De-Escalation and Working with the Public

Introduction

While the original purpose of this technique was to aid police officers in reducing the tension of an interaction (de-escalate), it is also helpful in other scenarios where we interact with people in a high-stress situation or where they are otherwise emotionally agitated.

THE GOAL OF DE-ESCALATION IS NOT TO RESOLVE THE ENTIRE PROBLEM ON THE SPOT! RATHER, THE GOAL IS TO REDUCE THE EMOTIONAL STRESS, BUILD RAPPORT, AND TO ACHIEVE AN AGREEMENT TO WORK TOGETHER TO FIND A SOLUTION AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE.

Our Mindset

When conducting de-escalation our mindset will greatly determine the outcome. Again, our goal is *not* to resolve the entire problem on the spot. Nor is our goal to "fix" the other person's thinking and make them see our point of view.

Our mindset must be focused on being calm, poised, and assertive, but also aimed at the goal of *understanding* the other person's situation and emotions so that we can demonstrate to them that they are *understood*.

Once a person *feels* listened-to and understood, emotions tend to drop, and more constructive dialog can commence. However, we must realize people are not computers and we may have to go through multiple cycles of the process before a person burns through their emotional responses. So, we must be patient as we help them understand that we really are listening to them and trying to understand them.

Key Notes

Not every step must be followed slavishly.

The technique is designed to naturally flow from one step to another as part of the conversation. It's helpful to have a small card taped in a notebook where you can refer to it as you speak with the person while you also take notes (another way of making them feel listened-to is by writing down what they say).

If a person you are interacting with regresses to an emotional outburst, the process begins again until the final step ("guide") can be achieved.

De-Escalation With MOREPIES, Step-by-Step

SAFE – Ensure that no one is in imminent danger before attempting de-escalation. This includes proper distance and placing objects between you and the person you are interacting with.

> *"Is the scene safe? The scene is safe."*

PRESENCE – We can best minimize fear when we present a strong, protective presence. Establish a calm, poised and assertive presence. Ensure that your body language matches the words that are coming out of your mouth. Conduct "self-check-ins" during the incident to ensure you maintain control of the incident.

> *"I am calm, poised and assertive."*

ENGAGE – Establish communication. We know when we've established communication when the person makes eye contact.

> *"Sir, sir, I'm over here."*

CONTEXT – Define a general, positive goal and establish ground rules.

> *"I can listen to you when you stop yelling."*

REFLECT – Active listening techniques support rational thought and reduce fear.

> *"Uh-huh…Umm…So you're really angry at John, is that right?"*

MORE-PIES

M - Minimal Encouragers - Small verbal statement to acknowledge that you are hearing what the individual is saying, and you are ready for the next piece of information. This technique can really help a person feel heard.

> *"Uh-huh, Yeah, Sure"*

O – Open-Ended Questions - Asking open ended questions which require more than a one- or two-word response forces the individual to elaborate in their answers forcing them to access their cognitive (forebrain) thought process.

> *"What brought us here today? How did that make you feel? Then what happened?"*

> *"Can you tell me more about _____?"*

R – Reflecting / Mirroring - A quick re-cap of what the individual had just said to show that you were listening to what he / she is communicating.

> *"My road is being torn up and I don't feel like living here anymore."*

> *"Your road is being torn up and you don't feel like living here anymore."*

E – Emotional Labeling - Labeling the emotions that the individual is expressing with non-verbal cues or what he / she are verbally communicating.

> *"I have been working at the shed for 10 years and then they just up and fire me!?"*

> *"You're angry that they fired you."*

P – Paraphrasing - Like reflecting / mirroring but a condensed version of what is being communicated. This is best used at the end of a long monologue.

> *"You tore out the trees, those trees have been here for a hundred years! You destroyed the best part of the area, the part everyone comes here to see, and I don't feel like living here anymore. This is the end of this being a nice place to live!!!"*

> *"What I hear you saying is that we removed the trees, destroyed the best part of the area, and you don't feel like living here anymore because it is destroyed."*

I – Use of "I" Statements - Use of "I" Statements can be an excellent way to establish boundaries when dealing with someone who is angry.

