The Secret to an Effective Interrogation

The Home Team School of Criminal Investigation recently began the Evidence Based Interview, Intelligence and Interrogation (EB3i) courses for Home Team officers. The trainers come from the 'Soufan Group' based in the United States, and contain expert trainers who have worked before at the US FBI and Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS). But what exactly are our officers learning about? Home Team News chats with Soufan Group founder Ali Soufan and course participants to find out more.

By Win Kwang Siang Soon

Though many would rather not end up at an interrogation room, there is definitely an air of mystery on what would entail inside.

Going into this course, the notion of a once familiar harsh and fierce interrogation (no doubt a product of many hours spent watching police shows and movies), were at the fore front of this reporter's thoughts.

However, a talk with Robert McFadden, Senior Vice President from the Soufan group, who only 2 and a half years ago retired from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS), shed light on what he and his company believes, a real interview should be.

"I can tell you what you won’t expect from us. You won’t expect a bright light glaring at your eyes, loud music, slamming a telephone book down the table," shared the 55 year old Mr Mcfadden.

“These kinds of antics are what we believe to be counterproductive and a waste of time that hinders an effective interview."

Mr McFadden joined the Soufan Group in 2011, after accepting an offer from long-time colleague and friend Ali Soufan, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Soufan Group.
“In one word, professional. Singapore Police officers are some of the most professional and passionate individuals I have ever worked with,” shared Mr Robert McFadden. PHOTO: Benjamin Chua

“We go back to the days of the USS Cole Bombing investigation. I was the case agent for NCIS and he (Mr Soufan) for the FBI. Since then, we became partners on numerous cases,” shared Mr McFadden.

Mr Soufan is also well known for his work on high profile terrorism cases and was even described by a New Yorker article in 2006, as the man who came closest than anyone to preventing the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

Together, the two men were present at the Home Team Academy for the Evidence Based Interview, Intelligence & Interrogation (EB3i) Basic and Advanced course.

The objective of the EB3i is to train Home Team officers on how to obtain reliable and accurate information and intelligence.

The course will also explore how principles and strategies drawn from allied fields as behavioral science can be applied as an integrated model for conducting interviews and interrogations.

“Based on sciences and practical knowledge, we want to provide the tools to enhance the capabilities of IOs (Investigation Officers), to conduct a clean, thorough and effective investigation,” shared Mr Soufan.

Most importantly, the trainers from the Soufan Group emphasize a strict “No Coercive Techniques” stance.

Coercive techniques refer to the use of alternate sets of procedures to derive information during an
interrogation. This includes the use of intimidation, stress and torture.

“Our company does not believe that coercive techniques work. The main problem that they create is false confessions that can send you on wild goose chases for leads,” shared Mr Soufan.

He believes that ultimately, police officers all want to know the truth. Coercive methods tend to deviate from the truth; by telling you what you think happens.

Hence, the Soufan Group’s 3 pillars towards achieving accurate strategic intelligence involve Consultancy, Research and Training.

A Soufan Group trainer teaching course participants on recognizing various social cues during an interrogation. PHOTO: Benjamin Chua

Training in this case, is presented to participating officers of the Home Team, in an interrogation context through their extensive behavioral sciences research findings.

As this reporter observed the course and its participants, the false notion he previously held of what an interrogation should be like, gradually dissipated.

Speaking to the course participants, many had found that the techniques presented by the Soufan Group were indeed different and new.

Stephanie Chan, who works at the Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre (HTBSC), was particularly impressed with the Soufan Group’s evidence based research.

“You need to give a reason or support to anything you do. I felt that they were able to do that well with their research,” shared the 26 year old.

For Mohammed Imran bin Mohammed Ayub from the Commercial Affairs Department (CAD), he
feels excited to finally have the opportunity of learning from a leading group in the area of intelligence and interrogation.

As an officer in the International Corporations division, Mr Imran is no stranger to interrogation having spent 4 years investigating white collar crime in CAD.

“So far, I am very interested in their methods and the model that they are teaching us,” shared Mr Imran.

“What they teach us is pretty new to me in terms of practice. It is not just a one way transfer of information between me and the interviewee, but a sharing of information instead.”

As he explains, intelligence gathering begins way before the interview, so Information officers know what they are looking for and have the background knowledge on hand to ask the right questions.

During the interview, instead of conventional interrogation techniques (cold room, poor lighting, no windows), the course encourages building a more approachable environment by adding windows and adopting a softer approach.

Mr Imran sees this approach benefiting him when he interviews witnesses.

This view is also shared by Ms Chan, who feels that such interview techniques help in her HTBSC projects.

“We do work on some projects that involve talking to people like problem gamblers. As gambling is a sensitive topic, I feel the course can teach me methods on not only building rapport, but also on asking the right questions that derive real information,” shared Ms Chan.
Furthermore, Imran feels that the proven research done by the company and shared to him in class has changed his perspective on interrogation.

“One thing that struck me was how their studies showed that one third of suspects enter the interrogation room willing the share information with you,” shared Mr Imran.

“This is quite shocking for me as I would think that most suspects will never agree to share information with us. But if they many are willing to do so, is a hard approach really needed?”

This total change of mindsets is what he hopes to share with his colleagues after the course finishes.

“4 years into the force, I am not convinced whether a hard or soft approach is the best way. But this will certainly give me the opportunity to try it out,” said Mr Imran.

Looking forward, both Mr Imran and Ms Chan eagerly anticipate the practical sessions in the days to come, which is the hallmark of the EMB3i courses.

“The officers in the training programme are really experienced, what we are doing through practical sessions and role playing is building upon their foundation to give them the necessary experience,” said Mr McFadden.

“We are not only conveying concepts but also sharing feedback afterwards. It’s really about applying and learning.”

At the end of the interview, we asked both Mr Soufan and Mr McFadden what they thought about Singapore Police Force (SPF).
Their answers praised the success of SPF officers and their efforts in building a community of trust.

“There may be a lot of differences with the way law enforcement operates. But in terms of cultural cooperation, Singapore is very strong. We don’t see that sometimes in different areas around the world,” shared Mr Soufan.

From a Research standpoint, Mr Mcfadden, who has done many collaborative projects with the SPF, feels that the SPF been able to effectively leverage on the Singapore’s unique circumstances from its cultural harmony to distinct societal makeup.

“In one word, professional. Singapore Police officers are some of the most professional and passionate individuals I have ever worked with,” shared Mr Mcfadden.