

From Crisis to Calm: De-escalation as an Outcome in Policing and Public Service

by Jeffrey Scholz



De-escalation is one of the most misunderstood topics in public safety. Some teach it like a script, others treat it as a soft skill, and many still argue that officers can't control whether a situation de-escalates at all.

As a retired New York State Trooper with over 28 years of experience in law enforcement, 16 of those as a crisis negotiator, and two as the Division Coordinator for the New York State Police Crisis Negotiation Program, I take a different view: **De-escalation is an outcome.**

It's not a single tactic; it's the result of influence, communication, strategic thinking, and when necessary, force. The goal is simple: reduce the risk and intensity of an encounter while working toward voluntary compliance and safety for everyone involved.

There are many paths to success. Ultimately, our path depends on the actions of the individuals we encounter. This requires awareness, recognition of hostile intent, patience, influence, and sometimes force.

Why De-escalation Is an Outcome, Not a Tactic

Some argue officers can only "de-escalate themselves." While we can't control others' behavior, we *can* control how we respond and what *strategies* we use to influence their behavior.

I like to use what I call **Professional Sincerity**, a method of authentic, tactical communication, to influence behavior under pressure. Rather than reciting lines or relying on emotionless interaction, this empowers officers to:

- Validate a person's emotional state without condoning their behavior.
- Set clear boundaries with clarity and respect.
- Express empathy while maintaining authority.
- Connect without becoming emotionally entangled.

When applied correctly, this approach invites cooperation while preserving safety, control, and legitimacy.

Influence as a Tactical Tool

Influence isn't manipulation. It's the ability to guide someone toward a better outcome by understanding their perspective and emotions and presenting actionable choices.

When someone is in crisis or escalating, influence allows us to meet them where they are emotionally by validating, not condoning, their emotions and thoughts without losing our role. It provides a communication bridge between crisis and calm and creates mental, emotional, and physical space for the person to choose compliance.

I like to think of officers offering options instead of ultimatums, resetting an individual's emotional regulation during an encounter, and using presence and tone as tools of influence. This is not "being soft." It's being strategic.

Hostile Intent Recognition: Knowing When Influence Stops Working

Of course, influence only works when the person is *capable* of being influenced.

That's where **Hostile Intent recognition** comes in. One must have a skillset that helps recognize when someone shows signs that communication alone will not work.

This is indicative when a subject demonstrates what is called the M.O.I.: the means, the opportunity, and the intent to cause harm.

When an officer recognizes and can articulate, based on known facts, that someone has the M.O.I. to cause harm

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immediately, verbal tools are no longer the priority, or even feasible. Safety becomes imperative. In these cases, appropriate force is not a failure of de-escalation. It *is* de-escalation. It restores control, reduces risk, and stabilizes the scene.

Officer-Induced Jeopardy and Action Imperative: Controlling the Conditions for Influence

Too often, officers unintentionally escalate a situation through decisions like:

- Rushing in without backup
- Giving confusing commands
- Closing distance too soon

We call this **Officer-Induced Jeopardy**, and it undermines influence by removing the time, space, and clarity needed to communicate effectively.

Likewise, **Action Imperative**, feeling pressured to act immediately, can rob us of the chance to apply Professional Sincerity before force becomes necessary.

Training should emphasize **patience** and **decision-making** without giving up safety:

- Assess threats.
- Know when to wait. Know when to move.
- And know how to create the conditions for your influence to work.

Why This Approach Works: The Contrast Matters

Many traditional programs focus on compliance, reducing stress, only using force, or avoiding force altogether. While those are reasonable goals individually, they fall short when they don't address how to influence real behavior under pressure.

Some police trainers may focus solely on officer

demeanor or internal regulation. I like to go beyond that by emphasizing **influence**—how you communicate, present yourself, and offer people a way out *before* they force your hand, as long as it stays safe.

Professional Sincerity isn't about being nice. It's about using effective and influential communication. It allows you to own the moment, lead the interaction, and help people feel understood and make better choices, which should lead to the behavioral change you seek.

Decision-Making: Anchored in Influence and Outcomes

In every encounter, officers must balance three priorities:

1. **Safety** – For the officer, subject, and public.
2. **Lawfulness** – Staying within policy, procedure, and the law.
3. **Outcome** – Working toward a resolution with the least risk possible.

Models like the **OODA Loop** (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) can be tied to communication tools like the **Behavioral Change Stairway Model (BCSM)**.

The BCSM emphasizes that behavioral change comes from influence and applies to all five steps of it:

- **Active Listening** builds...
- **Empathy**, which builds...
- **Rapport**, which enables...
- **Influence**, which creates the conditions for...
- **Behavioral Change**.

Officers learn to lead the encounter with strategic influence, not just reaction, and not sacrificing safety.

Conclusion: De-escalation is the outcome. Professional Sincerity is the way to get you there.

De-escalation doesn't mean "don't use force." It means "use *every* tool to achieve the *safest* possible *outcome*." I

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have always approached teaching officers more than *how* to survive the encounter; I have taught them how to *shape* it, using my examples of success and failure to guide the way. That's where I derived Professional Sincerity from.

Through awareness, Professional Sincerity, influence-based communication, timing, and decision-making, officers can do more than react; they can lead.

De-escalation isn't a tactic; it results from a skilled, aware professional who understands how to communicate, influence, and act when the time comes.

Let's stop treating de-escalation like a script. Let's teach it like the outcome it is.

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About the Author

Jeffrey G. Scholz is a retired New York State Trooper with over 28 years in law enforcement, including 24+ years with the NYSP. An IADLEST National Certified Instructor and New York State DCJS (Division of Criminal Justice Services) Master Instructor, he retired in 2022 as the Senior Investigator for BCI (Bureau of Criminal Investigation) Training at the State Police Academy, overseeing training for over 1,100 Investigators and thousands of other personnel statewide.

A certified Hostage Negotiator since 2006, Jeff was the Division Coordinator for the NYSP Crisis Negotiation Program from 2019 until his retirement. He is a recipient of the prestigious NYSP George M. Searle Award for excellence in police training.

Jeff's diverse assignments have included patrol, FTO, undercover narcotics, computer crimes, and major crimes—including homicides and missing persons. He also responded to the 9/11 attacks.

He has developed and delivered courses on crisis negotiation, de-escalation, situational awareness, interviewing, hate crimes, and implicit bias, to name a few. Since retiring, Jeff has trained officers and civilians in 17 states through his company, 886 Consulting, LLC. He also serves as a consultant for the NYS Office of Mental Health and a cold case consultant for DCJS.