> *"I can listen to you when you stop yelling."*

> *"I can talk to you when you put down the stick."*

> *"I am trying to understand you, but it is difficult when you won't communicate with me."*

E - Effective Pauses - Effective pauses can be used as a tool to enforce boundaries that have been established, or to prompt an individual to start talking when they are emotional. Natural speech patterns in a conversation have "back and forth" which require input from all parties. When one of the parties stops communicating it places pressure on the other party to continue talking to ease the tension.

S – Summary - This is used to re-communicate the situation, as they explained it, to show that you are listening to what they have to say.

> Reflecting / Mirroring + Paraphrasing

GUIDE – Verify that de-escalation has occurred to the point that problem-solving is possible.

> *"Can we work on that together and try to get you some help with your concerns?"*

Follow-up and PSASA

De-escalation is only the first step. Once a situation is under control and you have achieved an agreement to work together, the next step is to prepare for the next interaction.

It is essential that you demonstrate you are still "tuned-in" to what their concerns, fears, and problems are. You do not have to agree with them, but you need to help the other person know that you understand them.

Verbal, in-person or written?

It is important to carefully consider what the most appropriate method of follow-up should be. Not every request is best handled by long strings of text. Similarly, a phone call is of little help if you refer to complex documents.

Spend a few moments asking the question, "How can I most effectively communicate with *this person* so that they can best understand what I am trying to say about *this topic*? Should I send an email, a letter, make a phone call, or schedule a meeting?"

Some people do better on the phone. Others through written communication. A few minutes picking the right communication method can save you having to re-communicate the information again in another form.

In the example below, the responses are designed as a letter or email because of the position of the person requesting information. However, it is easy to see how to modify the steps to work for a conversation.

PSASA – Returning to the dialogue

The purpose of PSAS is to let the person know you "get it" – you listened, you listened to understand them as a person, and you are trying to help.

P – Paraphrase – Return to your notes from the previous interaction and restate the issues and points the person brought up previously.

> *"Senator Smith, when we last spoke you mentioned that you were concerned about the following issues:*
>
> - *Contractors from out-of-state being award Idaho dollars.*
> - *Constituents being angry and feeling left out in the cold when they do not win a contract.*
> - *You have a large construction voter base in your district and their concerns need to be addressed quickly.*

S – Summary – Similar to "paraphrase", but even more abbreviated and specifically addresses the reason why de-escalation was needed.

"As I recall from our discussion, the core issue is you felt we had not adequately informed you and your constituents of the bidding process and how bids are awarded. This is particularly important given that next year is an election year."

A – Acknowledge – While we do not need to agree with the person that their point of view is the right one, it is important that we build rapport by acknowledging their feelings and concerns.

"I can certainly understand the frustration of being surprised by someone calling me about an issue I did not know about. As you said, we also want to be sure we are good stewards of the tax-payers' money."

S – Suggest and Provide – The next step is to suggest and provide some information that may help move the discussion forward. We also provide the names or contacts of appropriate people if we feel we cannot adequately answer questions.

"I reviewed Idaho law 67-2805 'Procurement of Public Works Construction' and discussed it with the district engineer. Solicitations for bids were made (copies are attached along with a list of where the solicitations were sent). We received five bids for the amounts listed on the attached spreadsheet. From there we followed the process set out by the legislature.

"I also checked with the legal group and asked if there was any requirement that I was unaware of that would encourage us to give preference to Idaho businesses over those of other states. Their response is attached, but they said that this was a bid for a Category A project and the statute does not allow for consideration of the bidder's home state:

```
'Category A. Competitive bidding procedures shall be open to receipt of bids
from any licensed public works contractor desiring to bid upon a public works
project. For a category A bid, the political subdivision may only consider the
amount bid, bidder compliance with administrative requirements of the bidding
process, and whether the bidder holds the requisite license, and shall award
the bid to the qualified bidder submitting the lowest responsive bid.'
```

"Unfortunately, I cannot give you as complete an answer about the law that the Jane Smith can. She said you are welcome to call her at (208) 555-0000 if you have further questions on that front."

A – ASK – Finally, keep the dialogue moving. The goal is not to give a "slam dunk" answer that is a water-tight argument. It's to have a conversation and come to a mutual understanding.

"I hope this is helpful in speaking with your constituents. Is there something more that you would like me to look into for you on this topic?"

Continuing the dialogue

Often a person will want more information or wish to argue a point. There is nothing wrong with that! They are trying to either understand what you have provided, or they feel they are not being understood. Return to the process and continue the cycle.

