



What Does Verbal De-escalation Training Actually Mean?

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October 2020

There has been much argument and political rhetoric used recently involving demands for police reform. One of the reforms mentioned frequently is the demand for “de-escalation training” for police officers, or the need for the police to “de-escalate” more.

What, however, does this really mean? **To some it appears that “de-escalation” means the withdrawal of any use of force options. To individuals of this mindset, all police use of force is avoidable if the officers would only use “de-escalation techniques.”. As someone who has served 32 years in law enforcement and has been teaching verbal de-escalation techniques for more than a decade, I would have to say that such a viewpoint is grossly naïve and unrealistically optimistic. Legitimate use of force and verbal de-escalation are *not* mutually exclusive—they are distinct options available to officers confronting unlawful non-compliance.**

So, what does de-escalation really mean? It is time that we in the law enforcement profession, and all of the public safety professions, had a clear, practical, agreed-upon definition for verbal de-escalation. We here at the Dolan Consulting Group (DCG) have given much thought to such a definition. We have discussed potential definitions internally with the members of our leadership team made up of former law enforcement officers, an attorney, and a research scientist. We have gathered feedback from officers and leaders in the field, and the many instructors we have certified to teach our *Surviving Verbal Conflict®* course. After much conversation and many revisions, we have developed a definition of verbal de-escalation for DCG as an organization, and to utilize within our courses.

“We define verbal de-escalation as both verbal and non-verbal communication techniques most likely to defuse hostility, avoid physical aggression, and obtain the voluntary compliance of another, whenever safety is not unduly compromised. Verbal de-escalation techniques also assist the communicator in maintaining professional composure in the face of verbal hostility and abuse.”

Allow me to explain the essential components of this very intentional definition, as the specific words have important meanings.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Techniques

Here, we specifically refer to de-escalation techniques that are based on spoken words (verbal communication) and physical presence (non-verbal communication). **We have found that in many of the circumstances that public safety professionals often encounter, the right words, spoken in the right manner—often referred to as *officer demeanor*—can either calm a situation or at least gain begrudging compliance.** We also find that one’s physical presence – physical fitness, uniform standard, posture, and facial expressions – help establish one’s legitimacy and increase the likelihood of compliance with one’s requests. We also acknowledge, however, that communication skills are not the only forms of de-escalation. **When necessary, physical action – such as the use of force, physical containment, or withdrawal – is also part of the de-escalation process.**

Most Likely to Defuse Hostility, Avoid Physical Aggression, and Obtain the Voluntary Compliance of Another

We acknowledge that there are some instances in which well-deployed communication skills are not sufficient to gain compliance with some individuals. Such situations make up a small proportion of all public contacts that public safety professionals experience, but they do happen as a part of this line of work. In such cases, physical action – such as the use of force, physical containment, or withdrawal – is necessary. As these other forms of de-escalation are usually heavily regulated by agency policies and state training regulations, DCG leaves this training in the capable hands of the individual agency and state training standards trainers. Nevertheless, **integrating verbal and nonverbal de-escalation techniques in conjunction with these physical actions increases the legitimacy of the public safety professional’s action in the eyes of the courts and the general public.**

Whenever Safety is Not Unduly Compromised

We also fully recognize that public safety professionals sometimes encounter situations in which time is of the essence and physical action must be taken immediately. The clearest example to offer is when an individual draws a firearm and points it at the public safety professional. In such a situation, the public safety professional should immediately prioritize seeking cover and, if the public safety professional is a law enforcement officer, drawing one's own firearm in self-defense. Numerous additional life threatening and/or serious injury situations present officers with the need to make split second decisions to safeguard the public and themselves. Physical safety is always the first priority, but if this safety is not unduly compromised at the moment, then verbal de-escalation techniques can be utilized on their own or in conjunction with physical actions.

Assist the Communicator in Maintaining Professional Composure in the Face of Verbal Hostility and Abuse

We recognize two primary goals in pursuing verbal de-escalation. First, protect citizens by avoiding the use of force in the circumstances where proper communication skills would have permitted a non-physical resolution to the situation. Second, protect public safety professionals, whenever possible, from actions that will result in unnecessarily creating a greater risk to physical safety, a sustained citizen complaint of misconduct, a damaging lawsuit against the department, or worse.

Our training seeks to provide personnel with the skills they are missing (where their "training tape has run out") to avoid being goaded or enticed into losing their professional composure (avoid being "rope-a-doped"). **We see verbal de-escalation training as a way of also de-escalating the impact of some citizens' behavior on the spirit and soul of the public safety professional. By being able to identify sneak attacks on one's psychological well-being, and having the skills to deflect these attacks, public safety professionals are more likely to manage stress and survive hostile encounters with their careers and reputations intact.**

In conclusion, it is important that we develop a common definition and understanding of verbal de-escalation within the field of public safety, and law enforcement in particular. As the term "de-escalation" has become such a buzz word for politicians, news reporters, and political activists, it is high time the professions that actually use the techniques, and face the real world dangers in which they are used, define what this term actually means. We offer our DCG definition as a starting point.

About the Author

Harry P. Dolan is a 32-year police veteran who served as a Chief of Police since 1987. As one of the nation's most experienced police chiefs, he brings 25 years of public safety executive experience to Dolan Consulting Group. He retired in October 2012 as Chief of Police of the Raleigh (N.C.) Police Department, an agency comprised of nearly 900 employees in America's 42nd largest city.

Chief Dolan began his law enforcement career in 1980 as a deputy sheriff in Asheville, North Carolina and served there until early 1982, when he joined the Raleigh Police Department, where he served as a patrol officer. In 1987, he was appointed Chief of Police for the N.C. Department of Human Resources Police Department, located in Black Mountain. He served as Chief of Police in Lumberton, N.C. from 1992 until 1998, when he became Chief of Police of the Grand Rapids, Michigan Police Department. He served in that capacity for nearly ten years before becoming Chief of the Raleigh Police Department in September 2007. As Chief, he raised the bar at every organization and left each in a better position to both achieve and sustain success.

Harry Dolan has lectured throughout the United States and has trained thousands of public safety professionals in the fields of Leadership & Management, Communications Skills, and Community Policing. Past participants have consistently described Chief Dolan's presentations as career changing, characterized by his sense of humor and unique ability to maintain participants' interest throughout his training sessions. Chief Dolan's demonstrated ability to connect with his clientele and deliver insightful instruction all with uncompromising principles will be of tremendous value in the private sector.

Chief Dolan's unbridled passion to achieve service-excellence is a driving force behind Dolan Consulting Group. He is a graduate of Western Carolina University and holds a Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership and Management from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

His training courses include:

[Verbal De-escalation Training: Surviving Verbal Conflict®](#)

[Verbal De-escalation Train The Trainer Program: Surviving Verbal Conflict®](#)

[Community Policing Training](#)

[Taking the Lead: Courageous Leadership for Today's Public Safety](#)

[Street Sergeant®: Evidence-Based First-Line Supervision Training](#)