

**De-escalation: Public Understanding, Application, and Implementation Through Deep
Change**

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Abstract

In recent years, the law enforcement profession has been overwhelmed with public criticism, political posturing, and an “expert” dissection of police tactics employed in several high-profile events across the United States. While many of these observations have been less than helpful, several have positively benefited policing thus far. Topics such as the benefits of body worn cameras, relationship building in our communities, and the increased community support for better training just to name a few. Most importantly, however, is the use of de-escalation tactics and techniques to mitigate the risks associated with high-stress conflict-central events. With growing public outcry for change, accountability, and transparency in law enforcement, officers must possess exceptional levels of professionalism, patience, and tolerance. Law enforcement officers must maintain a training strategy that provides constant feedback and adjustment based on observed needs regarding the verbal and physical application of de-escalation principles, while simultaneously mitigating risks to the communities we serve and the members of our organizations. Utilizing the known facts of the issue at hand, our own observations, and the principles, strategies, and lessons learned from this course, the following is our capstone research analysis.

As leaders in law enforcement organizations, we have a vested interest in providing excellent police services for the communities we serve while protecting, fostering, and facilitating positive relationships built on trust and shared expectations within those same communities. As stated, there is a growing public outcry for positive change, accountability, and transparency within our organizations specific to uses of force incidents. This has been driven by several high-profile, and sometimes questionable, law enforcement uses of force actions that have ended with the loss of life.

While attending their various State recognized peace officer standards and training academies throughout the nation, receive a quick introduction to de-escalation training. While it is not a new concept, de-escalation training has traditionally been a one and done style of training. The average recruit only receives eight hours of police de-escalation training, compared to fifty-eight hours of firearms-based training and forty-nine hours of defensive tactics-based training (PowerDMS, 2021). Once released back to their home agencies, many do not receive any additional training on the topic. This persists despite empirical evidence showing that interpersonal communication and de-escalation of violence are perhaps the most important skills a police officer can possess (McLean, 2019). The following research is intended to provide law enforcement leaders with a clearer understanding of the current public perception of uses of force by our organizational members. Further, we will demonstrate how the proper application of de-escalation tactics and techniques positively affects performance and officer strategy to create greater buy-in within the members of the organization through deep change.

Public Understanding and Perception

De-escalation can be defined as the use of communication or other techniques during an encounter to stabilize, slow, or reduce the intensity of a potentially violent situation without

using physical force or with a reduction in force. De-escalation, in law enforcement terms, is a method to prevent and reduce the severity of potential violence. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, 2018), “The purpose is to bring chaotic situations to as peaceful a resolution as possible while not unreasonably increasing the risk of harm to anyone. It is a strategic response to risk in the officer’s best interest. It includes communication, critical thinking, incident resolution, and officer discretion” (p.3). When it comes to the public’s perception of officers, de-escalating a situation can help the public believe the officer knows the laws and their legal limitations and help them to be viewed as reasonable and understanding. According to Kustom Signals, Inc. (2023), “When someone doesn’t comply easily, it may not be because they are hiding something but rather because they feel distressed or have an impairment. Law enforcement’s logic is not everyone’s logic. Understanding this can change the course of the whole interaction. De-escalation techniques are not easy, for they require a lot of patience and compromise on the officer’s side. But in today’s day and age, de-escalation is sure to bridge the gap between communities and law enforcement” (para. 11). De-escalation comes in a variety of forms from officer presence and verbal commands to physical force. How officers de-escalate a situation varies on the experience of the officer(s) and the volatility of the call the officer is handling. Richard Schott (2022) states “Successful de-escalation often requires initial escalation and a show of force, something that is deeply misunderstood by the public”. Looking into the case where Herman Whitfield III died in the custody of the Indianapolis Police Department, officers were called to his residence for a mental health crisis. After being tased and restrained, he died. The Marion County Coroner’s Office stated the cause of death was “cardiopulmonary arrest in the setting of law enforcement subdual, prone restraint, and conducted electrical weapon use” (Galo & Creamer, 2022, para. 54). Other contributing factors included morbid obesity and

hypertensive cardiovascular disease. The fact that Whitfield died in the custody of the police department gave the community the perception that excessive force was used because officers escalated the situation rather than utilizing proper de-escalating tactics.

