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The Art and Science of Verbal De-escalation

By: R. Roger Ramsukh

'You shut your mouth and get away from me you idiot!' 'You don't care about me!' 'I'll do what I want, and you can't stop me!' 'You're ugly, and your kids hate you!'

Sound familiar? If you have worked in direct support of someone with an intellectual and/or developmental disability, I'll bet you have – it's almost unavoidable at some point. Consider this – the very way you do your job CREATES the conditions for conflict! By its very nature, controlling the actions of another – either directly or indirectly – whether for their benefit or not, CREATES the conditions for conflict because you are not allowing free and unrestricted choice, expression, action, access, or any other expression of free will. We ALL live in a world where our actions are moderated by others, whether that is a police officer stopping you for speeding or breaking the law, waiting in a long line because you need support in a customer service situation, or not being able to take a break when you're scheduled to because the person you support is having a particularly difficult moment at that time. We get annoyed, we can become angry and in our less-than-proud moments, we may even lose control and say or do something that we wish we hadn't. I write this to remind you that that which you struggle with in others is exactly something you yourself have displayed before and, under the right conditions, you may display again! Often, the very things a person you support is angered by is an 'injustice' you'd fight for yourself if you were in their situation. Think if your decisions were made for you, and the routine of your day is dictated by another's agenda. Before you read any further about the 'techniques' to de-escalate someone, understand this very important perspective: we all want the same general things in life regardless of our cognitive ability. Your ability to empathize and manage these expectations forms the basis for effective de-escalation.

1. To de-escalate effectively is to know yourself well

What are your triggers? What can anger you at the snap of a finger? What issues from your childhood pop up when you are dismissed, passed over, ridiculed, embarrassed, degraded, or

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aggressed upon? What thoughts do these events provoke within you? How do you calm yourself down?

How can this self-reflection help you to understand others? Quite simply, knowing how you would feel and understanding your own sense of what is 'right and just' will enable you to listen with *intent* rather than waiting to speak. Listening with intent means listening to hear, listening to understand, listening so that you are able to see from that person's perspective. The art is in listening so that, in an intangible (yet very real) way, the person senses that you are really listening to them. Sometimes, people don't really listen, they just wait until the person pauses long enough for them to interject. Silencing someone is not de-escalation any more than being quiet means you agree with their point.

If you are emotionally compromised yourself, then you are not the best person to de-escalate the situation. You cannot give what you do not possess. You cannot help someone find some calm if you are filled with anger, resentment, and chaotic thoughts yourself. Effective technique stems more from being in the right emotional state than from the words you say. When I have taught this in groups, participants often get stuck on specific words I use. Even when I've used it effectively in actual situations, staff are sometimes stuck on what words I used at the time instead of focusing on the artful way to use them. Resolution can be achieved in so many ways that do nothing to build rapport and understanding with another and indeed sets up further conflict because it was dealt with just to end the conflict. Removing of rewards, calling in security to restrain the aggressive person (such as I saw many times when I worked in a hospital), and outright refusal to give in because you will not put up with the behaviour may all be done in the moment, but they may do little to build understanding and prevent future maladaptive behaviours.

What do you do if you are the only person available? You do what we all must do – you do the best with what you have, and you do the best job you can. Hopefully, some of the other strategies below will help you overcome your emotional conflicts. I am merely positing that, usually, if there is a choice of staff, the least compromised, most detached person to the episode will probably do best. So, before you put yourself in a position where you must face an escalated person to try and 'talk them down,' you should be aware of your own emotional state, your own triggers, and be prepared to *understand rather than to be understood*.

2. De-escalation starts long before the actual conflict does

Why is it two staff can say the same thing in the same way, and the supported person responds better to one of them? Is it because one is a male and other a female? Is it because one is short and the other tall? Caucasian vs. a person of colour? In truth – sometimes! Yes, there have been times when we as a team knew that a particular person responded better to males than females or vice versa. Or that my skin colour was not going to help me in a certain situation with a person. But there are many more times when, all tangible attributes being equal, the supported person still responds better to one than the other. That is because one staff member *actively and purposefully* manages that relationship.

The principles of managing that relationship is a course in itself, but some of the highlights are:

- i. Do you take the time, and are you aware of how ‘fun’ your interactions are with the person? Do you take the time to do fun things with them, talk to them even when you aren’t asking them to do something, or give them praise when they are doing something appropriately instead of only giving them your attention when they are doing something you don’t like?

Staff often are quick to address a behaviour they don’t like with attention and energy, yet they may not respond at all when the person is behaving appropriately – reverse this and build up that goodwill between you and the person you support.

