Chapter 4: Communication to de-escalate conflict

Using communication during conflict situations

Communication can be defined as:

'the imparting or exchange of information, ideas or feelings between human beings by speech, body language, gestures, behaviour, writing or other means.'

Security operatives will, by virtue of what you do, come into contact and communicate with a wide range of people on a daily basis. It is important, therefore, that you develop your communication skills so that you can be as effective as possible when dealing with those people.

When you communicate with people, you not only give out verbal messages, but non-verbal messages as well, giving others signals about your attitude and personality. These non-verbal signals (or body language) are often given out subconsciously, without us even realising that we are doing it.

In module 1, chapter 7, you read about the different types of communication such as verbal communication (speaking and listening) and non-verbal communication. You may want to familiarise yourself with this content now.

It is estimated that less than a tenth of any message you send comes from the actual verbal or spoken words you use. The rest comes from the non-verbal signals given off when trying to convey that message. It makes sense, then, that as a professional security operative, you are careful to only give off signals that you mean to and that you can accurately interpret the signals given off by the person you are dealing with at the time.

Barriers to communication

Hopefully, if you think carefully about what you are doing, you should be able to make yourself understood by others most of the time.

Unfortunately, however, communication can sometimes become difficult or even break down entirely.

Anything that gets in the way of successful communication is described as a **barrier**.

'A communication barrier is anything that hinders, restricts or perverts successful communication between two or more parties'.



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Physical barriers to communication

Physical barriers or blocks to communication are usually fairly easy to recognise and deal with. They include things like:

Discomfort

People are less likely to appreciate or understand what you are saying to them if they are uncomfortable. If they are too hot, too cold, in pain, hungry or tired, or even frightened, they will probably be thinking more about that than what you are saying to them.

Possible solutions may include:

- moving them to somewhere more comfortable
- calling for medical assistance
- showing non-aggression
- giving reassurance
- giving sufficient personal space

Noise

Noises such as loud music, heavy traffic or people shouting can all make it more difficult for someone to hear what you are saying, and for you to hear them, therefore hindering communication.

Possible solutions may include:

- moving them to somewhere quieter
- moving closer to them when speaking
- speaking slightly louder and clearer
- being prepared to repeat yourself



Shock

If, following a particularly stressful or traumatic incident, someone is suffering from shock, then their mind and body will be trying to recover from that, making your message less important to them.

Possible solutions may include:

- moving them to somewhere more comfortable
- calling for medical assistance
- showing non-aggression
- giving reassurance
- being prepared to repeat yourself

Language

English is not everyone's first language; it could be a person's second or even third language, which will make communicating with them slower and more difficult. If the person you are trying to speak to cannot understand English at all, then communication can become almost impossible.

Possible solutions may include:

- speaking slowly and clearly
- using hand signals to support your words
- passing your message through an interpreter
- being prepared to repeat yourself

Accents and jargon

Some people can find it difficult to understand people with particularly strong regional accents.

The accidental use of work or regional jargon that someone is not used to may also cause problems during a conversation.

Possible solutions may include:

- speaking slowly and clearly
- using short, simple words
- explaining jargon in words they can understand
- being prepared to repeat yourself

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Drink and/or drugs

People who have consumed too much alcohol can be very difficult to deal with, as their perceptions are distorted and they may appear to be overly aggressive.

Someone who has recently taken drugs may not appear to know what is going on around them and may be very difficult to communicate with.

Possible solutions may include:

- being assertive
- showing non-aggression
- speaking clearly and calmly
- giving reassurance
- being prepared to repeat yourself

Psychological barriers to communication

Typical **psychological** barriers or blocks to communication in the workplace can be more difficult to recognise and may include things like:

Mental illness

There are many types of mental illness or disability, many of which are often not easily recognisable from the outset. These issues may result in a person appearing nervous, frightened, paranoid or confused.



Possible solutions may include:

- keeping your hands open and in view
- giving them plenty of space
- trying not to startle them
- showing non-aggression
- reassuring them
- speaking calmly and politely
- being prepared to repeat yourself

It is important that all security operatives use their communication skills effectively, particularly when dealing with conflict situations. Security operatives need to understand what helps or improves communication in the workplace and how to reduce or remove any barriers that are making communication difficult or impossible.

Culture

People from different parts of the world may have different ways of looking at things than you do, they may not understand why you are saying something or they may simply refuse to accept it.

Possible solutions may include:

- respecting other people's values
- showing non-aggression
- being assertive
- calmly and politely explaining the rules

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Fear or dislike of authority

If someone has had a bad experience with security operatives in the past, they may be unnecessarily frightened of them or may just automatically dislike them, which could mean that they have a bad attitude towards you from the start.

Possible solutions may include:

- showing non-aggression
- being assertive
- reassuring them
- calmly and politely explaining the rules

Attitudes and beliefs

Someone with a generally poor attitude to life and to other people may also be difficult to deal with, as they may think that anything you say is unreasonable. A person with different beliefs may also totally disagree with what you have to say, purely because of their own very strong beliefs.

Possible solutions may include:

- showing non-aggression
- being assertive
- calmly and politely explaining the rules
- respecting other people's beliefs

Overcoming communication barriers

Positive verbal and non-verbal communication need to be used to overcome barriers, for example speaking clearly, adopting a non-aggressive stance and explaining what you are doing will all help you to overcome barriers. How you express yourself, for example how you use eye contact and other body language, can create the right impression about you.