An Example from Social Media

Social media chats are a new avenue of communication that many people prefer to use. However, it can be a minefield since it lends itself easily to misunderstandings. People tend to "lash out" or be more aggressive over social media. It takes a delicate touch. However, using the principles of de-escalation we can create a constructive and friendly discussion.

Here is a real-world example of an aggressive request for information that we received via social media chat and how the situation was de-escalated to a positive outcome.

Note: The discussion does not follow a rigid framework. Instead, it uses MOREPIES and PSASA as a guide to facilitate de-escalation and build constructive communication.
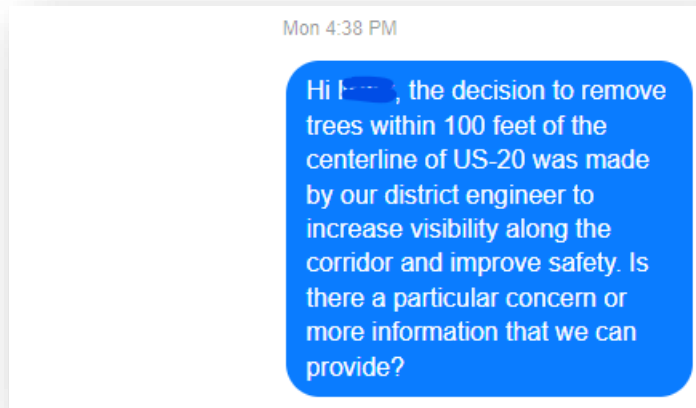

A confrontational demand for information

Mon 3:37 PM

Who is responsible for the decision to kill the trees along the road in Island Park?
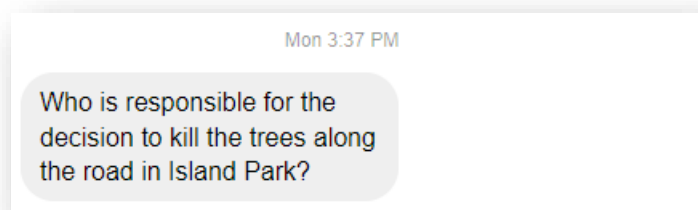
At the outset we note the confrontational tone that is more of an accusation than a question, "Who is responsible…", and the use of the loaded term "kill". The implication is clear – somebody is responsible for killing trees and this citizen wants to know who it is!

However, the emotive nature of the request makes it clear there is much more to this than a simple request for information. This person wants the name of the tree killer! Behind that though there are other issues, beliefs, and concerns that we would like to help address.

We should also take our own emotions out of the equation. Maybe the message was poorly worded. Maybe the guy was having a bad day. Let's de-escalate and see if we can turn the conversation into something productive for everyone.

Beginning de-escalation (Engage and paraphrase, open-ended question)

> Mon 4:38 PM
>
> Hi H─, the decision to remove trees within 100 feet of the centerline of US-20 was made by our district engineer to increase visibility along the corridor and improve safety. Is there a particular concern or more information that we can provide?

The reply is carefully crafted:

➤ It opens with a friendly greeting and calls the person by name. This personalizes the discussion.

➤ We state more clearly what the action is without the emotive language - we removed trees within 100 feet of the centerline of US-20.

➤ We answer the question generally using the decision-maker's official title – district engineer. Giving a name is sometimes advisable, but in this case we still are not sure if this person is a safety threat. So, we go for a more general title to bypass any personal attacks on the DE.

➤ We offer a brief reason for the decision – to increase visibility and improve safety.

➤ Finally, we ask if there is something more to their request. The demand was for the person "responsible", but we know there is more to it and we want to help answer their unstated concerns.

Our response is designed to get the person talking beyond their demand to know the name of the tree killer. We realize that we still do not know what this person's goal is. English may not be their first language. They may just want to know if they can buy some of the wood for heating. They may be a terrorist that wants to save the forests. We need to know more, but we don't want to be confrontational. So, we reframe their question into a neutral response so we can see where this discussion will take us…

Looking closely to understand them more

> It's making one of the most beautiful highways in Idaho ugly. I am concerned that there is corruption. Somebody's making money on all those trees at the expense of everyone in the community. And the highway is mostly straight I don't see how that benefits his ability. It's been find for decades not see why we have to do this and make one of the most beautiful places a little uglier.

