

De-escalation is not a tactic, it is a result

That is what I was told at the Force Science Institute's two-day seminar on "Realistic De-escalation." As you know, the Police Commission has insisted on modifying our Use of Force Policy to include de-escalation, and de-escalation has become the buzzword that will solve all the use of force problems nationwide if only those darn cops could be forced to use it! No matter that you have been using it your entire career, just not putting the word in your reports. So, we now have the word in our Use of Force Policy, and the Department has even published a directive called "Tactical De-escalation Techniques." (Directive No. 16, October 2016)

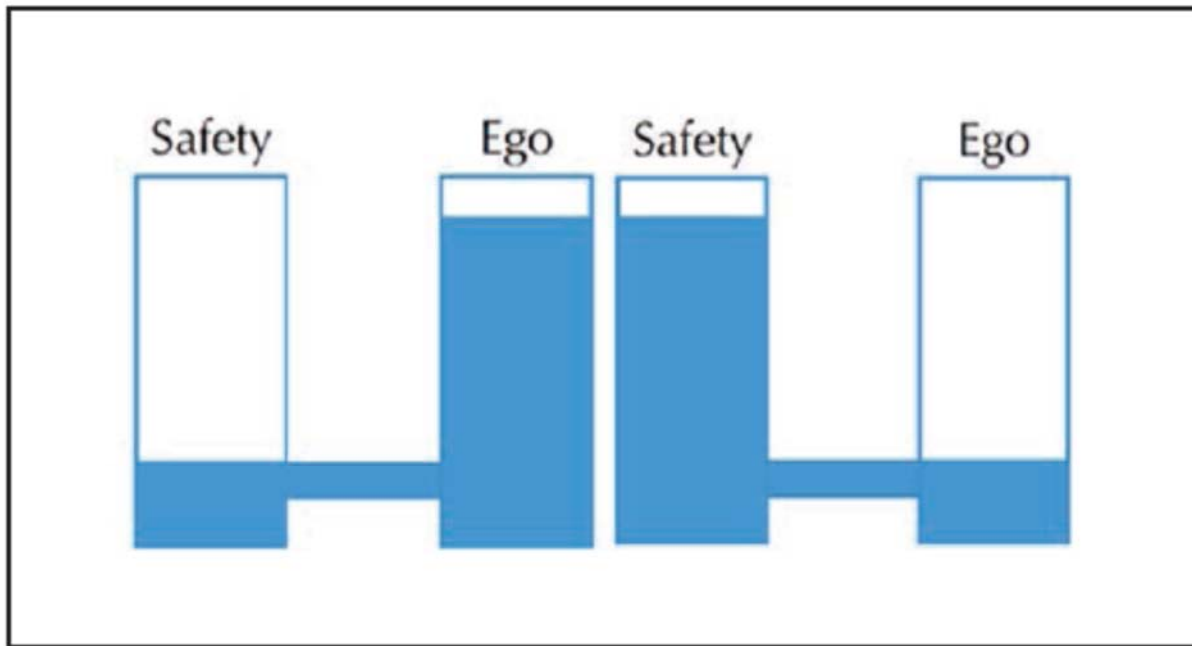
Force Science Institute is a research group that is made up of physicians, psychologists, behavioral scientists, attorneys and other professionals who study human factors, movement, action/reaction times and how the mind works during rapidly unfolding events. They looked at de-escalation through scientific eyes, thus the title of their seminar: "Realistic De-escalation" (emphasis mine).

Force Science considers de-escalation to be an "outcome," not a tactic. Tactics are important to de-escalation, but the ultimate goal, when possible, is to establish influence with the subject through communication to resolve the incident. Containment and control must exist to establish this communication, and it takes two parties, the officer and the suspect, to make it work. That is where the qualifier "realistic" comes in. The suspect can steal your reaction time. There may be no time to establish communication or influence.

