

Using words to defuse violence: good communication skills can help soothe angry patrons, elicit cooperation from a frustrated public, and prevent altercations from escalating into violence.

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I WAS AN OFFICER with the New York City Police Department when I was assigned to keep watch over Mafia boss John Gotti. I was sitting in the passenger's seat of my partner's private car when Gotti emerged from his house in a huff. His hands were balled into fists, his gray jogging suit was wrinkled, his face was unshaven, and his hair was uncombed.

It soon became clear that his fit of temper was due to a misunderstanding. One of Gotti's cohorts had claimed that we said something unkind about the Don. The claim was untrue, but this did not stop a highly insulted Gotti from barreling towards our car. He placed his head through the driver's side window and began screaming. His tirade was menacing, and he was so angry that every muscle in his face appeared to be twitching. My partner had his revolver in his hand, secreted tightly between his knees, prepared for trouble.

It was a critical moment, and I made a decision to deal with it by doing nothing. Gotti bellowed and sputtered, and after receiving no response, he stopped talking. In a calm voice, I said: "John, do you think we come to watch you eat breakfast every day because we like you? My boss told me to do this. He sent us out here. You expect your people to do what you tell them. We have to do what our boss tells me."

This simple declaration accomplished several things. First, it defused the immediate situation by requiring Gotti to think of an answer for the question. It also allowed him to focus his anger on someone else and, ultimately, to exit gracefully. Gotti complained about the police chief and the district attorney. He then shook my hand, apologized for his behavior, and left.

With the proper timing, tone, body language, and vocabulary, a hostile interaction evolved into a positive one. Gotti had been placed in check by a dose of my Streetwise Communication.

Dealing with an angry Mafia boss is no different than dealing with an average citizen who can, at any given moment, be distressed, unreasonable, and arrogant. Therefore, this communication technique--which I developed over the years--can help security professionals soothe angry patrons, elicit cooperation from a frustrated public, and prevent altercations from escalating into violence, which can cause harm and result in costly lawsuits.

This communication technique is not for emergency situations, however. In a true crisis, when lives are at stake, officers cannot take time to verbally spar with customers. They must follow established crisis management procedures.

Streetwise Communication is a course I teach that is geared to security professionals. It is a communication technique that entails not only words but also the way they are said and the mannerisms used while expressing them. It is not formulaic but situational. The specific set of responses that work in any given situation have to be intuited on the scene.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Sometimes swagger works, while at other times being humble is better. Sometimes an officer should stand tall and at other times he or she should back down. The secret is learning what fits each situation. Because of this, my training programs use open-ended role playing. Officers must be confronted with people and situations of all types to become adept at dealing with any type of altercation. Following are a few tips in using Streetwise Communication and some examples of how it works in real-life situations.

Recognize Cues

The first step toward using Streetwise Communication is developing the ability to recognize the meaning of verbal cues

being sent by the other person. The situation is akin to boxing. Once a pugilist can predict the next punch coming his way, he can quickly devise a strategy, such as a counter-punch or some other evasive tactic, to avoid being hit.

I faced such an opportunity as a young security officer in a hospital emergency room. A man visited the hospital to see his dying mother. The man was clearly upset. Hospital rules at the time required that he secure a visitor's pass before he could enter the patient area. The man refused to take the time. He yelled at the receptionist and at me that he had to get to his mother immediately.

It was obvious that getting past security quickly was very important to him. I told him that my goal was to get him to his mother as soon as possible and that the only thing standing in the way was this simple visitor's pass. I walked him back to the desk and explained that the man was in a hurry. He patiently waited for his pass and then went on his way.

Maintain Authority

Officers should learn to steer a situation in a chosen direction without arousing the anger of the participants. This can help officers maintain control even in instances where they do not have the upper hand. Most of these situations involve people who are angry and about to make poor decisions.

