



Verbal De-escalation Techniques: How They Actually Work

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Our verbal de-escalation courses help public safety professionals deal with difficult and argumentative verbal interactions with citizens without risking their careers.

At the heart of this is the *Rhetorical Continuum*—in other words, just like there are ranges of force, there are also various levels of rhetoric that you can use to overcome citizen resistance. **Like the use of force continuum, the *Rhetorical Continuum* provides public safety personnel with a range of response techniques that are applied to the situation in proportion to the citizen's level of verbal resistance.**

It is crucial that we understand how this works, because we must operate under an unprecedented amount of transparency today. Every conversation you have with a citizen can be recorded and posted online. With that in mind, it's crucial for you to understand how verbal de-escalation techniques can be applied in the situations you respond to every day.

In this article, we'll look at the various forms of persuasion along the *Rhetorical Continuum* and what it looks like to use them in common situations faced by public safety professionals. The examples in this article are things that every public safety professional of any rank can use when talking to the public or responding to a potentially dangerous call.

Types of Persuasion

The principles underlying the *Rhetorical Continuum* come from Aristotle's principles of rhetoric.¹ Rhetoric is another term for persuasion with words, the art of changing someone's mind through reasoning, and Aristotle revealed three methods of persuasion—ethos, logos, and pathos. **Today these can be understood as the ethical appeal, the logical appeal and the emotional appeal.**

Ethos, or one's ethical appeal, refers to people being persuaded to comply because it is perceived as the ethical or moral thing to do. The ethical appeal only works when people accept that you, and your requests, are legitimate. **If people perceive that you lack legitimacy because of your appearance, words, or actions, then it is hard to gain compliance.** Logos, or one's logical appeal, refers to the use of logical explanation in order to change a person's mind. **Some people need to hear a logical reason for a request before they will comply.** Pathos, or appeals to one's passions, refers to people being persuaded by reasoning that touches their personal sentiments or emotions. **Pathos persuasion shows people how they will personally benefit from cooperating.**²

Language—Verbal and Nonverbal

How do these three concepts apply to helping public safety professionals deal with difficult and argumentative verbal interactions with citizens? **People respond better to one type of persuasion over another depending on their personality, the context of the situation, or their mood at the moment. Public safety professionals need to be able to determine the most appropriate method of persuasion for each specific situation,** and apply the appropriate persuasion method to gain citizen compliance or cooperation.

Public safety professionals exercise the ethical appeal by conveying legitimacy through their official position, physical appearance, and professional communication. Most people in society are agreeable, and they will comply with authority figures if they believe the authority figures are legitimate. Public safety professionals carry legitimacy in their official position, being a law enforcement officer, firefighter, or EMT. Citizens most often determine your authority by your uniform.³ For the ethical appeal to work, how you dress needs to communicate your legitimate authority. Do the clothes you wear at work clearly communicate to citizens your profession? Can a citizen easily determine that you are a public safety professional. Will people have difficulty determining if you are a police officer, soldier, or firefighter based on your uniform choice? Does the neatness of your uniform communicate that you are detail-oriented and competent? In order to effectively persuade citizens with your ethical appeal, your appearance needs to convey that your official position and your competence.

Ethical appeal also includes your words and nonverbal body movements. To establish your legitimacy with words, you should introduce yourself and briefly state the reason for your interaction. Besides being a universal human cultural norm, introducing yourself reinforces your legitimate authority. Just as your uniform says "I'm a police officer," so does your introduction. "Hello, sir. I'm Officer Dolan with the Raleigh Police Department." This statement respectfully conveys that you have certain authority (police authority) in this specific context (Raleigh). It politely and subconsciously communicates, "I'm a cop. You should obey what I say." Following this with a brief explanation for your interaction provides a legitimate reason for interrupting or detaining the citizen. "The reason I stopped you today is because of your excessive speed." Quick sentences like this explain that you have a legitimate legal right to be there and to intrude on the citizen's life. Your nonverbal behaviors, such as your stance, tone of voice, and facial expression, should also be consistent with your statements, so that there are no mixed messages to confuse the citizen.

