



De-escalation; the art of avoiding violence

By Luis Rivera, PhD

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Miguel “Jay” Vigo Matos on his graduation from Boot Camp and welcome him to “the Profession of Arms.”

People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.” - George Orwell-



INTRODUCTION

Violence in disasters, more specifically violence against first responders, is a well known problem—far greater than what is being reported—however, it has not been adequately addressed. In an effort to find a solution to this problem, the author conducted a research study that validated the use of self-defense training as alternative means of non lethal force to mitigate the risk of an attack to first responders during disasters or crisis situation. Nevertheless, as important as self-defense is, physical confrontation should be the last option, as long as it can be safely avoided.



The purpose of this article is not to serve as a training vehicle in the subject of conflict de-escalation, but to provide information on different techniques and approaches to this problem set. The article will also illustrate how these techniques can impact the outcome of violence situations by comparing two events—one where the techniques were applied and one where they were not.

THE ANATOMY OF VIOLENCE CONFRONTATION

A kid of approximately 14 years of age is seating on the steps of a barber shop waiting for the barber who's out to lunch.

Three thugs walk by the kid and one of them makes a smart remark about the kid's outfit. The kid offended by the remark stands up and challenges them to say it to his face. The thugs turn around, approach the kid and repeat the remark. The kid gets in their face and tells them the next insult will be their last. His statement fails to dissuade the bad guys and with one more insult the situation escalates to a fist fight. One of the thugs pulls out a switch blade, which the kid—who had been training in martial arts for a few years—quickly kicks out of his hand. Surprised by the kids fighting abilities the thugs hesitate ... At that point the barber—who's returning from lunch—sees what's going on, brakes up the fight and threaten with calling the police.

The aforementioned anecdote is an account of a real world situation of street violence. A violence confrontation usually starts with one person verbally attacking the other; either by accusations, insults, or threats. The second person responds with a greater verbal attack. It goes back and forth until one of the combatants pushes the other and fists start flying.

Many Self-defense instructors advocate that physical confrontation or violence should be avoided—something most people agree with. However, not too many instructors teach the necessary skills to deal with such situations other than advising one to “turn around and walk away;” *Sine Qua Non*, walking away may not always be as easy as it sounds, nor is it always the safest option ... In order to be able to walk away from a potential fight one must be able to first set the conditions.

So, how does one stop an argument or encounter from turning into a physical altercation?

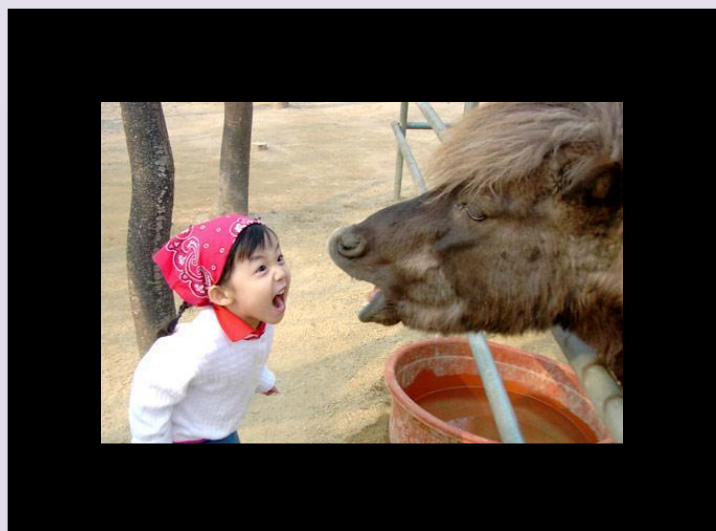
There are numerous theories on how to defuse potentially volatile situations; nevertheless, when it comes to first responders, one must consider the differences in training, equipment and capabilities of the individual when choosing a course of action to deal with the problem set. For example, a female nurse that is confronted with a violence situation while responding to a disaster or crisis will more than likely not have the same amount of training a police officer would. For this reason, the way these two individuals deal with it would be different.

The 04 June 2010 article of the online publication of the Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations, written by Oliva, et al, highlights the importance and effectiveness of basic de-escalation skills training. These concepts are designed to provide law-officers with knowledge and skills sets, such as ***attainment of effective communication*** and ***listening skills***—that enable them to initiate specific actions to de-escalate a crisis situation and minimize the use of physical force. These approaches are leveraged as long as they do not jeopardize the safety of the law-officers and keep the potential offender from becoming a victim of his or her unruly behavior by affording them the opportunity to regain control emotionally and bring the situation down to a manageable state.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

As mentioned before, one of the most important skills one can possess when attempting to de-escalate a crisis is ***communications skills***. These skills will help establish dialogue by:

1. Breaking the ice: this will help the subject initiate dialogue and establish rapport—basic conversational things like introducing oneself can help accomplish this.
2. Help listen for the total meaning of the words spoken by the individual—this is critical in establishing dialogue.



3. Help provide reflecting statements—like ... *Wow; I can see why you are so displeased and upset.*

4. Develop and use minimal encouragers—short responses that let the other person know he or she is being listened to—comments like; *I hear you, got it, I'm with you.*

5. Additional techniques such as using “I” statements, restating statements, reflecting, and summarizing or paraphrasing are techniques that have been proven effective by de-briefers and psychologist specialized in crisis negotiations situations and isolating events.

Communication is not an individual sport. For communication to be effective it must afford both parties the ability to exchange information. This exchange must create a climate of mutual understanding. The bottom line is that to be able to communicate effectively, one must be an “Active listener.”