Patrick Yoes, President of the National Fraternal Order of Police, advised their support for bill H.R. 8637, the “Law Enforcement De-escalation Training Act.” According to Patrick Yoes with the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP, 2022):

“The implementation of de-escalation techniques would have a positive impact on public safety and the relationship between the public and law enforcement officers. Numerous studies have shown that civilians base their perceptions of law enforcement on their last encounters. Providing officers with the skills and training to avoid needless escalation during calls for service would enable officers to protect the public more effectively. This improved communication will create a better police force and safer communities” (para. 5).

As of June 2021, twenty-one states still do not require de-escalation training for police. Only eight of those states changed their requirements in the last three years. The use of force by law enforcement personnel generally results in injuries sustained by the officers and suspects alike. According to Morgan Steele and Tamara Lynn (PoliceMag, 2022):

“The City of Chicago paid out more than \$67 million in police misconduct settlements in 2021, with most going toward cases where officers used excessive force. New York City paid more than \$1.1 billion from 2015 through mid-2021 for police misconduct, including use of force. From 2010 to 2022, cities across the United States paid out more than \$1.5

billion in cases where an officer's conduct led to more than one payout, again including cases of excessive and/or unnecessary uses of force" (para. 2).

Communities do not understand that de-escalation is a tool, and its effectiveness varies. It is also not a cure-all for overseeing every situation. But research shows that when departments implement de-escalation training in their agencies, use of force incidents decrease and communities support spending money on this specialized training. According to Bell (2018), "Mainstream media would have us think that use-of-force, racial unrest, riots, and injustice is an everyday occurrence. This fuels resistance towards officers and encourages people to challenge the authority of law enforcement. The prevalence of social media and camera phones means that a single incident can quickly escalate into a movement against police for the world to weigh in on" (para. 3). The advancements of technology in the hands of everyone in the world allows all the power to capture events such as police shootings and then feeds them through a biased lens of media pushing systems of online videos, making them visible to anyone in the world of social media within seconds. Live streaming allows the voice of the viewer to be spoken to millions around the world while eliminating fact checking and context. Several problems can arise when amateur videos are uploaded. When partial incidents are captured and seen by the public, an outcry from various groups tends to boost false accusations of law enforcement arrests and tactics (Mallett, 2019). When civil rights organizations such as NAACP, Alliance for Justice, American Association for Access, Equity and Diversity, Anti-Defamation League, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Civil Rights Defenders get involved and portray law enforcement culture as systemically racist, this has a drastic effect on society perceptions, causing people to believe they need to stand up and protest the "unjust" law enforcement

profession. This in further exacerbated when these protests, which begin as peaceful demonstrations, shift, and become violent riots, as experienced throughout the United States and many other “western” cultures globally (Mallett, 2019).

Police de-escalation is not a new concept, but the topic continues to be highlighted after several high-profile incidents have occurred recently. These incidents have sparked public protests, widespread media attention, and heightened scrutiny of law enforcement actions and tactics due to a perceived biased and politically driven attack of the critical trust between law enforcement organizations and the communities they serve. Events like the shooting death of Sean Bell in New York in 2006, the injuring of Joseph Guzman and Trent Benefield in St. Louis, MO in 2011, the shooting death of Anthony Smith in New York in 2011, or with the death of Eric Garner in New York in 2014 which was widely publicized and gave birth to the “I can’t breathe” movement, and lastly the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO in 2014. Whether these events were caught on video or not, the aftermath was highly publicized and biased, and further fueled by the lack of open communication from the law enforcement leaders involved, which fostered an environment of malcontent and anger which led to further violence.

