

Public Service Event Tactical Communications

Narration Script

9/13/22

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Welcome to Tactical Communications for Public Service, designed to help you and your group provide top-notch communications support for public service events of all kinds.

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Today we're going to talk about ways to improve tactical message handling skills in support of a public service event.

We'll learn why we call it "tactical" communications, how to maintain message accuracy, the limitations of tactical messages, best practices, net operations, and how to make the net tight and efficient.

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What does the word 'tactical' mean as we use it here? The dictionary definition turns out to fit our use of the word pretty well.

1. Operations using specific "tactics,"
2. Quick, small-scale operations serving a larger purpose, and,
3. Actions intended to be carried out within a limited scope.

In our operations, we use specific tactics, *or procedures*, in support of our mission – delivering messages accurately and quickly. The messages we handle support a much larger operation. The scope is limited by the small size and simplicity of tactical messages, and that they're delivered immediately.

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Why teach public service event tactical voice communications?

First, our job as communicators is to help event organizers run safe, fun events.

Also, we know that verbal messages are quite error-prone.

Our efficiency in moving messages depends on our ability to deliver them quickly and accurately. Errors and corrections waste often valuable time. Public service events can be fast moving, so delivering messages quickly and efficiently is important.

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The messages hams handle fall into two categories – tactical or formal.

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"Tactical messages" are simply those sent directly by voice from one person to another.

When you're providing communications for a public service event, like a bikeathon or marathon, virtually all communications will be handled as "tactical" voice messages for all but the largest and longest events.

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Formal messages are sent on a standard radio message form...like ARRL's Radiogram, or a radio-friendly version of FEMA's ICS-213. These forms are sent using well-known voice procedures, or by using one of several digital modes.

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Which kinds of messages can be sent using tactical voice techniques?

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First, they need to be pretty short and simple.

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There should be no more than a brief delay in delivery

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Delivery must be direct, without relays

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Messages should not contain any complex or tricky words.

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And, nothing about a tactical message should make it likely to be misunderstood.

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Put another way, a message should be sent on a form if:

It will need to be relayed one or more times

If the message is detailed, or contains easily misunderstood words

Any kind of list or long, complex message, and...

If the message needs to be traceable or have delivery confirmation.

Again, you're only likely to use formal messages for very large or long-term events.

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If any event requires sending formal messages, consider using NBEMS, or Winlink P2P digital text modes on a second frequency. These should be handled by separate operators so tactical communicators can remain focused on their primary job.

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When can you safely relay a tactical message through one or more stations?

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Never. Ever. Just don't do it.

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One of the key requirements for tactical messages is that they are for direct and immediate delivery. Anytime a verbal message is relayed - even once - errors are added. The more times it's relayed, the more errors are added. If you've ever played the old kids' game of "telephone" you'll have experienced this effect first-hand.

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Okay, now that we've said "never relay messages," there is actually one very small exception. During simplex FM nets, two stations may not be able to hear each other. In this case, a third station that can hear both the sending and receiving stations can relay the verbal message. This is because the originating station can hear the message being relayed and offer any corrections. However, if more than one relay is required, it needs to be sent on a form.

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Errors creep into verbal messages for two main reasons. First, human memory is remarkably fallible. What we "think" we remember often turns out to be wrong. So, to help us remember what someone said, we often abbreviate and paraphrase what we've heard. If a message is verbally relayed through several people, the changes add up, and eventually the message becomes unrecognizable.

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Errors can change meaning, and those changes can have serious, even deadly consequences. We must avoid mistakes in all messages, whether tactical or formal.

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So, what happens when you're asked to pass a message you think isn't appropriate for tactical voice? The one thing you NEVER do is change it on your own. Only the original author can change a message. This applies to all messages, whether tactical or formal. If someone asks you to pass a message that isn't short, clear and simple, suggest it be sent on a message form instead. The act of writing it out often helps the author clarify and focus their thoughts, but if you write it out for them, be sure to get their approval before sending it.

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There are two aspects of our message delivery service that supersede all others – speed, and accuracy. Nothing else matters as much. If you get it right the first time by sending the message clearly, you've already increased delivery speed. But even if you get it there super-fast, if it's not completely accurate, you may be doing more harm than good.

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The gold standard is a "verbatim" message – an exact copy. Using the author's own words can be critically important, since words can mean different things in different situations. Also, each organization and agency has their own jargon, so it's vitally important we use only their original words, not ours.

If you hear a word you're not sure of, ask for clarification or a repeat. Don't guess. It might be a sound-alike, or a word you're unfamiliar with. Also remember that everyone's vocabulary is different. For instance, those with scientific or medical backgrounds know and use words that the rest of us will have never heard of. Getting those words right is critically important. A wrong or misunderstood word could cost someone's life.

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Verbatim messages, although they are the "gold standard," aren't always possible or essential. It's not always easy to remember a verbal message word for word. However, we have an easy fix for simple messages: we call it "read-back."

"We need five traffic cones at Main and Elm ASAP, per the race marshal."

"Confirming, five traffic cones needed at Main and Elm ASAP per the race marshal."

Simply repeat the essentials of the message to the sender. This helps everyone be sure they're getting it right. If you're at the receiving end, be sure to deliver it using exactly the same words you read back. Write the message out on a notepad if you need to.

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If you're the originator of a message, as often happens when we're also performing operational tasks for the agency, or dealing with our own operational issues, make sure your message is clear and can't be mis-interpreted.

Plan what you're going to say before putting it on the air. Don't ramble or think out loud with the mic keyed.

Use plain language everyone will understand. No "Q signals" or other ham jargon.

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To improve clarity and speed, messages should be succinct – clear, short, and complete. Succinct messages are also easier to remember, and faster to send and receive. We need ALL our messages to be like this, so leave your conversational habits at home.

