RAN Exit Academy

'Communicating with radicalised individuals in an exit setting'

Communication between practitioner and participants is one of the core elements of exit work. In the meantime, it is a challenge to establish and maintain a situation in which conversation serves the goal of facilitating an individual to leave an extremist environment, culture or ideology.

Important factors that create a positive setting for exit are mutual respect and trust, clear rules and clarity of the role of practitioners.

This manual aims to help and inspire exit work practitioners in their communication with (former) extremists, based on the expertise of experienced professionals. Not all suggestions provided will apply to every single exit process or facility. Moreover, they should match the practitioner's professional personality. If participants suspect that they are subjected to 'tricks' and feel genuine and authentic behaviour is lacking, communication lines will become thinner.

1. Introduction

What would be the ideal setting for an exit process?

- The participant is determined to change /hertheir life in a positive, non-extremist way;
- He/she is willing to take responsibility for this process of change;
- The exit worker facilitates the participant through mirroring and providing feedback and advice;
- There is mutual trust and understanding. The atmosphere is open.

This is, of course, utopian. However, for the benefit of achieving the desired result, it is good to aim at getting as close as possible. Communication plays a key factor here. This manual will look at challenges that might come across in conversations and how to deal with them.

2. Challenges in communication

2.1 Patterns

In the communication between participant and practitioner, three patterns can be distinguished that are not beneficial for an exit process:

2.1.1   Active rejection by the participant

There are several reasons why participants may refuse a conversation.

- Feeling ashamed about the situation;
- Denying that a problem exists;
- Bad reputation of exit facility in peer group;
- Feeling insecure about what will happen with the information;
- Distrust;
- Not accepting the practitioner:
  - as a person (e.g. they feel they are not being taken seriously)
  - professional (e.g. "I don't need a therapist")
  - as representative of an institution they depict (e.g. police, intelligence or government). Can be prejudice- or conspiracy-based.

Rejection might be structural or, rather, mood-dependent. The lack of will to talk can be general or limited to certain topics, e.g. more personal issues.

2.1.2   Participant in extremist bubble

When a participant is still mentally and/or physically part of an extremist group, or a firm believer of an extremist ideology, it is hard to reach out to him/her. Messages from outside the

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General guidelines exit

The RAN Exit working group has described some general guidelines on exit work that has been used as markers for this manual:

1. Voluntary participation is key.
2. The participant is the owner of his/her process of change.
3. Exit processes from different extremist groups/ideologies are similar.
4. Exit processes are highly individual: drivers, personal situation and state of mind differ.
5. Exit processes are future-orientated.
6. Apart from counseling, practical needs also need to be dealt with.

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non-extremist world are not noticed or taken seriously. The participant provides the information with which he/she is familiar and may try to convince the practitioner. There is no cognitive opening for change. The participant is not necessarily aware of this.

2.1.3   Noise between participant and practitioner

The practitioner and the participant are not on the same page. There is no mutual understanding or common ground. This is not necessarily related to the extremist nature of the participant and can also be related differences in language, cultural, socio-economic and educational background or substance abuse, for example.

The three patterns can also occur simultaneously and consecutive during exit processes. Although in the end, both parties need to solve communication problems, it is the role of the practitioner to create the prerequisites for solutions.

2.2 Roles: Drama triangle

Which attitude roles make communication unsuccessful? Stephen Karpman describes this in his drama triangle[1]. He defines three positions/roles:

- Victim (V): it is not my fault. I need help. Overwhelmed by a sense of vulnerability, inadequacy or powerlessness, the individual does not take responsibility.
- Rescuer (R): let me help you, I know what you need. Doesn't take responsibility for themselves but rather for the perceived victim.
- Persecutor (P): it is your fault. Uses power in a negative or even destructive way.[2]

There may be a difference between the inner and outer perception of the role a person plays. The decision to take on the role is mostly made unconsciously and people tend to change over time and within a situation. In an exit work setting, the professional is not necessarily the rescuer, nor the participant the victim. Roles here also change.
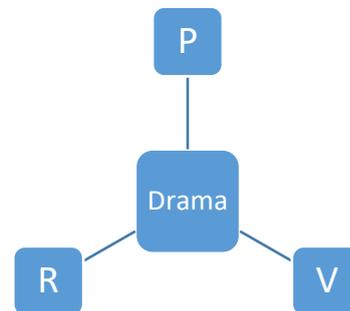

Figure 1 Karpman's Drama Triangle

For example: an exit worker (R) pressures the participant (V) to visit an imam. In the next session the participant appears dissatisfied. The visit didn't produce anything and he/she (P) criticises the exit worker's decision, who apologises (V) for it or becomes angry (P) because they feel that their help is not appreciated.

