for the GS to step back and look for the different constraints and/or knowledge bases that have created such tension.

2.4. Appraising interaction outcomes

Key to any interaction is evaluating the outcome of the interaction in relation to one's initial goals. The goal of the GS is to effect positive outcomes, and there are beneficial consequences to such outcomes. For instance, voluntary compliance and cooperation is intended to influence and persuade the other person toward one's goals [8,9]—without using force or threat, leaving the other with dignity and respect. Such skills are a key for the GS because there is often a need to get people to cooperate and comply in following courses of action (e.g., tolerate checkpoints, succumb to physical searches) they might normally not accept. In contrast, coerced compliance may lead to others' behaviors that support the mission, and may be required in some situations, but potentially at the expense of disgrace, effacement, or humiliation that can erode the social affordances professionals (e.g., in the military or policing) need to complete their missions. A priority for any such professional is to establish authority and legitimacy, as this relationship enhances the security under which the mission is performed. However, true authority and legitimacy requires a mutual understanding and respect between the two individuals, and the GS must understand how the integration of tact and tactics supports the intent in the current situation. The best achievable outcome is for the professional to engender feelings of trust and commitment such that the other individual is willing to give support, even to the point of some personal risk. Level of trust, then, or at least having moved the needle from lesser toward greater rapport (with its potential to influence trust), is another important indicator of the success of the encounter.

2.5. Pursuing interaction objectives

At this stage, the GS has reached a point amenable to engaging in the mission objective. This objective may be de-escalation of conflict, key leader engagement, dialog seeking actionable information, coordination with members of the general population, and similar purposeful aims. As with other stages of the interaction, the GS must pay close attention to nonverbal cues, must maintain control and awareness of self-presentation, and recognize points in the engagement that afford opportunities to achieve mission needs.

At this stage, too, is where disengaging (leaving the interaction) occurs. Aside from culturally appropriate mannerisms or phrases to use when parting (e.g., situationally-appropriate rituals), this competency is characterized as considering the outcome of the encounter and ensuring it has led to as positive an outcome as could be accomplished, setting the conditions for a future engagement. This latter activity could actually mean continuing or reinitiating an encounter (rather than disengaging) if the outcome is not as positive as needed, thereby continuing the interaction cycle.

2.6. Pre- and re-planning

Pre-planning involves being prepared for dealing with expected social encounters, and also involves decisions about what conditions to set before making the approach, how to make the approach, and who is going to do what during the engagement. A GS should be aware of issues such as rules of engagement, local beliefs and values, important phrases in the local language, cultural norms, effects of violating those norms, the political climate, social hierarchies, sacred spaces, and even who on their team has the requisite social skills for the mission.

Re-planning is taking into consideration what change in approach or technique is appropriate, if any, given the state of the interaction through the stages to this point. The GS should continually revisit what has occurred so far during the interaction, consider what the impact has been, and ask what elements are working and what are not working. Re-planning is also making new assessments given overt changes in demeanor, situation, or mission goals

that require adaptation and a potential new direction on the part of the GS. As with other stages, the GS should consider to what or where to pay attention, what reactions there have been, what level of rapport has been established, and what defines or determines success given the current state of the interaction and any new information gleaned through the interaction to that point.

3. Crosscutting skills

In this section we describe in more depth a number of important crosscutting skills (some already introduced), that is, those that are involved in multiple stages of the encounter. These skills include detecting and interpreting nonverbal cues, perspective-taking, mutual attention, building rapport, maintaining self-control, maintaining self-awareness, and recognizing social affordances.

3.1. Detecting and interpreting nonverbal cues (and non-content features of language)

Nonverbal communication includes hand gestures, eye contact, body positioning, and other embodied elements of communication [10,11]. They can be used to aid or enhance comprehension, indicate the topic of conversation, signal an addressee, and convey meaning. They can also add emphasis, determine who is being addressed, and indicate power relationships. Nonverbal cues thus represent an important source of situational information. A professional should constantly be aware of rapid or hidden movements that might indicate potential violence. However, not all such movements are necessarily precursors to escalation. Some may be unanticipated due to differences in expectations of communicative norms, while others may be natural actions that can be predicted in the given situation.

Non-content features of language include aspects of speech such as turn-taking, volume, and prosody. Turn-taking is particularly important; generally, across cultures and contexts, for clear communication, one person speaks at a time and there is minimal pause and overlap. Back-channels are verbal and nonverbal signals that can indicate interest, sympathy, or agreement or disagreement (e.g., nodding or shaking one's head, saying "uh-huh" or "hmm"). Loudness and prosodic elements of interaction such as intonation can also vary across contexts and lead to miscommunication, if misunderstood or used improperly.