Active listening is a communication technique. It requires the listener to understand, interpret, and evaluate what they hear. The ability to listen actively can improve personal relationships through reducing conflicts, strengthening cooperation, and fostering understanding.

When interacting, people often are not listening attentively. They may be distracted, thinking about other things, or thinking about what they are going to say next (the latter case is particularly true in conflict situations or disagreements). Active listening is a structured way of listening and responding to others, focusing attention on the speaker. Suspending one’s own frame of reference and suspending judgment to fully attend the speaker (Wikipedia 2010).

A method commonly used for communicating effectively is the concept of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). NVC is a process developed by Marshall Rosenberg by which people communicate with greater compassion and clarity. The process consists of 4 components of communication:

OBSERVATIONS free of evaluations.

FEELINGS straight from the heart.

NEEDS, VALUES and longings.

REQUESTS expressed clearly in positive action language.

Together these components help create the kind of climate conducive to dialogue that can foster resolutions satisfying for everyone without painful compromise or sacrifice (Rosenberg, 1999).

AVOIDING ESCALATION WITH TACOS

In order to set the conditions for dialogue; in addition to knowing the *right things to do*, one must also be aware of things *not to do* when communicating with a potential aggressor. In

an article published in the Martial Arts Magazine in 2008—written by Mr. Drew Guest, he takes a different approach to de-escalating or reducing the level or intensity of aggression. He actually emphasizes what *not to do* by using the key word T.A.C.O.S. The acronym TACOS stands for ***Threaten, Argue, Challenge, Order, Shame***—the 5 golden “*do not’s*” of de-escalation are based on Richard Dimitri’s Senshido golden rules of de-escalation:

If your goal is to de-escalate then, ***do not***:

1. **T**hreaten the aggressor
2. **A**rgue or contradict the aggressor
3. **C**hallenge the aggressor
4. **O**rder or command the aggressor
5. **S**hame or disrespect the aggressor

Any one of these things can, and likely will, lead to an escalation in the aggressor’s level of aggression (Guess, 2008). To get an idea as to how antagonistic and counterproductive the use of these “*Do Not’s*” actions can be, one only has to look at the incident with the 14 year old kid. What did he do wrong that made the confrontation escalate to a full fist fight?

1. He threatened the aggressors with violence if the name calling didn’t stop.
2. He perpetuated the argument by contradicting the aggressors.
3. He challenged the aggressors by getting in their face.
4. He basically ordered the aggressors to stop the name calling by issuing an ultimatum.
5. He shamed them by calling them names in retaliation.

In summary the only thing he did right was defend himself when the time came.

The other side of the coin is the case of ***Ashley Smith***—the Atlanta-area woman taken hostage by Brian Nichols, who was the subject of the largest manhunt in Georgia history. Nichols had overpowered an Atlanta courthouse deputy as he was being escorted to court for a rape trial March 11; shot and killed the presiding judge and a court reporter before killing another deputy as he left the courthouse and later he killed a federal agent in an attempt to flee authorities.

Ashley communicated effectively with her kidnapper by—unwittingly—using the concept of Nonviolent Communication. She was not confrontational, did not panic or try to offend or threaten her kidnapper, she simply calmed the alleged killer by reading an excerpt from “The Purpose-Driven Life” and talking with him about God. By doing this she developed enough rapport with the kidnapper to the point that she was able to escape by persuading him to let her pick up her daughter from an AWANA children’s program at a Southern Baptist church.

Sometimes the best defense to avoid becoming the victim of violence is by talking your way out of the situation. This can only be accomplished by effectively communicating with the potential aggressor.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

Whatever can go wrong, will ... -Murphy's Law-

The bottom line is that if one is prepared for every possible situation, the odds of surviving violence in disasters and crisis situations will increase dramatically in ones' favor. In order to be prepared to deal with unforeseen events or situations one must understand and be able to apply the principles of **Contingency Planning**.

A **contingency plan** is a plan devised for a specific situation when things could go wrong. Contingency plans are often devised by governments or businesses who want to be prepared for anything that could happen.

Essential Elements of a Contingency Plan

The essential elements of a contingency plan include determining **functional criticality**, **planned mitigation strategies**, **failure scenarios**, **failure probabilities** and **contingency options**. Each of these planning elements should be included for each contingency that is linked to the mission's critical functions. In other words, as long as your contingency plan covers the **What**, **When**, **Where**, **Who** and **How**, one would have covered all bases.

Situation; A female nurse helping victims of an earthquake in an isolated room in a damaged building sees a suspicious looking individual approaching her location ... She quickly start to mentally prepare to act by developing a contingency plan:

What: Prepare for possible attack by suspicious character ...

When: Soonest

Where to: Escape to the nearest safe location and report incident to authorities immediately.

Who: Oneself and others

How: 1. Staying calm

2. Assessing the environment

- a. ID potential aggressor—look at hands to see if he or she is armed
- b. Identify routes to escape
- c. Be prepared to call for help
- d. Look for things that can be used as weapons

3. Attempt to walk away from the situation and call for help from other first responders nearby.

3. If walking away is not an option or possible: disable the aggressor *capitalizing* on the use of *Surprise, Speed* and *Violence of Action*.

4. Escape before the aggressor recuperates and report the situation to authorities immediately.

Continue to adjust the plan as the situation changes.

Summary

Part of the preparations for first responders to deal with violence in disasters and crisis situations is to be familiar with conflict de-escalation techniques—a vital part of self defense strategy.

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