So, anyone can assume one of the drama roles. The participant can even become the rescuer, e.g. by trying to convince the exit worker to follow the path of his/her ideology. Individuals who were involved in an extremist/manipulative group will have experienced negative roles. Radical ideologies also tend to have clear roles of victimhood (our culture is under fire), rescuer (we are needed) and persecutor (scapegoating, we-us thinking.

Karpman identifies unproductive roles that are useful for self-assessment and analysis into how people communicate. The model was also further developed to see how the three roles could be changed in a positive and more productive way. David Emerald converted the anxiety-based problem-focused Drama triangle to a passion-based outcome-focused approach which he named "The Empowerment Dynamic (TED)"[3]. He changed the roles as follows:

- Creator instead of victim;

[1] S. Karpman, The New Drama Triangles (2007).
[2] M.Orris, The Karpman Drama Triangle by Steven Karpman (2015).

[3] D. Emerald, W.A.I.T- Why am I talking? (2015).

- Coach instead of rescuer;
- Challenger instead of persecutor.

2.3 Different from other target groups?

The communication between an exit worker and a former extremist will have significant similarities with other situations in which a professional is facilitating individuals to change their life, e.g. rehab, desistance and anger control. Numerous exit workers have experience in these fields and communication methods and strategies from other sectors are used in exit work.

Some factors make communication in exit work specific and, perhaps, more complicated.

- Radical ideologies tend not to accept the current organisation of the country/world;
- Radical environments have their own language;
- Radical groups can still have influence over or pose a threat to the participant.
- Extremism is often not the only challenge to solve in rehabilitation. Other problematic factors may include PTSD, substance abuse, aggressive behaviour and so on.
- Exit work is often delivered under special circumstances e.g. in prison or under probation.

3. The Exit Worker

3.1 Role

There is no clear profile of an exit worker. They come from different backgrounds (e.g. youth workers, psychotherapists, religion studies) and work under different circumstances (e.g. in prison and society, for an NGO or a government body, funded by the state, trusts or families). This diversity also will result in different forms of communication with clients. Looking at the role of exit workers, the main task is to facilitate the participant's exit process through:

- Coaching;
- Providing practical help for rehabilitation;
- Involving other experts (multi-agency).

As the emphasis of this paper is on speaking with radicalised individuals, we will focus on the coaching role.

3.2 Credibility and gaining trust

The relation between an exit worker and a participant is not on an equal footing. Where the participant has needs, the exit worker can help him/her to fulfil them. The professional is more experienced in processes of change. The radicalised person may have limitations, both legally (being incarcerated, under probation or receiving compulsory treatment) and societal (small network). This is a given fact and communication and interaction between the two will need to take place under these conditions. For the participant, the feeling of being heard and respected as an individual(so not for the extremist acts and opinions) is an essential element.

Being clear and honest about your role is key to building and maintaining trust. Participants should be aware of the exit worker's tasks and the limits that these pose. For example, most practitioners will have to report situations where there is a clear and present danger for society or the participant. In some situations, participants are aware that you have received information that concerns them. And they also know why they are in contact with you. If a participant feels that an exit worker is not being honest with them, credibility will be undermined.

Expressing authenticity is an important prerequisite in gaining trust. If a participant has the impression that the exit worker is simply actioning the skills they have learnt, the individual may feel that they are not being taken seriously. In the meantime, a certain distance is needed. Facilitating an exit process requires a balance between empathy and a professional attitude. The challenge is avoid creating a situation of informality and loss of professional distance, or to become biased when one starts to feel sympathy for a participant.

3.3 Ideology or therapeutic/coaching expertise?

What should a practitioner know of the participant's radical ideology when coaching a person who wants to resocialise? Of course, possessing in-depth expertise is useful as it assists in contextualising the participant's behaviour and statements and also raises awareness when it comes to sensitive topics. However, overstating one's knowledge is not fruitful as it might spark a competition on who knows best and blur the lines between the roles of persecutor and rescuer. Therapeutic or coaching expertise, perhaps working with other target groups, is helpful when facilitating a personal process of change.

Most importantly, practitioners should have sufficient knowledge of both in order to have a constructive dialogue. Without knowing the basics, participants will not accept you. However, if you show interest, listen closely and ask for further information, people are generally happy to elaborate. As an exit worker, you can always check with colleagues or other professionals whether the information is feasible or signals you notice are a cause for concern.

The culture of an extremist social environment is an important field of study. This is the place where ideology and (group) behaviour come together. This is especially true for people who have been part of a group for a long time, or in cases where a group that maintains a significant distance from 'mainstream society' will have conditioned their behaviour in this situation. Former extremists have the experience to assess whether a certain attitude is typical for the extremist group or should be viewed as an individual characteristic.

