

RTDNA Journalist SAFE Training

Safety and Awareness in the Field Every Day

Verbal De-Escalation

This is a technique that using active listening and a specific communication strategy any journalist can use to help calm an upset person they may encounter. This skill is used by hospital staff, mental health workers and public safety officials. This is truly an art form and takes practice to become proficient.

5 Key Principles of Verbal De-Escalation

1. **Give the person your undivided attention.** Turning away from them or not paying close attention could lead to escalation or physical assault.
2. **Be nonjudgmental.**
3. **Focus on the person's feelings, not just the facts.**
4. **Allow silence.** It's ok to not say anything or have long pauses in the active listening process. This shows the other person that you are interested in what they have to say and waiting for them to say more.
5. **Use restatement to clarify messages.** This helps the upset person confirm that you are indeed paying attention to what they are saying.

Tips for Successful Verbal De-Escalation

Get the name of the person who you are speaking with. People respond favorably to their own name. It also makes the interaction more personal. Ask for the person's name early on and use it throughout. "Hi Bill, nice to meet you, my name is Chris and this is Holly, we are from WWWW TV."

Active Listening: Clarify, paraphrase and use open-ended questions to help to ensure that the person is aware you have understood their issues. This helps to lower frustration levels as they feel they have "got it off their chest." "You mentioned a few things, I want to be sure I understand exactly why you are upset. You feel the Mayor is singling you out with this new city policy because you complained in the past about the city budget?"

Slow down, show empathy and don't judge: Even if you do not agree with the person, expressing and reflecting why that person feels a particular way will help resolve the conflict. Don't make rash judgements, but work through the process. Show compassion and empathy and give the conflict your full attention.

Get them to say YES: It is hard for someone to stay mad at you if they agree with you. We do this by asking questions and providing a summary during the interaction to help confirm you get their point. "So you are unhappy about ** because of **, so I get this clear, is that correct?"

NEVER say "Calm Down." These words do not work during a verbal conflict! Never in the history of "Calm Down" has anyone ever calmed down.

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When Verbal De-Escalation is Not Working: Look for Body Language

- The person clenching his or her fists or tightening and relaxing their jaw.
- Any sudden change in body language or tone used during a conversation.
- The person starts pacing or fidgeting.
- Change in type of eye contact between you and the upset person.
- The dominance “Rooster Stance” – chest protruding out more and arms more away from the body.

STOP: [Any of these body language signs](#) are reasons to suspect that the person who is upset may very soon act violently towards you or your crew. Remember your [situational awareness](#) and have a plan to escape. Do not turn your back to them.

Tips & Tricks

To verbally de-escalate another person, you must open as many clear lines of communication as possible. Both you and the other person must listen to each other and have no barriers. Barriers to communication are the things that keep the meaning of what is being said from being heard.

Communication Barriers:

- Pre-Judging
- Not Listening
- Criticizing
- Name-Calling
- Engaging in Power Struggles
- Ordering
- Threatening
- Minimizing
- Arguing

80% to 90% of our communication is non-verbal. It is very important to be able to identify exactly what we are communicating to others nonverbally.

You may be trying to de-escalate the situation by talking to the other person, but your body language maybe showing a willingness to get physical.

It is also important that we recognize and understand the non-verbal cues from another person who has the potential of escalating. A natural smile is good. A fake smile can aggravate the situation. Use slow and deliberate movements. Quick actions may surprise or scare the other person.

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Positioning & Safety

While de-escalating another person, you want to be in a non-threatening, non-challenging and self-protecting position.

- Stay slightly more than a leg's length away, on an angle and off to the side of the other person.
- Stay far enough away that the other person cannot hit, kick or grab you.

Remain calm and listen - really listen!

- Avoid overreaction.
- Validate! "I understand why you might be upset." (This does not indicate that you agree with them.)
- Remove onlookers or relocate to a safer place. (Onlookers can become either "cheerleaders" or additional victims in the event of escalation.)
- Watch for non-verbal clues or threats.
- There is less chance of aggressive behavior if two people are talking to one person, so work in pairs whenever possible.
- It will be beneficial to have a witness, if the situation deteriorates and someone is injured.

Good Practices

Always report minor situations to your managers. Minor situations can be a "warning signs" of bigger things to come! Always document every threatening event. Keep the camera recording to document your interactions.

Bad Practices

- Avoid becoming emotionally involved – control your emotions at all times.
- Avoid engaging in power struggles.
- Avoid becoming rigid in your process.
- Avoid telling the other person that you "know how he or she feels."
- Avoid raising your voice, cussing, making threats, and giving ultimatums or demands.
- Avoid aggressive language, including body language.
- Do not attempt to intimidate a hostile person.

Learn more about Verbal De-Escalation by visiting www.RTDNA.org/safety