Force Science Institute has conducted hundreds of tests on reaction times. A suspect six feet away from an officer can cover that distance in an average of .73 seconds. A punch or a kick can be delivered in .2 seconds, a knife slash in .14 seconds, a strike with a bat or club in .18 seconds, and gun draw from a waistband and subsequent firing of the weapon in .26 seconds. And because a novice with a gun points and shoots, the novice will have a hit rate of 77 percent, usually the face. Time compression can defeat de-escalation before you can say "one thousand one." When the suspect steals your reaction time, immediate force may be the only answer you have left .

But if you are fortunate enough to establish containment, your next problem is to establish control. Your goal now becomes to establish communication with the suspect, build rapport and create influence. You then use the influence to resolve the problem. Now science steps in.

How do you create influence? First, forget about diagnosing the suspect. Whether the suspect is schizophrenic, manic depressive, brain damaged, chemically imbalanced or all four, it is not helpful for you to classify the malady, and it couldn't be done even by a doctor without a battery of tests—so don't try. What you need to determine, according to Force Science, is whether you can make contact with the suspect, i.e., communication on some level. You need the communication to establish the rapport, and you need the rapport to establish influence.



The safety/ego relationship.

Watch the suspect. Is he defending his territory? If so, don't invade his space. Does he have a fatal medical condition? Call an ambulance. What is his perspective? What is the goal of his activity in his mind? No matter how ridiculous it might be, it is the suspect's reality. If the suspect's thinking is contaminated because of delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thinking or mood disturbance, your words to the suspect may not even be processed by his brain. The suspect is not ignoring you, your words are just not penetrating his conscious. You must establish contact to get communication. A sharp, loud noise, such as a hand clap and shout of "hey!" followed by a calm voice, might break through and get his attention. No attention, no communication, and therefore, no influence.

Repeatedly yelling the same commands is not likely to be helpful and usually increases the tension, not only with the suspect but with the officers. While trying to help the suspect gain emotional control of himself, realize that there is another person who needs to maintain emotional control. That person is you. "Ask, tell, make" is something we have always been trained in, but it is usually ineffective in this type of situation and tends to quickly lead to a use of force. When dealing with suspects with mental problems, you need to know your own triggers as well as trying to determine theirs. When an officer's ego goes up, an officer's safety goes down.

Techniques, explained by Force Science, are to speak calmly and watch your nonverbal communication, such as body language and tone of voice. Convey respect for the suspect. Show compassion. It may help if you confirm the possibility that their delusion may be true in order to open a dialogue. Listen to what they are saying with active listening skills. Ask them questions about what is happening, why is it happening, has it happened before, and what does the suspect think can be done about it. Ask the suspect what he needs from us. Be creative, you are trying to establish the rapport that is needed as a foundation to exercise influence.

Once rapport has been established, the suspect may trust you enough to allow you to have an influence on the next things that need to happen, such as to put down the knife or submit to transportation to the hospital. However, Force Science cautions, NEVER let your guard down. Suspects with mental conditions can unpredictably explode and attack. Always have a plan in effect for that eventuality.

Hopefully these techniques work, but if they don't, and the suspect steals your reaction time, you may have to use force, even deadly force. Now another skill must be employed, and that is effective report writing. The modern policing atmosphere means that you will be second-guessed, Monday-morning quarterbacked and probably sued. Take some time and put everything into your report, down to the smallest detail, of the efforts that you utilized to avoid the need to use force. That includes your planning on the way to the call to establish containment.

Remember, containment is the first step in de-escalation. No containment, no communication. No communication, no rapport. No rapport, no influence. No influence, no peaceful resolution. Explain where in this plan the suspect stole your reaction time, making your use of force necessary and reasonable.

The subject is complex, and more information can be obtained at Force Science's website at www.forcescience.org. And if you ever get the chance to attend their training, I highly recommend it.

Be legally careful out there.

Links to various things in this article are at **www.warningbells.com**.