4. The participant

Individuals who remain in or have recently left an extremist environment often make use of the conversation style common to this environment. This partly reflects the thought pattern, which can be very black and white, intolerant and, sometimes, even aggressive. As in other aspects of life and behaviour, the radical tone of voice has taken over the individual's personal form of expression.

This manner of communication, on the part of the participant, poses two challenges. Firstly, it is hard to reach out to the individual to tear down the wall of radical conversation behind which the participant hides themselves. This can slow down the process of trust-building. Secondly, the radical conversation style is one aspect that should change when one seeks to resocialise. By retaining the use of a radical tone of voice, others will not recognise you have changed and perhaps even still feel intimidated or under attack. Therefore, discussing the manner of communication within the context of the relationship between exit worker and participant is also a part of the exit process.

Participants will not be able to change their conversation style overnight as ideas and convictions rarely alter so rapidly, and it also takes time to modify style and vocabulary. It should be expected that, the further an individual has progressed in the exit process, the more they will be able to communicate in and adapt to a normal societal setting. In the pre- and initial phase of the exit process, it is especially important to strike a balance between what is considered acceptable and the interference of an exit worker that may pose a threat for building a relationship.

5. Starting up the conversation

The first contact with a participant is crucial as no trust has been established yet. In some situations an exit worker really has only one attempt to establish a connection, e.g. when a family has requested to offer help to a a relative. In other situations, e.g. when a participant is in prison), returning at a later time is possible. The following elements improve the chances of initiating a process of change:

1. Create a **safe environment** for your first appointment. This should be a setting that encourages the participant to open up and also minimises the risk of violence. Both the safety of the participant and exit worker should be taken into account. A first encounter in an office, for instance, can be alienating for the participant. Meeting in a home environment may pose a safety hazard for the exit worker and, where other family members or friends are present, limits the possibility of the participant speaking freely. Therefore, initial meetings are arranged in public places.

2. Be **well prepared**. For some exit workers this implies reading available files and possibly communicating with professionals who have previously worked with the participant, or relatives of the individual, in order to form an accurate picture. For others, it means entering the situation with an open, unprejudiced mindset in order to see what the participant has to say.

3. Work towards a **follow-up appointment**. The first meeting will rarely be hands-on or an open discussion. It takes time to reach this point. Setting a second appointment and fulfilling promises in this regard can be a positive element in itself. This is an opportunity to show the participant that they are being taken seriously. If the participant is in a bad mood or under the influence of substances, it is important to make arrangements for a more suitable time.

4. Be **straightforward** about who you are and why you are there. This should not be construed as taking a confrontational approach. For instance, most individuals are not keen on being labelled as extremist.

> **Working online**
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> Some exit programmes have tested initiatives to reach out to the target group online. The impact of an online-only approach is hard to prove as the exit worker doesn't really know the participant and has no clue as to whether their interventions have any effect and whether the participants are being honest in describing their problems and progress. A more ethical dilemma: if a participant doesn't reveal his/her identity, should the exit worker do the same or should they work undercover.
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> As online is a part of the target group's daily life , it obviously can be a point for starting a conversation or to serve as a means of contact between face-to-face appointments.

5. Be clear about what your limits are when it comes to **confidentiality**. That is, what stays in the room and what has to be reported.

6. **Listen and observe**: one of the pitfalls an exit worker faces is talking too much. To gain a good impression of your new participant, it is good to observe instead of primarily taking the floor. For the participant, it indicates immediately that they can talk in this setting.

7. Pay attention to the participant's **needs and concerns**. This is not the same as solving them, acknowledging them or even taking the role of the rescuer. It is more about respecting that people have needs and concerns and that these can be prioritised in the process. Of course, if there is a clear emergency, action is needed.

8. Seek the **appropriate level of communication**. Take intellectual capacities and mental disorders/problems into account. Talking in an overly simple manner may provoke feelings of

not being taken seriously. Speaking in complicated terms may upset the individual or make him/her passive.

9. Show affirmation in response to the participant's **positive thoughts and actions**.

10. Remain impartial when the participant engages in **provocative behaviour**. The individual may try to test the exit worker, to see if they can be trusted or can lose their objectivity and be pulled out of his/her professional role or comfort zone. One important way of handling such situations is to be aware of what attitudes and issues upset you. Reflection carried out alone or with colleagues on how to respond in a professional way can be helpful.

6. Conversation strategies

The main goal of conversations between the exit worker and participant is to bring forward the participant's process of change. The goal is not fact-finding,interrogation or convincing the individual. If a participant perceives that discussion may be moving in a direction of this sort,they will quickly assume the role of the victim. What methods can be employed when talking to radicalised individuals?