- ii. How much choice do you allow a person in their day and in their life? I’m going to make a bold statement: perhaps the single greatest source of conflict between a staff member and the person being supported in THEIR life is the amount of control exerted over THEIR decisions, expectations, and desires. The more you find creative ways to give them a sense of control over their own decisions, the more the person will be receptive to your words when they are escalated. It is not only good practice in general, but also why two staff can ask the person to show ‘quiet hands,’ for instance, and the individual only responds to one of them.
- iii. Recognition: Do you recognize this person as a person? What an absurd question you may say. But do you really? Do you recognize this person as someone who has complex thoughts, opinions, and varied desires? I have fallen prey to this thinking, at times, with non-traditional communicators (non-verbal individuals). It is deceptively easy to think about this person as just a stimulus/response organism: when they act out close to lunch time, feed them; when they shiver, turn up the hot water; when they get irritable, give them something to soothe them or suggest a nap. Yet beneath all that, I am convinced there are complex thoughts in even the most dissociated of individuals. Thoughts about me. Thoughts about the weather. The taste of chocolate versus vanilla ice cream. How comfortable they are with the current temperature in the house. If you and your partner have ever had a disagreement about how cold a room is, then you know what I mean! Do you recognize this person as someone who maybe feels lonely even in a room full of people? Or that they heard someone talking about how temperamental they are, and it made them sad or angry? Do you take the time to amply demonstrate that they are recognized as a person and not just ‘a case’ or ‘a client’ or ‘a diagnosis’ (they are not the Autistic or the Schizophrenic ... they are a person with, among other things, Autism or Schizophrenia)? Can you communicate to them your understanding, your compassion, your concern for their life when they are calm, so that you are able to ‘reach them’ when they are dysregulated?

3. In an escalated state, be aware of optics

An actual confrontation, for those who have been in them, can be a time of chaos, noise, unintelligible words, wild and large gesturing and posturing, and name calling; there is the threat of a physical escalation that is barely contained by a thin veil of words, gestures, and perception. Where is the conflict occurring? Specifically, is it near an exit so that the person can leave/retreat if they want to, or are you near the only point of egress, thus blocking (even though you may be unaware) the only exit out of the room for the person? This may create the

perception that they are trapped. Are there multiple staff around them? Is there the perception that one wrong move, and the staff will descend upon them to contain them?

This happened often when I worked in the hospital and a Code White was called – often, two or three security officers would show up in their ‘official’ looking uniforms, and the clear message was ‘calm down or you will be restrained.’ Sometimes their *mere* presence was coercive enough to get the person to calm down, but I’d venture to say almost half the time their *mere* presence escalated an already tense situation.

Is there the perception that the person doing the talking is ready to go ‘hands on,’ or does the person look calm and in control? There should only be one person who speaks *at all unless* they signal to another person to take over. It is amazing how well the people we support can read body language, and they instantly know if someone is in control themselves or if that person is barely holding onto their own anxiety. This is that intangible communication I wrote about earlier. I have often seen that, when a person I support is out of control either verbally and/or physically, they will go to specific people. Those staff may feel like they are being targeted yet, ironically, it often is just the opposite ... the individual recognizes that certain staff members can make them feel safe even when they themselves are not being safe. These staff may be able to use the right tone of voice to communicate caring or safety. In the case of physical blocking or physical restraint, they may use the right amount of force – not more and not less (yes, using too soft an approach can communicate indecisiveness, uncertainty, and doubt – NOT the attributes needed to help a person feel safe with you).

Does the person stand with authority, or fear, or intimidation? You should not stand straight on but on an angle for a couple of reasons. Standing square on to the person is more confrontational than angled slightly away. Angling also reduces parts of your body from being injured since, effectively, one side is nearer than the other to the person and, in a physical aggression, that side would, presumably, be grabbed or struck first. Standing on an angle also allows you to move out of the way quicker, since you will naturally move on a diagonal were the person to lunge at you in a straight line. Your hands should be about waist height, with the palms facing up in a gesture that communicates caring. While this is meant to communicate caring, it is also a safety feature for you because, if the person lunges at you, you can bring your hands up to block much more quickly than if they were down by your side. If you *feel* safer you can *communicate* safety.

4. The verbal part

I hope you can appreciate, by this point, how much goes into de-escalation before you have even opened your mouth! As we get into the ‘way’ to speak and ‘what’ to say, hopefully you have already laid a good foundation by being aware of the ‘self’ and your triggers, you’ve built rapport consciously and persistently, you’ve not set up a situation where the person is triggered unnecessarily because they felt boxed in, or you were standing too close (or too far), and you communicated through your posture and overall body language, that you want to understand their perspective.

I have found that I can de-escalate a situation with my presence without doing anything else! I have walked into a situation and because it was me (I say with humility), and I had done all I’ve just mentioned, the escalated person immediately changed their tone and became calmer. I

don't mean they went immediately calm. I mean they were at one volume and intensity with their speech, and it immediately got a little bit calmer and softer, and they were more willing to talk to me than others on the scene. As soon as I see that change, I KNOW it is just a matter of time and wording to bring that person back to rationality.