The ethical appeal will usually work to gain compliance from most citizens, especially law-abiding ones. Failure to use at least the ethical appeal, however, will cause even agreeable people to turn against you. If you do not look unprofessional, and address people in an unprofessional manner, then even law-abiding citizens may be reluctant to cooperate with you.

While the ethical appeal can persuade many people to comply, it will not persuade everyone. In such cases, a public safety professional may need to add logical appeal. The logical appeal entails explaining to the citizen why it makes logical sense to cooperate with your requests. **“Folks, I’m going to need you to move back from the police tape, so we can get an ambulance in here. We have a person who needs immediate medical attention at the hospital.” This quick statement provides a logical reason for clearing a path and is far more effective than simply yelling, “Everybody get back!”**

It is important to note that one adds the logical appeal to the ethical appeal, rather than switching from one method to the other. While employing logic to persuade the citizen, one also needs to keep employing the professionalism of the ethical appeal. If the citizen becomes argumentative or insulting, use verbal deflection to step over the distraction and get back to the point. Imagine that while you are clearing the way for the ambulance, one person is not moving and says, “I have a right to be here!” Employing both the ethical and logical appeals means not engaging in a debate with the citizen, but deflecting the statement and providing logical persuasion instead. “I hear that, sir, and I’m not saying you have to leave, But I do need to clear a path for the ambulance to save this person’s life.”

The vast majority of people will comply when you use the ethical appeal, or combine it with the logical appeal. Nevertheless, there might still be that individual who needs even more persuasion. In these situations, the emotional appeal is added in an attempt to reach the citizen’s internal motives for compliance. For example, if the citizen still refuses to clear an ambulance path, the emotional appeal could focus on fostering feelings of guilt. **“Sir, if that person dies because you delayed the ambulance, are you willing to live with that on your conscience?** What will the people in this neighborhood think of you for doing that?” These statements tap into the person’s self-centeredness and desire to maximize pleasure while minimizing pain—in this case, the pain of guilt or neighbor retribution.

The emotional appeal sometimes involves giving people options that will allow you to get your job done, yet still offer benefits for the citizen. “Sir, you got some good options for places to stand to still watch what is going on. I’m not telling you to leave. You can stand over there on the sidewalk or the grass, but I need the street clear. What do you say you work with me on this and watch from the sidewalk?” If all else fails, you may need to explain the negative consequences that will befall the citizen if he refuses to cooperate, and confirm that he really wants these consequences. “Sir, I’m going to do whatever I can to try to save that person’s life. If you will not clear a path for the ambulance, then I will have no other option left but to arrest you. Sir, that would be a shame as you have lots of other options right now. Is this really what you want?”

In these statements, the professionalism of the words conveys the ethical appeal and the sensibleness of the suggestions conveys the logical appeal. The emotional appeal builds on

top of the other two persuasion styles. If the logical appeal fails, however, the situation was beyond verbal de-escalation and physical or legal action needs to be taken. Nevertheless, if an accusation later arises that you acted unprofessionally, anyone who saw or recorded the interaction would reject such an accusation.

Like the use of force continuum, the *Rhetorical Continuum* arranges verbal persuasion options from lowest to highest levels of complexity and engagement. At the low end of the continuum is the ethical appeal alone, which requires the least complexity of effort. In the middle is the addition of the logical appeal, and the high end of the continuum is the emotional appeal. Also, **like the use of force continuum, the citizen's level of resistance determines the persuasion option applied by the public safety professional.**

Verbal De-escalation in Practice

Here is what the *Rhetorical Continuum* looks like in action. Imagine that you are a law enforcement officer responding to a 911 call at an apartment. Neighbors reported hearing a woman screaming for help from inside the apartment. You and your backup officer arrive at the apartment, dressed professionally in your clean and pressed duty uniforms. You do not hear any screaming, and when you knock a man answers the door looking surprised. Your uniform signals your authority, and you continue your ethical appeal with a meet and greet. "Hello, I'm Officer Smith with the police department. The reason I'm here is we got some calls about a woman screaming in this apartment. May I come in to make sure everything is okay?" You have laid down a firm ethical appeal that a lot of Americans would accept and let you in the door to talk.