3.2. Perspective-taking

To effectively function as a GS the professional needs to be able to accurately take the perspective of others. This skill requires insight into others' thoughts, motivations, concerns, and decision-making to identify goals and priorities, anticipate how others are likely to act or react, appreciate what would otherwise seem to be unusual or unexpected behaviors, and explain behavior [1]. Perspective-taking is only possible if the GS has some understanding of his or her own belief and value systems, and how those of others' differ [12].Different mechanisms support perspective-taking. A GS can overcome cultural biases by modeling the other's cognitive and emotional states, taking on a role so as to be able to speculate about the motives of the other person. Relatedly, empathy is about self/other differentiation and identification. However, perspective-taking also requires experiencing a situation with another.

Overcoming bias and gaining empathy are not sufficient for effective perspective-taking; the GS must strive to overcome inhibitors to perspective-taking such as time pressure for understanding the other person's mental state. Conceivably, perspective-taking becomes more challenging when dealing with foreign cultures, as the unfamiliarity might make it harder for the professional to change how information is picked up from the environment, but the inherent high-risk, high-consequence situations make these skills all the more important.

Perspective-taking skills depend on careful observations to gather information on others' goals, expectancies, and anxieties. Additional skills such as de-centering and social gaze support the setting aside of one's biases, as they assist in adopting another's perspective, and attending to situationally-relevant detail. These skills thus influence inferences made about what the other is thinking or preparing to do.

3.3. Mutual attention and encounter management

A professional can take cognitive, physical, and emotional stances relative to others [13]. Stances affect attentiveness, and can impact the ability for a professional with a particular perspective to notice cues, form expectancies, prioritize goals, and consider actions. They are once again examples of an integration of tact and tactics, whereby normally the overall approach is one of a GS (albeit safety-conscious), but cues and contingencies in the situation, such as perception of lack of trust, could cause a shift in behavior to, for instance, an overtly defensive position until a crisis is abated and less defensive postures would be warranted.

Some communication tactics are general purpose techniques for influence and persuasion in situations requiring GS skills, such as a need to de-escalate when a person is getting angry. There are a number of such tactics appropriate to a GS context, to include clear and simple language, appropriate posture, tone of voice and inflection, and common gestures, all of which are easily attended to by the other person. Similar tactics can be utilized for the purpose of removing barriers and creating support. Overall, compliance is more easily gained when the request issued to others contains concrete, manageable actions that lead to acceptable resolutions.

3.4. Building rapport and trust

The GS remains aware of potential threat and the potential need for escalation of force, but simultaneously acts in a way than can build rapport. The skillset of building rapport is very useful for achieving desired positive outcomes with consequences such as voluntary compliance and cooperation. Building rapport goes beyond the immediate effects of the encounter, and often has a long-term component, such as contributing to trust that might encourage others to take actions in support of the GS professional's tactical and strategic objectives.

Rapport covers a variety of sub-skills. These include crosscutting skills such as perspective-taking, as well as rapport-building strategies such as situationally-appropriate rituals (greetings, introductions, explanations, expressions of gratitude, and farewells) and relationship rituals (reassuring, complimenting, engaging in small talk, and using humor). Additionally, rapport involves mutual attention and coordination of social cues through movements, gaze, and speech. Such empathic accuracy depends on how GS professionals are able to involve themselves with others. The more involvement the more accurate attributions of mental state become, which in turn are important for perspective-taking, coordinated interactions, and greater common ground.

Trust-buildingis key to GS skills, as it defines how the GS approaches each encounter. The GS looks to gain trust by looking for opportunities to demonstrate trustworthiness to others. Building trust has a long-term component—to encourage others to take actions that have some risk for them, but would benefit the professional's mission. This state can be achieved by identifying shared goals, especially when the other's goals are acknowledged, and repairing conflicted interaction states by using trouble recovery techniques. Building trust also has a short-term component; from the start of the encounter a GS can be trying to "move the needle", using rapport-building skills when possible or recovery skills whenever necessary.

3.5. Emotional and kinetic self-control

Adopting a security-focused approach, and the attendant physical and emotional stances, does not preclude simultaneously adopting a GS perspective with the aim of achieving a positive social outcome. It is important for professionals to learn how to integrate the need for self-protection with the ability to take control over their emotions and with the objective of gaining a sense of the situation and then of using that awareness to take decisive action that leverages social affordances [14] and turns them into tactical advantages. The balance has to be made within context, and often under time and emotional pressure.