It is that knowing that gives the confidence to do this effectively. Now, make no mistake, this does not happen all the time or with everyone, and I have escalated a situation unexpectedly, because I was just not the right person, and it was not 'my day' to be effective. Doing these things, however, will make you effective more days than not.

Here's what to do in the order to do it in:

- 1) Be agreeable
- 2) Listen effectively
- 3) Be clear
- 4) Repeat

Be agreeable. Imagine that you walk into a scenario and the person is making wild hand gestures, is shouting, swearing, insulting everyone, and making accusations. The first thing is to find some common ground. What about their perspective could be true or, at least, true for them? It does not matter that they may be wrong, or that they misunderstood, or that they are totally making it up in order to make a point or get something. Your job, initially, is not to teach or correct, it is to be agreeable to quickly establish rapport in the moment.

What in that person's reality could be true? Miller's Law stated succinctly is "Assume what someone says is true and try to imagine what it could be true of!"

Maybe the person was insulted by a staff inadvertently. Just because I didn't mean to insult you does not mean you were not insulted. Maybe the staff forgot to do something, and the person felt uncared for because of it. So, when the person says, 'Staff don't give a s**t about me,' there is a grain of truth in what they are saying – at least from their perspective. And it is that grain of truth that you are after. But regardless of what it is, half-truth or totally made up – your job is to agree with something about their perspective. Once you have that then ...

Listen effectively. This means being present and really listening to them, THEN repeating what they are saying back to them to make sure they know that you are listening. When you do this, use *their* words not *your* words that mean the same in your mind. For example, don't say '... and that's why you got mad' when they said, 'and they pissed me off.' Don't say, 'feeling sick' when they said, 'stomachache.'

As you use their words, seek clarification that you got it right. Ask them for confirmation. THEN ask them to keep talking. You will find, in almost every situation, that the more a person talks with an actively listening audience (that's what you were just doing in the above steps), the more the person will calm down. When you are in an escalated state, your body goes through a physiological transformation in that fight or flight situation. As your heart races over 120 beats per minute, the spectrum of sound you can register decreases by 2/3, but your visual acuity increases 400%. Your body prepares for a fight, or to run away, and sheds everything that is unnecessary; that's why you've heard about soldiers or regular people urinating on themselves before a big battle or scary situation – that is their body literally squeezing out anything that will hamper it from performing at its peak. What this means in a verbal confrontation is that fully 2/3

of the words you say may not be registered/understood/processed by the person with whom you are in a confrontation.

You probably know this to be true in your own life when you've had a heated argument with your partner, and you say, 'I told you that ... I JUST said that five minutes ago ... Didn't you hear me?' The truth is no they did not – not because they were being obstinate, but because, physiologically, they were SO escalated, it did not register. That is why you must ...

Be Clear. Use as few words as possible, because too many words clouds meaning. Keep words simple and sentences short. Don't talk about intangible concepts – be directive. Use words that have verbs to direct ACTION. 'Take a breath.' 'Tell me more.' 'Do you want to pace?' 'Back away from the counter.' 'Focus on me.' Always state what you want, not what you don't want. For instance, the escalated person may tend to stare at the person with whom they are upset. Instead of saying, 'Don't look at them,' state what you actually want, 'Focus on me.' In an escalated state, the mind does not process negatives like 'don't.' It can only attend to the verb. Police officers are now taught not to say, 'Don't move' when facing a suspect; they are taught to say, 'Stand still.' This is the action they want (though technically I realize this is an *inaction*)!

Repeat this cycle of being agreeable, listening effectively (which means truly listening, repeating what they said in their words as much as possible, seeking clarification, and asking them to keep going), and being clear in your expectations. You will find that, inevitably, the person calms down to the point that they can listen to reason or suggestions about how to proceed. What happens after that is up to you and the situation at hand. If you can correct their perception, do it. If you can remedy a wrong, then fix it. If they need a distraction to get their mind off something that can't be fixed, then provide it. Not every situation can be fixed but occupying the person's mind with a distraction may be enough to prevent another escalation. That is your goal – believe it or not – not to fix but to calm. When you are clear about your intent, you will not be at the mercy of someone who is unsettled or unclear.

Conflict is inevitable in life, as we all have our own perspectives shaped by personal experience, what we have been taught, and the way we internalize these thoughts. This is personal to each of us. While we cannot eliminate conflict totally, a savvy, skilled, and heart-centered person can reduce it to a large extent and can de-escalate quickly when the right principles, and the right mindset are applied in a conscious and coordinated way.

Rather than wishing you no conflicts, I wish you no situation you cannot handle.

About the author

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