> An unrelated question if you don't mind. What are the proposed plans for the last chance area?

Ah, now we are getting somewhere!

First, we note that the comment has some odd grammatical errors. That may be a result of a language problem or they simply use the voice-to-text feature on their phone and either can't or don't edit message before they send them. Either way, we should not read too much into word choices and grammatical structures. They are communicating in a limited way and so we need to be patient.

The concerns can be broken down as follows:

1. The change is making the highway and Island Park ugly.
2. This citizen is concerned there is corruption driving the change.
3. They do not understand how removing trees on a straight stretch of road "improves visibility".
4. They think everything has been fine for decades, so why change it? They feel the change was made suddenly and capriciously.

Then they insert another question at the end. That's a good sign. It means they feel they have aired their complaint and now it is okay to bring up another. Even though they say it's "an unrelated question", we remember that Island Park is in the midst of some political turmoil over some conspiracy theories related to plans to widen the highway. Numerous citizens feel the changes are being forced upon the them. Rather than take this as an accusation, it's a perfect

time to provide useful information in a friendly way to help educate and be as transparent as possible.

Emotional Labelling, suggest and provide information, use of "I" statement

Their last response was after business hours, so we reply first thing the next morning with a chipper "Good morning" message…

Good morning, ████ I certainly understand your concerns about the beauty of the trees. For reference, here is a link describing a similar effort in the past that showed a positive increase in safety for Idaho motorists in the Island Park area (https://apps.itd.idaho.gov/apps/MediaManagerMVC/transporter/2014/121914_Trans/121914_US20treecutting.html). I also passed along your comments regarding the removal of the trees to the district engineer so he knows your concerns.

Last Chance is included in the current discussions regarding widening US-20 to accomodate increased traffic between Ashton and US-20's junction with SH-87 (just north of the Valley View RV Campground). Planning has not be finalized and public meetings were held last week to gather community input and suggestions. You can follow the project and learn more about it at this link: https://itdprojects.org/projects/us-20-ashton-to-sh-87-jct/

We still want to "close the loop" on the initial request so we affirm their concern. It is valid to want to protect Idaho's beautiful forests and be concerned about the aesthetic beauty of the state.

At this point the person responding to the citizen uses the word "I" rather than "we". There is a significant difference between an individual saying, "Hey I get it" and a government entity saying, "We understand your concerns". One is warm and friendly. The other is institutional and changes the tone to something that feels more stand-offish and confrontational. The first is coming alongside them as a fellow human being, the other is pitting them against "the government".

Next, we pivot and provide some background information on tree removal decisions. This is not done to prove him wrong, but to broaden his knowledge of what we do and why. The reality is tree removal also protects wildlife. We do not throw that fact in his face but leave it for him to discover as "new information" found in his learning process. He may not agree, but because he has "discovered" it he will realize there are multiple viewpoints.

Finally, we want to make sure he knows his comments are not just being batted away. Again, it costs us nothing to tell him that we have passed on his concerns about aesthetics to the district engineer. Of course, when they were passed on, we did not use the same words, but that information is still valuable to the DE. He is in the midst of a larger project and he may want to be sure that he emphasizes efforts to protect Island Park's aesthetics in an upcoming community meeting.

Now to address that second request. The gist of both questions amounts to "What have you decided to do to us without informing us and listening to our concerns?" That is a common complaint we hear, so we want to carefully address that belief. The response is stated in objective facts. Essentially, we are saying "nothing has been decided yet on what will be done in that area" and "we are really trying to get community input". Now, we want to again provide additional resources for the person learn about the project.

So, how are we doing so far?

Agreement to work together

> Thank you for the links I'll look into it.
>
> Are they just going to widen the road? is there any talk of moving or adding a highway in the last chance area? Is there a recording of the meeting that I can watch?

We got a "Thank you" and a commitment to read the links! That may seem a small thing but consider the difference in tone from how the discussion began. This is what de-escalation is all about – helping facilitate communication and getting the other person the help they want. He has just agreed to work *with* us in understanding the problem rather than simply engaging in an argument.

Moreover, now the citizen is fully engaged and knows *we* are here to help provide resources, not engage in a fight. His reply includes several additional questions. He's asking because now he trusts that we will honestly provide information. We have moved from being an adversary ("the government") to being a helpful source for information. This is exactly where we want to be!