IACP (2018) asserts,

“Police hold a position of authority, and the public relies on the police to use force when necessary. However, police also have a responsibility to make use-of-force determinations responsibly. Identifying when officers should (and should not) disengage is important in assessing what tools to leverage in any scenario. This is important for line officers on the streets interacting with community members directly and for police supervisors who are held accountable by their own leaders and the public” (p.3).

IACP (2018) further asserts,

“Clear communication with the community is vital to increasing community member trust and understanding of law enforcement operations, especially in the case of a critical issue such as de-escalation. Key points, such as notification of events involving uses of force and changes in departmental policy, procedures, training, and supervision, are considerations for communication with the community” (p.14).

To build trust between our law enforcement officers and the citizens we serve, we must take an honest and genuine approach to working with our local media groups. This requires our senior level leaders build trusting relationships with our media outlets, have true open-door policies for open dialogue, seek out positive community-based programs and interactions that facilitate positive media coverage, and strive to address the wants of those media partners while best serving our communities and their privacy.

A few principles law enforcement agencies should be considerate of are: ensuring your procedures in interacting with citizens are legitimate and based on respect, empathy, and understanding; ensuring your officers know the laws and restrictions in place prior to engaging with the public; truly understand how they can influence a person through their understanding of perspective and purpose; and do not presume what makes sense to you makes sense to others (Ranalli, 2020). Law enforcement leaders and influencers can help the public understand use of force and de-escalation by “getting in front of the story” and being transparent about incidents. Ongoing positive relationships between law enforcement and the communities, citizens, visitors, and their local or regional media partners will help control and minimize public scrutiny.

Proper Application and Its Impact on Performance

Most de-escalation training conducted throughout the nation has emphasized a plan of action for the prevention and mitigation of violence and aggression. De-escalation training focuses on early intervention, verbal and non-verbal interaction or communication, decision making skills, and the use of physical intervention techniques, which all are designed to mitigate conflict, aggression, injuries, and violence during encounters between our officers and those we contact. De-escalation techniques are now widely embraced by many police executives leading the nation's largest policing agencies such as New York, Los Angeles, and Miami (Domanick, 2017).

One purpose of de-escalation training is to show law enforcement officers a way to alter their behaviors and perceptions from a warrior mindset to that of guardian (Cuncic, 2022). By doing so, it shifts the law enforcement philosophy more in line with that of protector and less of that of fighter. This is not to say we must never be the warrior. This simply provides and more adaptive strategy that allows for more give and take and practical application across all law enforcement actions. The training teaches the officer to rely on their effective communication skills and the art of negotiation when the situation permits. De-escalation includes skills such as active listening, verbal and nonverbal communications, self-control, scene assessment and management, force options, time, and empathy (Pope, 2014).

According to Cuncic (2022), *active listening* is a communication skill that involves going beyond simply hearing the words that another person speaks but also seeking to understand the meaning and intent behind it. By utilizing one's active listening skills, the officer is paying attention to what is truly being communicated rather than simply waiting his/her turn to speak.

Additionally, the officer should not argue, interrupt, or convince the person they are wrong. Very often, people only want to vent and get their point of view out and heard.

Nonverbal communication is often defined as the way in which beings convey information without words. It is comprised of our gestures, facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, volume, and inflections (Pope, 2014) as articulated by Albert Mehrabian, nonverbal communication generally accounts for ninety percent of perceived communication (Thompson, 2011). To be the most effective, the officer should refrain from standing in a guarded or defensive posture. An officer's hands are very telling. By keeping their hands down or to the side and keeping a safe distance between the officer and the subject, the officer can project a sense of timidity. When paired with soft but direct eye contact, acknowledging gestures, and a forward leaning posture, officers can help reinforce this sense of timidity. It is critical that we maintain a sense of calm, collected, and empathetic engagement. "We must respond to the meaning, and not to the words" (Nash, 2017).