For example, suppose a visitor to a corporate campus is waiting to meet with a company employee. The employee is late, the building is crowded, and the visitor is tired. He strides across the lobby to complain to the security officer. As he moves forward, however, a distracted courier runs into him, knocking him down. The visitor is not seriously injured but he is angry. He begins yelling at the courier, who is apologizing. The security guard approaches, and the visitor says that he wants to press assault charges against the courier.

If the security officer tries to explain the particulars of assault charges to the visitor, the situation is likely to escalate. Instead, the security officer must get the visitor to realize that he may not really want to push ahead in the direction he has chosen. However, the officer must do this in a way that allows the visitor to arrive at this decision.

The way to do this is to make the visitor aware of the ramifications of his decision. The officer should respond: "I'll be happy to help you press charges. Let me explain the process. First, we have to fill out this form detailing the accident. Then, I'll call the police. They will want to interview you."

At this point, the visitor is likely having second thoughts. The officer should press on: "After they investigate the scene, the police will prepare a complaint report in your name. Then, if there is an arrest made, you may have to appear in court before a judge." All of this should be said in a helpful and even tone.

At this point, the officer should also ask: "Are you tied up this afternoon or are you free tomorrow?" This allows the visitor, now much calmer, to bow out gracefully. The most likely outcome is that the visitor will decide not to pursue the charge. However, even if he does decide to file charges, the situation is still defused and further violence is avoided.

Give Ground

Learning when to stand up and when to give ground is difficult. No two situations are the same, so it is critical to do role-playing exercises with shifting variables. One of the most important factors to consider is physical appearance. While security officers of any stature can be effective, physical size of people on both sides of the argument can often influence how an officer could leverage a given situation.

For example, take a situation where a large man is sitting in his car, blocking a security entrance. The security officer, a petite female, sees the car and asks the man to move. The man gets aggressive, steps out of his car, and begins to talk more loudly. The officer wants to steer the situation away from a physical altercation and get the man to move his car.

In this case, the appropriate move is for the officer to put her hands up in a gesture of conciliation and say: "If you want to stay here, stay here. But I'll have to call the police. You leave me little choice." Either the man moves his car or is arrested. Either way, the company, through the security officer, has defused the situation.

This tactic also works within companies. For example, say an intoxicated person is sitting against an emergency exit door. The person is incoherent and obviously in distress.

The CEO points out the man to a security officer and says: "Move him." Knowing that this could be dangerous, the officer posits that calling the police would be a better solution. Undaunted, the CEO tells the officer to move the man. The officer should say: "Okay, I can move him but I will have to put my hands on him. But he doesn't look like he knows where he is. If he gets hurt, he could sue you, me, and the company. Maybe we should just call the police."

Stay Silent

Security officers must always be prepared to listen, either to gather the facts or to give the other person a chance to vent and cool down. Silence can be a powerful weapon when used correctly.

There are only so many words an angry person can speak before they become talked out. After that, they have two alternatives--listen or go away. Either way, the officer has the upper hand.

Ask Questions

When a security officer is on the defensive, a good question can take the attention off an incident and draw it elsewhere. For example, take a situation where a medical emergency is taking place in an office building. When preventing anyone from getting too close while the EMTs work, the security officer is faced with a dozen employees, all demanding to know what happened. The officer should first be honest and say that he cannot disclose any information because he does not have the authority.

In response to the next question, the officer should respond politely to the person: "Do you work in this building?" Though an obvious attempt to change the subject, the question will make this person stop and think. A series of conversational questions should follow. These should be casual rather than confrontational.

For example, the officer could continue: "What floor do you work on? Oh, in Fred Smith's department? How long have you worked here?" The crowd may not disperse immediately, but they will wander off eventually and without causing trouble.

Security managers often have to enforce decisions that are unpopular or controversial. While solid customer service techniques such as courtesy, respect, and professionalism can defuse many of these difficulties, officers need to know what to do when these core concepts do not work. By acquiring the appropriate verbal skills, they can learn to dodge a few verbal jabs and resolve most situations without violence.

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