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Let's take a look at a typical off-the-cuff message from someone who's clearly thinking out loud with the mic keyed. Think about how you could make it better.

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"Umm, net control, I just talked to the volunteer out at the intersection of Main and Elm Streets. They've still got that open side road and asked me to request that DPW bring down four of those wooden barricades they have to keep cars off the marathon course. Could you relay that request to the DPW rep for me?"

If you've been doing this for a while, you'll have heard messages like this one.

The message rambles unnecessarily, and takes too much time to send. All the extraneous details make it MUCH harder to remember, and could cause confusion and errors during delivery. The receiving station is left to sort out what's important, because there's no way they will ever remember the entire message verbatim. Errors will be made!

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Here's a more succinct version...

"Operations, the volunteer here requests four wooden DPW barricades to block side street traffic at Main and Elm."

This version focuses on just the important facts. If you are the receiving station, you could read it back to the sender, jot it down exactly as received, and hand it to the DPW representative.

Any message of this sort benefits from being written down on a notepad. It's also good practice to include the time it was received, and from whom.

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Some hams are very possessive about their mics, but handing them off to an official or volunteer is perfectly okay. Make contact with the other station, then hand them the mics and let them talk. When they're done, sign off with the other station. In this case, your primary function is to be the FCC-required control operator.

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It's not always possible, especially if you're a mobile station, or using your hand-held radio in the field, but keeping a log of important messages is good practice.

Anything important or official should be in your log, including orders, requests, significant events, or messages that might need to be verified later.

Informal messages between radio operators, like "get me a ham sandwich" can be left out.

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What goes in a log? It should include the time the message was received at your station, who sent it to you, who it was intended for, who you delivered it to, and a brief description of the message's content. It's important to understand that the addressee and the person delivered to are often different. Someone could be off duty, or the addressee might have been something like EOC or highway department. Knowing the specific person who accepted the message is critical information in the event there are any questions later on.

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Now, let's take a look at the net itself. At its simplest, a net is just a group of folks operating on the same frequency with a common purpose.

There are two styles of nets we can use, depending on the needs of the situation.

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The first is the non-directed net. When message traffic is light, one station can simply call another, pass their message, and then return to listening. It's fast, simple, and efficient. Many smaller events can be handled with a non-directed net.

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Then, there is the "directed net." When messages are flying fast and furious, you may need someone to keep the net "between the guardrails." We call that person the Net Control Station, or NCS. If you

need to pass a message to another station in the net, you call the NCS, and tell them what you need. They may direct you to call the other station, or with formal messages, they may direct you both to move to a different frequency to pass the message, and return to the net when done. The NCS can also prioritize certain messages over others, command “net silence” to handle an emergency, and generally prevent chaos.

You can also operate as a non-directed net, but with an NCS on standby to “jump in” if it gets too busy.

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FCC call signs can be devilishly difficult to remember, especially when you’re working with multiple new people. For that, and other reasons, we use “tactical call signs” that identify a station’s location or function.

The benefits of tactical calls include a faster net, no confusion when operators change, and better overall situational awareness for everyone on the net.

However, don’t forget that you still have to legally identify your station as per FCC rules.

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Contacting another station using tactical call signs is quick and easy, since you don’t need to know who’s operating the radio at the other station.

When you make the call, always put the other station’s tactical call first, then yours. In other words, “you, this is me.” That way, they’ll be more likely to be paying attention and hear who’s calling.

At the end of the exchange, sign off with both your tactical and FCC callsigns to keep it legal. This has the added benefit of letting others know your exchange is complete, without the need to say things like “clear” or “out.”

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We have a system of “message precedences” for letting others know if a message needs special or immediate attention. In a public service event, we’ll mostly use “routine”, “priority”, and “emergency.” Many hams will know these from handling Radiograms, but we use them in a tactical message net as well.

If your message is routine, there’s no need to say so. It just is.

However, if it’s a priority or emergency message, that needs to be clearly stated when you make your call.

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Speaking the precedence FIRST gets everyone’s attention fast, and they’re more likely to pay attention to everything that follows, especially during a busy net.

Normally, we call the NCS during a directed net, but in an emergency, it’s permissible, even desirable to call the other station directly. This can save precious seconds when they matter most. An emergency message halts all other net operations until the emergency is cleared – except for

another emergency. If you hear the word “emergency,” pause what you’re doing and pay close attention, even if you’re not directly involved. If the situation changes, you might be!

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It’s inevitable. Two people are going to key their mics at exactly the same moment. There’s no good way to prevent this, so we need procedures to move quickly past it.

Saying “this is,” and then unkeying for a moment, just slows the net down and doesn’t actually prevent most doubles.

In most cases, the NCS will tell you there was a double, and reply to the station they heard most clearly. If this happens, be patient and try again when they’re done.

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What presentation would be complete without a few simple do’s and don’ts? Here’s a few that will help make the net more efficient.

Don’t let yourself be distracted – pay attention.

Listen for a bit before transmitting to be sure the net isn’t busy working an issue.

Leave space between transmissions so someone can break in with an emergency.

Let net control know before leaving your station, but only if that’s in your net’s protocols.

If you need to speak directly with another station, ask the NCS for permission to “go direct”.

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Now that we’re at the end, let’s do a quick review of some important points from the first half of the presentation.

First, tactical messages need to be short and simple.

If they’re long or detailed, they should be sent as a “formal” message – on a standard message form.

Tactical messages can’t be relayed from one station to another.

“Reading back” a message for confirmation helps preserve accuracy, both to the person who asks you to send it, as well as the station sending it to you.

Writing down a received verbal message to be handed to the recipient also helps avoid errors and misunderstandings.

Finally, log all important messages for later review, and

NEVER, ever change the message you’re given.

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