

De-Escalation: From Conflict to Compassion

When workplace conversations become heated conflicts, there is often the potential for one or both parties to experience distress or even danger. Innocent interactions with clients or colleagues might quickly turn from diplomatic dialogue to anger, agitation, and potential aggression. Learn and practice de-escalation techniques to prepare yourself and your team to manage potential conflicts and resolve concerns communicated by your clients.

When is De-Escalation Necessary?

Situations that might require de-escalation include any potentially violent or disruptive interactions in which an individual—a client, customer, or colleague—is struggling to communicate calmly and begins resorting to unruly behavior. For example:

- A customer feels unheard and becomes deeply frustrated after attempting to file a complaint with a staff member
- An adult client in a residential program begins communicating erratically with a caregiver due to a health condition
- A traumatized child in a recovery program becomes physically aggressive while feeling emotionally overwhelmed by a group activity

In these types of situations, de-escalation can help slow down an impending incident, preventing an individual's behavior from escalating to full-blown conflict or aggression. De-escalation also enables the service provider to better understand and resolve the issues presented by the upset individual—without the use of physical force.

While conflicts often escalate quickly—or disruptive people appear to suddenly “snap”—in most cases, warning signs occur before violence. Train your team to recognize behaviors of concern that precede violence. To learn more, review “[Violence in the Workplace: Warning Signs](#)” factsheet from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety.

Understand De-Escalation Before Trying It

Multiple de-escalation techniques and models exist—there is no perfect model that suits every situation. Various techniques were created to de-escalate stressful scenarios commonly faced in specific professions, for example, for police officers, health care providers, educators, and caregivers. In the future, as these professions continue developing and applying de-escalation tactics, the public can probably expect more thorough data on the effectiveness of de-escalation. Until then, it is best to follow the de-escalation practices considered tried and true by those with experience in the field.

Before attempting de-escalation in a real-life situation, reflect on “[5 Tips from Force Science on De-Escalation Tactics](#)” shared by former law enforcement officer Duane Wolf in a 2017 article on PoliceOne.com. Wolf explains that understanding these tips helps individuals deploy de-escalation tactics more effectively:

1. **De-escalation is an integrated response.** Verbal responses, persuasion, and empathy are key components of de-escalation, but there’s more to it than talking and listening. Wolf recommends practicing de-escalation in situational training exercises and learning specific tactics to use in different situations.
2. **Success relies on human connection.** De-escalation cannot occur if the upset individual is completely unable or unwilling to listen. Be aware if an individual’s state prevents them from reasoning or even recognizing your presence. If appropriate, consider making a single loud noise to get the individual’s attention, and then immediately revert to calm, pleasant conversation.
3. **De-escalation requires self-control.** Many professionals skilled in de-escalation also practice breathing techniques and calming exercises, or complete “stress inoculation training.” Managing your own emotional and physical responses to stress will prepare you to remain calm during a stressful interaction.
4. **Outcomes matter most.** Wolf explains that when walking into an escalating conflict, it is helpful—if possible—to gain a baseline understanding of the situation at hand. But in the moment, when attempting to de-escalate the conflict, your desired outcomes are more important than the underlying causes of the incident. Focus on the goal of preventing violence and achieving calm communication, and don’t get distracted by the upset individual’s personal details.
5. **Sometimes things still go wrong.** Wolf writes that “Dealing with people in crisis is difficult... the response you get is beyond your control.” Do your best to control your own de-escalation efforts, and don’t blame yourself if an upset individual does not respond as desired. Continue practicing and evaluating your de-escalation techniques to gain skill over time.

Wolf’s tips provide a solid foundation for professionals who might need to apply de-escalation tactics in practice, whether at a food bank, a residential program, a daycare, or any type of human services organization.

How to De-Escalate Stressful Situations

Effective de-escalation requires honed conflict management skills, situational awareness, and self-regulation. Your team can practice and apply a combination of these skills to create a de-escalation approach most appropriate for the types of conflict that arise in your unique environment.

In [another PoliceOne.com article](#), Duane Wolf explains that professionals should focus on reducing combative energy in conflict situations: “in a confrontation, all parties add or subtract from the emotional responses that can heighten or lessen the stressors.” While attempting to de-escalate, try to lessen combative energy and restore peace by:

- Actively listening to the upset individual; using paraphrasing and body language to demonstrate that you are listening
- Showing empathy by verbally identifying the emotions the individual is feeling
- Adding calm energy by slowing down your movements and speech, pausing during a conversation, and lowering your voice

Demonstrating empathy and establishing an environment of trust can sometimes go a long way in de-escalating a potential conflict. If you sense that an upset individual is primarily attempting to resolve a problem, complain,

or vent, then begin by using [active listening skills](#) and providing the listening ear that the individual needs. Sometimes this approach will effectively de-escalate or resolve the conflict. Also, follow the related “[Top 10 De-Escalation Tips](#)” recommended by the Crisis Prevention Institute.

Chuck Joyner, another PoliceOne.com columnist and former CIA, FBI, and SWAT service member, recommends “[7 Easy Steps to Successful De-Escalation](#).” These steps—while seemingly simple—might be challenging to apply during a stressful situation because they require self-control. Review Joyner’s article for all seven steps, or start with these:

- **Don’t be a jerk.** Never provoke a person who is already visibly upset.
- **Don’t speak a single mean word.** “If you start out nice, you can always get mean, but if you start out mean, you can never be nice.” Keep your words, tone, and body language kind and calm as long as possible.
- **Don’t make it personal.** Remain professional and objective; recognize that disruptive people are working through their own issues—it’s not about you.

If you struggle to de-escalate the conflict or identify what the disruptive individual needs, then set and communicate clear boundaries. Do not tolerate the individual behaving outside of the boundaries you set. Also try asking a question that Joyner recommends: “Is there anything I can say or do that will get you to comply with my commands?” If the individual refuses to comply—or is unable to comply—then you can determine that approach is needed. You will also be prepared to document the chain of events that led you to initiate an alternative approach.

If an individual is completely unresponsive to de-escalation attempts, then enact your backup plan. Have a plan—based on the specific situation and the professional standards for your industry—to use other methods to resolve the conflict. In some situations, involving trained professionals to use physical restraints or force might be necessary. Follow your organizational policies and defer to law enforcement or other authorities when appropriate.

Additional Resources

Explore these resources to develop de-escalation tactics most suitable for your industry, facilities, and client demographic. Provide ample training and support to your staff as you hone your conflict resolution, situational awareness, and self-regulation skills.

For health care professionals:

- [De-Escalation in Health Care](#) (The Joint Commission)
- [Joint Commission Issues De-Escalation Guidebook for Healthcare Facilities and Workers](#) (Patient Safety & Quality Healthcare)
- [Strategies to De-Escalate Aggressive Behavior in Psychiatric Patients](#) (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality)
- [Crisis Intervention in Dealing with Violent Patients: De-Escalation Techniques](#) (PAETC)
- [The Art of De-Escalation: Five Steps for Managing Aggressive Patients](#) (MedPage Today)

For professionals working with youth:

- [How to Calm the Agitated Student](#) (Intervention Central)
- [20 Tips to Help De-Escalate Interactions with Anxious or Defiant Students](#) (KQED)

- [Using Trauma-Informed Strategies to De-Escalate Classroom Conflict](#) (James Morehouse Project)
 - [Tantrums, Meltdowns, and Kids Acting Out: What to Do?](#) (Bradley Hospital/Lifespan)
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