GS skills are important in the military, policing, and other fields. Lessons learned concentrate on how one comes across to others; among other things dictating how to project a "neat, clean, professional" image (see self-presentation, described next), while also conveying that one is an "alert, prepared, and formidable opponent". Other lessons focus on how controlled, meaningful actions at the different stages of crisis management lead to better outcomes than reactive or impulsive ones [7].

3.6. Self-awareness and self-presentation

Professionals need to stay aware of their behavior and actions as they relate to interactions with others, especially under stressful circumstances and/or with those from a different cultural background. Building on sensemaking skills, the GS professional must make a rapid assessment of the situation, cuing in on key manifestations of the other's presence and leveraging affordances that come to the fore, while making sure to be aware of presumptions of the other's background or beliefs. The GS should keep questions in mind as the interaction progresses, considering the other person's perception of trustworthiness and what short- or long-term interests they might share. The GS should also exercise restraint from being provoked.

The more professionals sense themselves as presenting nuances of the situation to others, the more likely it is that the encounter will take on GS characteristics. Balancing instinctually biased behavior, people also have a tendency toward commitment and consistency. If professionals, through an understanding of their own actions and tendencies, can gain some amount of commitment to communication and trust from the other person they can build on that. Gaining a small win already moves the other person in the desired direction, making future resistance seem inconsistent with past behavior. Others' commitment should be voluntary, active, and public. When possible, the others should generate their own reasons for making a commitment, and the professionals should present themselves as open to that reasoning. Even prior commitments that conflict with the current desired end-state are not insurmountable. Instead, by praising the previous decision as the right one at that time, professionals can present themselves as reasonable and provide a face-saving, consistent means of abandoning obligations or redirecting behavior.

3.7. Social affordances and leverage points

If sensemaking is about figuring out what is going on in the situation, recognizing social affordances is about figuring out what actions are available. Exploiting those affordances to their advantage is important for good strangers. GS skills allow professionals to leverage affordances and positively influence the other person. They should be interested in creating a social situation favorable to their objectives, combining tactfulness with tactical impact, and not just passively accepting the particularities of a situation. As an example, consequences of actions can be motivating. If the person is desperate not to be stigmatized (e.g., seen publicly helping the professional) and thus might be compliant if this shame or danger can be avoided, then a GS—only if possible, in terms of safety—might guarantee that outcome. Similarly, a GS might use social norming to suggest how others (e.g., those to whom the other person might look up) would behave in a given situation. Reasoning through the different outcomes may lead to a complicit interaction partner. Further, recognition and affirmation is critical of the other's sense of self.

Authority, legitimacy, and credibility are important in social encounters and, when not detracting from rapport-building, should be emphasized as appropriate. Relatedly, positive attitude, such as viewing the current situation as a challenge in which to exercise GS skills rather than frustrating resistance to be overcome, demonstrates openness and forthrightness.

4. Training methods

We worked closely with support from Army leadership to assess training of GS skills. Traditionally, during officers' leader courses, language, regional expertise, and culture concepts that are discussed in the classroom are not applied comprehensively at the tactical level in classroom or field exercises, hence new officers are not gaining confidence in their ability to manage the unexpected or difficult interactions requiring GS skills. We also addressed throughput and scalability concerns, with methods and approaches that are intended to apply broadly and rapidly, so that the schoolhouse instructors can readily integrate GS skills content into their courses without the need to dedicate time and resources that are not available. In addressing these concerns, we introduced two types of training intervention.

The first method is "stealth" training, in which an expert for a specific course (e.g., land navigation) sets conditions for learning and competency development consistent with the Army Learning Model. This is done effectively by modeling GS behavior during train the trainer sessions, so that instructors come to understand (both

explicitly and implicitly) how best to get students to reflect on their experiences, solve problems, and take perspective of others. By training trainers, stealth training leverages norms, modeling, and feedback to promote scalability at a low cost.

The second method is a perceptual and cognitive training system for teaching and assessing social skills in dynamic social and tactical situations. The system enables a focus on sensemaking, social affordances, and the intentions that lead to actions in high consequence social situations. It does so by providing decision points where the student's selection of an option causes a particular branch of the situation to happen, and annotation screens on which the student must note or label important features of the scene. As such it simulates decision-making and portrays consequences.

These studies are recently completed. They showed positive effect on the improvement of GS skills [15]; analysis is ongoing and additional formal results will be reported in future papers.We see a strong fit between GS skills training and expanding efforts both in the military and policing to attend to the human dimension and human domain of operations—initiatives to build community trust that point to an urgent need for socially attuned, agile, and adaptable professionals who embody GS skills.

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