Next is *verbal communication*. Verbal communication is simply the content of our messages conveyed through words. It should be noted that our officers must understand and value the words they choose to use. Words have value and carry weight. We must choose those which have very narrow meanings and are easy to understand. This exchange of communication can build trust and rapport when applied appropriately, but likewise can be devastating if not. The officer is also encouraged to ask open-ended questions to solicit prolonged responses to facilitate deeper conversation and emotional release (Personal Communication, 2022).

De-escalation further teaches our officers how the others may be suffering from an emotional or mental crisis. Often, those in crisis simply need to express their feelings to someone

willing to listen without judgement. Our officers should remain calm and help the person in crisis navigate this process while ensuring their safety and the safety of others (Go CIT Staff, 2022).

In this element according to de-escalation, the goal is to solve the issue with the least amount of force possible while ensuring the safety of all involved and those in proximity who are not. There may be times when the typical forms of de-escalation through communication, including verbal and nonverbal, simply are ineffective. When this occurs, officers must be prepared to use physical force. Sometimes the most effective de-escalation tactic is strategic and focused immediate force. We must ensure our officers are understanding of this and confident in the actions they take to ensure success.

A successful de-escalation starts with the law enforcement officer and their willingness to change their behavioral patterns and perceptions through training to gain insight and understanding. Officers must understand emotional intelligence and how to drive desired responses through emotional hijacking (Goleman, 2002). Engle (2020) claims, “De-escalation training teaches officers to think about use of force in different ways. Instead of, ‘Can I use force?’ the question becomes, ‘Should I use force?’” (para. 17). To quote Steve Mescan (Personal Communication, 2022), “officers must ask themselves WHY am I doing, WHAT I am doing, WHEN I am doing it”.

Building Buy-In Through Deep Change

We propose, however, another take on how to best apply de-escalation training and tactics within law enforcement organizations. We believe that through clearly defining our organizational goals and providing law enforcement members with more precise reasoning why de-escalation techniques must be used we can foster a great rate of success in buy-in. Through

educating and coaching our members on how de-escalation techniques and tactics must be employed during all our law enforcement interactions and by building and nurturing positive workplace cultures that foster safety, creativity, and innovation our members will be more receptive, accepting, and more adaptive to the implementation of de-escalating techniques during these interactions.

First, we must clearly define our goals in writing. This should be addressed within our standard operating procedures and policies but should not be limited in scope to those events or actions that involve some use or presentation of force. Our goals must have clearly defined explanations and understandings in our mission and vision statements (Martins, 2022) and through our commander's intent (Willink, 2015).

For instance, the Foley, AL Police Department has the following mission, vision, and desire statements:

"It is the mission of the Foley Police Department to deliver a police service we are proud of. We practice maximum effort, and we are polite, professional, and productive. Our vision is to strive everyday to be the best trained, best equipped, best performing police department that serves with excellence. It is our desire to maintain our city's quality of life and ensure our citizens feel safe to work, play, rest, and raise their children in this city. We desire that our residents and businesses enjoy a high degree of protection and police services. We desire to police in a manner that allows our community to get to know us as approachable employees which results in close relationships, partnerships, and professionalism. We desire to assist in community development which in-turn affects economic

development for our city, our citizens, and our future generations”

(Bullock, 2019).

Through this defined and articulate policy, the leaders within understand that the commander’s intent (Chief of Police’s intent) for the organization is to be polite, professional, and productive in their interactions with the citizens they serve. He further pledges to ensure his organizational members are provided with the best training and equipment to facilitate the best performance of those on his team and to ensure the best possible services are provided for the community in which they serve. By going even further and stating what desires the organization holds true, the members of the organization gain understanding of not only what expectations are expected of them but also of how they should approach their interactions and services provided to the public. Chief Bullock continues in his commander’s intent by providing the following methods:

“We will give our absolute best and impact our community through quality police services we are proud of. As a department, we will always seek to reach higher levels of performance through professional and ethical law enforcement operations and modern proficient training. We will always work as a professional team. Each section of the police department is an invaluable, critical, mission-essential component of this police team. We will practice maximum effort in pursuing offenders and protecting the innocent. As a department, we will strive to become one large family as we serve our community” (Bullock, 2019).