But what if he doesn't let you in? What if he stands in the way and says, "Everything is okay. They must have just heard my television. I was watching a horror movie. I'll keep the volume down." You need to verify the safety of those inside the apartment, but right now there is no evidence of an emergency situation requiring you to rush inside immediately. Plus, the guy could be telling the truth. Because of his resistance, however, you now need to add your logical appeal by explaining why it is logical that he should let you inside the apartment.

"Sir, it may have been your television as you say, but I have an obligation to make sure that it was and that there is no one in danger in this apartment. Put yourself in my shoes for a minute. If neighbors were calling saying someone in this apartment was being attacked, you wouldn't leave without making sure that wasn't the case. Right? Of course you would make sure that everyone was safe before you left, and I'm in the same boat. We cannot leave until we verify everyone in the apartment is safe." These statements lay out the clear logic behind a quick protective sweep, and anyone who wouldn't comply at this point is intentionally trying to be difficult.

What if the man starts arguing or insulting you? Verbal deflectors are used to avoid being sidetracked with a debate, and keep on topic. For example, the man says, "You need a warrant to come in here." You respond by saying, "In many cases we would need a warrant to enter, however not this time. The courts have ruled that 911 calls create exigent circumstances that allow us to come in. Could you please step aside so we can obey the law?" The man says, "You fascist thugs are violating my rights!" You respond, "I hear what you're saying, Sir. I wouldn't want the police in my house either, however the circumstances right now require it. What do you say we do this

quickly? If everything checks out, we'll be out of here in just a couple of minutes. Can you work with me here?"

If he still refuses to comply, it is time to add the emotional appeal by appealing to the man's self-interests, explaining his positive options, explaining his potential negative consequences, and asking him to confirm noncompliance. "Sir, your neighbors are probably watching us right now. Why don't you let us in so we talk about this in private so the neighbors won't hear? Sir, this is taking up more of your time and we cannot leave until we check the apartment. You got a good option here. The faster you let us check the apartment, the faster we get out of here, leave you in peace, and stop making a scene for the neighbors. What do you say you let us make a quick check?" These statements appeal to the man's self-interests and present cooperation as a positive, self-serving option for the man.

The man continues to block the door. You say, "Sir, I've explained we cannot leave without doing this first. I have explained I have a legal obligation to check the safety of anyone who might be in this apartment, and I've given you some good options for handling this. But if you delay me further I am going to have to physically move you. If that has to happen, someone might get hurt and you will probably end up getting arrested tonight. Do you really want to risk getting injured and spending the night in jail over this? Is it really worth it, and is it really what you want?"

At this point, if the man refuses to comply, the situation is beyond the *Rhetorical Continuum* and now moves to taking physical action. Depending on the situation, taking physical action can mean ending the encounter and withdrawing, requesting backup or SWAT, making an arrest, or using force. In this particular scenario, taking action would mean pushing past the man and arresting him if he physically resisted your efforts.

Conclusion

We offer two types of verbal de-escalation classes: [Surviving Verbal Conflict](#)© and the [Train the Trainer](#) program. Both classes emphasize the *Rhetorical Continuum* when dealing with verbal resistance and argument from a citizen. **Like the use of force continuum gives you physical force options, the *Rhetorical Continuum* gives you verbal persuasion options—ethical, logical, and emotional appeal—that correspond in complexity with the level of verbal resistance encountered. Using this tool helps public safety professionals visualize their verbal options, and understand when it is best to use each one. The *Rhetorical Continuum* helps officers use these options to survive verbal conflict.**

References

¹ Aristotle (2004). *Rhetoric*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

² Ibid.

³ Johnson, R. (2001). The psychological influence of the police uniform. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 70, 27-31.