Paraphrase, suggest and provide.

> We are still very early in the planning stage of the project and many options are still on the table. This link will take you to a recent online version of the meeting that should help answer your questions. https://hdr.wistia.com/medias/9jecbobq8o
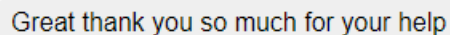>
> You may also find this link helpful. It's a self-guided presentation that walks through the project, the decision making process, and other issues related to your questions. https://us20ashtonto87.com/

This re-iterates what was stated previously and expands upon it. We give him more information resources. Why did we wait to give him these other links? Because flooding someone with a large reply with dozens of links can be counterproductive. We feed them the information at a rate they find acceptable. If they want more, they will ask for more. If they don't want more it may be because we sent enough, or we are miscommunicating.

A key part of resolving conflict is not *telling* someone how we think they are wrong but *helping* them discover more information that may expand their view of things. They may still disagree, but at least they understand that we are not acting arbitrarily or with bad motives.

Again, we want *more* communication, not to just make the person go away. We want to continue building trust. The response speaks for itself...
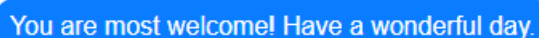
Payoff!

Success! We went from "Who is responsible for the decision to kill the trees along the road in Island Park?" to "Great thank you so much for your help*".*

WE DID THIS IN A DISCUSSION THAT ONLY USED 405 WORDS!

Cementing the relationship

We are not done yet. First, we want to kindly respond in to their friendly thank you. Remember, it takes effort for someone to move from thinking we are murdering trees to line our own pockets to saying, "thank you so much for your help".

The wording in the first sentence is a bit unusual with a feeling of old-world manners. That is intentional because it is not what most people expect. They expect a more informal "You're welcome" but that does not stick in the mind. We want the interaction to be as unique as possible and to convey a sense of warmth.

These little touches seem insignificant but remember that this is an ongoing part of de-escalation. Our ultimate target is not to make the person just go away or to "fix" their thinking. We want to build a *relationship* that benefits everyone. Carefully handling communications can turn an adversary into an advocate.

Pocket Reference Cards

These cards are designed to be cut out and attached to a notebook for quick reference. They are also helpful to keep next to your computer and phone for easy reference. When a tense situation develops it's easy to forget these steps. Having them readily available gives you an easy to follow guide to help de-escalate the situation and improve communications.

De-Escalation – MOREPIES

Safe "Is the scene safe?"
Presence "I am calm, poised, and assertive"
Engage "Sir, sir, I'm over here"
Context "I can listen to you when you stop yelling."
Reflect

> **M**inimal encouragers
> > *"Uh-huh, yeah…"*
>
> **O**pen-ended questions
> > *"Can you tell me more about…"*
>
> **R**eflect/Mirroring
> > *"I hate x. It makes me feel y."*
> > *"You hate x. You feel y."*
>
> **E**motional Labeling
> > *"You're angry that you just found out about this change."*
>
> **P**araphrasing
> > *"What I hear you saying is…"*
>
> **I** statements
> **E**ffective Pauses
> **S**ummary (Reflecting + Paraphrasing)

Guide "Can we work on that together?"

The Six Cs of Delivering Your Best Message

Be Clear

Be Concise

Be Calm

Show Confidence

Show Conviction

Show Compassion

FOLLOW-UP (PSASA)

P – Paraphrase – Restate the issues and concerns the person brought up previously.

"Senator Smith, when we last spoke you mentioned that you were concerned about the following issues:…"

S – Summary – Specifically addresses reason why de-escalation was needed.

"As I recall from our discussion, the core issue is you felt…"

A – Acknowledge – Build rapport by acknowledging their feelings and concerns.

"I can certainly understand the frustration of…"

S – Suggest and Provide – Provide information and contacts that can help move the conversation forward.

"I reviewed Idaho law 67-2805….
"She said you are welcome to call her at…"

A – Ask – Ask if more information is needed and if their concerns have been addressed.

"I hope this is helpful in speaking with your constituents. Is there something more that you would like me to look into for you on this topic?"

Communication Preferences

- Urgent Conversations
- Sensitive topics
- Complex directions
- Clarifying messages

- Time to respond
- Simple directions
- Team conversation
- Reference Information

- Simple questions
- Status report/check in
- Watercooler chat
- Running conversations