By using words of value such as team, family, maximum, always, and professional Chief Bullock sets the tone for the culture of his organization and is setting the foundation for which

that culture is to be built. These statements resonate with the employees of the Foley Police Department and drive their actions to exceed these foundational goals.

Next, we must provide the members of our organizations with a complete understanding of not only what de-escalation is, but also why, how, and where it should be applied. Apart from the definitions above, we propose the wider definition of de-escalation as to decrease in extent, volume, or scope (Merriam-Webster, 2008). While we have already discussed the how and where, the why is what we want to cover more in depth. Long past are the days of the “toxic masculinity” and ego driven decisions, yet with the current workplace paradigm as related to generations, we still have many members of our organizations that portray these characteristics (Snyder, 2017). As leaders within our organizations, we must accept complete responsibility for ensuring these team members, and the others as well, understand and accept the error in this mindset and help mentor and coach them to be the responsible, calm, adaptive, and empathetic communicators our professional environment requires. To achieve this, we have found that sitting down with these team members one-on-one to discuss these behavioral changes is the best course of action to gain greater open dialogue within the safety of seclusion from their peers. These team members are generally accepting of how useful de-escalation is when applied correctly. The statistics show that after de-escalation training is conducted with team members, those members experienced a fifty-two percent decrease in the number of violent incidents and a one-hundred percent decrease in the severity of those violent incidents when de-escalation tactics were used (Engle, McManus, & Herold, 2020). We have found that by going the extra mile and explaining how these statistics provide proof of the effectiveness of the tactics themselves and how this shows a direct correlation to less sustained injuries, greater success in safe outcomes, and a greater public image within our communities tends to further reinforce acceptance and

buy-in. Through this deep change strategy in shifting mindset and understanding our communities and organization build stronger relationships together and increase organizational efficiency across the board. Like all deep change, leaders must continuously inspect what we expect through coaching and mentoring at all levels of our organizations.

Leadership

Our observations show that our workplace culture is the greatest driving force within our organizations. Culture affects every aspect of our profession, organizations, teams, and units. To paraphrase John Maxwell, show me the leader and I will know his people. Show me a leaders people and I will know him (Maxwell, 1998, 2007). As leaders, it is imperative to set the tone and example for the desired behavior within our units, teams, and organizations. We must hold ourselves accountable first and ensure those we lead are accountable for their actions. As a leader “it’s not what you preach, it’s what you tolerate” that defines your culture (Willink, 2015, p. 51). What we tolerate in ourselves and what we tolerate from others will steer our ships to glory or sink them to the depths of the abyss.

Conclusion

In conclusion, de-escalation tactics and techniques are a “must have” in our current political, progressive, and socially engaged environment. We must completely embrace our organizational values and hold ourselves and others accountable to them. As a profession funded through tax dollars and reliant on the support of the communities we serve, we must take pride in the level of service we provide. While we currently find ourselves under constant scrutiny from outside politicized groups and organizations, we must find resolve in the knowledge we are

supported by the silent majority within our communities. But we must also recognize that we have members in our ranks that are ignominious and unworthy of the badge they wear. We must seek these individuals out and raise their understanding and acceptance of these values, or show them the door. De-escalation is built upon the principles of effective communication, time management, and empathetic response. By applying these same principles to all aspects of our organizations, we believe we will build greater relationships internally and within our communities which will in turn facilitate greater success in conflict management, productivity, and member retention.

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