1. Work with **open questions** as this stimulates discussion and encourages the participant to talk of their own accord and to formulate what they need or want to accomplish. Open questions work only when they sound unprejudiced. In this sense, 'why' is often perceived as negative and should be avoided. Asking several questions in a short space of time will not work as the participant usually will not answer all of them. If an open question doesn't result in a satisfactory answer, don't reword it but simply pose another open question instead.

2. Talk **future-orientated**. Where is the individual now and where do they want to go?. What is their dream scenario? If this is unrealistic, don't pass judgement immediately. Let the participant think through their dream scenario and take a reality check then jointly adjust it so that it is realistic. A good way to downsize ambitions is to shorten the time frame in question. For example, the question "where would you like to be in a year's time?"' will produce more realistic answers than "how do you envision your future?". It is important for the participant to be able to see a future orperspective in order to stay motivated in the process towards change.

> ### Motivational interviewing
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> Much of the advice provided here can also be found in a method called Motivational Interviewing developed by William R. Miller and Stephan Rollnick. It was originally developed for rehabilitation therapy   It is a four- phase model:
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> 1. Engagement: trust building and goal-setting .
> 2. Focusing: seeking and maintaining direction.
> 3. Evoking: trigger the participant's motivation for change.
> 4. Planning: participant creates their own plan of action, facilitated by the coach.

3. Use the **biographical narrative interpretive method** to assist the participant in formulating a future perspective. It should not be about comprehensively reconstructing their past but rather examining be focused on personal qualities that they possess which they can build on. This shows them that their life story did not make their path to radicalism inevitable.

4. **Mirroring** is effective. By repeating part of what they say or using the same words, the participant feels that they are being heard. There are, however, two challenges when talking to radicalised persons. Repeating destructive messages will be perceived as confirmation. Furthermore, the exit worker should not use vocabulary that is not in line with their role. Although in the short term, the

5. **Reframing** can be also helpful. Contrary to mirroring, where words or statements are repeated, in this case the exit worker gives a new twist to elements of what is being said. This can be done in order to check whether they fully understood what the participant has said, to underline the impact of what has been said or to convert earlier statements to positive tolerant language.

6. **Provide food for thought** and **plant seeds of doubt.** Make people think of unlogical and contradictive messages within the extremist ideology. This asks for balancing between subtle and clear. Point should be risen withour be explicit and moralistic however not to be noticed as something to think about.

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7. Let the participant **rephrase and conclude** in order to make them the owner of the process. If the exit worker summarises what has been said, the conclusions and actions will be perceived as theirs.

8. Make a clear division **between individual opinions and acts**. As a coach you should distance yourselffrom opinions and acts that an individual has carried out. It is important that, the participant feels respected as a person. Only in this way will a cognitive and emotional opening for change remain. When establishing distance from opinions and acts, it should be done in a factual manner and not place you in the role of persecutor. It is not uncommon for exit workers to literally refer to the difference between their respect for an individual and their opinions.

9. Make a **clear distinction** between 'mainstream' ideology or religion in all its forms and problematic or violent extremist versions. Following a certain faith or showing solidarity with (perceived) vulnerable groups is not the problem but, rather, the way violent extremists deal with it. This approach can pave the way for positive future plans by rechanneling engagement.

10. **Promote self-agency.** Allow the participant to take decisions on matters that lie within their capacity. This can start with simple matters like determining where the next meeting could take place. If this doesn't work out, use this as an angle in determining the next step in the process.

7. Using methods, tools and techniques in a structured way

Determining the way to communicate with radicalised persons is an essential part of shaping an exit programme. When choosing methods, tools and techniques for an exit programmer, take into consideration the following:

- Exit programme target group.
    - o Does the method or tool match the culture of this group or offer ways to connect with the culture?
    - o Does it match intellectual capacities?
    - o Is the complexity of the process of change understood?
- The practitioners:
    - o What is their educational background? Does the method or tool help them build their skills and knowledge?
    - o Are there any elements to which they may likely object? How should these be tackled?
    - o Does the programme answer their needs and sense of urgency?

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[4] W.R. Miller & S. Rollnick, Motivational Interviewing. Helping People Change. 3rd edition (2012).

- o Should they be involved in the choice to create ownership?
- Implementation:
  - o Are implementation tools available (e.g. training, documents, protocols)?
  - o Do practitioners have sufficient time to familiarise themselves with the new method or tool?
  - o Will these tools or methods replace or add to current practice?
- Effectiveness
  - o Is academic research available?
  - o Do other exit programmes work in a similar way?
  - o How do other programmes facilitate processes of change?
- Flexibility:
  - o Can the method or tool be adapted?
  - o Is it user-friendly?

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