You should maintain your space and not stand too close or straight on to the other person, as this may make them feel intimidated. You should not crowd them into a small place or a corner either, as this may make them feel blocked in with no way to leave if they want to. If possible, move them to a quieter and well-lit area.



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PASSIVE



ASSERTIVE



AGGRESSIVE



Types of behaviour

You need to ensure that you project the right image towards people when dealing with them.

You do not want to appear nervous or shy, as this may make you appear to be weak. This type of behaviour is known as being **passive**; it is negative behaviour and will not help a situation.

Passive behaviour includes:

- being hesitant, using apologetic speech patterns
- overly seeking approval
- always agreeing with others
- using a broken speech pattern
- self-deprecation or self-criticism
- overly quiet speech
- discomfort in groups
- a lack of eye contact

You do not want to come across as being too strong or opinionated either, as this may make you seem **aggressive**. This again is unhelpful negative behaviour that will probably hinder the situation.

Aggressive behaviour includes:

- having a threatening tone or position
- using angry gestures
- using angry words
- concerns of violence
- staring and/or uncomfortable eye contact

Ideally, you will want to use your behaviour to show that you are confident, capable, helpful and friendly, without coming on too strong. This is known as being **assertive**, which is a very positive type of behaviour to show, and which should receive a positive reaction from others.

Assertive behaviour includes:

- being firm but fair
- remaining calm
- normal positioning
- relaxed body language
- polite/rational speech
- listening
- acknowledging

You show others what type of person you are by careful use of your appearance, demeanour, speech, posture, gestures, facial expressions, movement, positioning and eye contact. Whenever you are dealing with someone, but particularly in conflict situations, you need to make a conscious effort to outwardly display positive behaviour towards them.

It is said that in the first 10 seconds of meeting or seeing someone, you will form an impression of what they are like, and that they will form an opinion of you at the same time. This happens even before words are exchanged, so it follows that your appearance, demeanour and clothes are important factors used to determine how others perceive you and how you perceive them.

As a security operative, you should always be conscious of your own self-image and how it can be used to influence those around you.



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Addressing unacceptable behaviour

Part of the role of a security operative is to enforce rules and regulations and to deal with unacceptable behaviour.

Examples of typical situations that a security operative may have to deal with include:

Site/Venue	Unacceptable behaviour
Pub	Drunkenness and swearing
Nightclub	Offering unwanted attention
Building site	Trespassing
Shopping centre	Loitering and drinking
Commercial site	Parking illegally/ dangerously
Retail shop	Shoplifting

The approach

As you enter a situation, you need to ensure that you have carried out an appropriate dynamic risk assessment (for example by using TACT and SEW) to ensure that you are able to deal with it safely. These assessments need to be continued throughout the encounter, to ensure that you are able to adapt to any changes or escalation and to ensure that you remain safe throughout.

As you approach the situation, you need be conscious of your own body language, so that you can adopt the most appropriate behaviour to best deal with the parties involved.

You need to be assertive, display positive behaviour and make sure that you do not come across as aggressive from the outset.

'By being positive and helpful, and communicating well, you should be able to quickly form a healthy working relationship with people.'

Consider the problem-solving techniques that you have already learnt:

- using a non-aggressive stance and body language
- building a rapport
- active listening – remember to look for any possible barriers to communication
- showing empathy
- providing options
- looking for a win-win outcome
- delivering a gift, e.g. calling a taxi
- follow appropriate organisational policies and procedures

Using discretion

When dealing with the many and varied types of incidents in the workplace, security operatives will be required to make decisions as to what course of action needs to be taken.

You have a fairly wide range of powers to help deal with different situations. You have, for example, powers of arrest, the rules of trespass, the right to use force and you can give words of advice to people whose behaviour or actions are against the rules or are just unacceptable.

You will be required to exercise a certain amount of discretion in the actions you choose, and there will be a variety of ways you can successfully deal with most incidents. Using discretion requires the selection of the best course of action, having recognised and considered all of the alternatives.



All of these situations will need dealing with swiftly and tactfully. Some will require just words of advice to stop the offending behaviour, whilst others may require civil or criminal laws to deal with them.

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When using discretion, you may, in certain circumstances, decide not to act in situations where you would normally be expected to. This failure to act could be seen as laziness, incompetence or discrimination, so you need to ensure that you are able to fully justify your decision. When exercising your powers of discretion, you need to consider:

- who you are dealing with
- your location
- how the incident started
- what the possible outcomes are
- whether you should act or not (e.g. the bar/shop is about to close)
- how you should act
- how those actions might be seen

Working with colleagues to de-escalate conflict situations

Positioning - contact and cover

When working together with another security operative, if you are the main person dealing with the situation, you are referred to as the **contact** (sometimes called the **lead**).

Your colleague, the person supporting you, is referred to as the **cover** (sometimes called the **support**).

The CONTACT:

- approaches the situation
- makes initial contact
- engages with the person/people
- deals with problems

The COVER:

- stands nearby
- watches the encounter and others around, and acts as a witness
- can call for extra support (other colleagues/management/police)
- can step in to assist or relieve if necessary

How the contact and cover stand in relation to the other person or people is vital.

The contact needs to be close enough to the person to be able to conduct a one-to-one conversation, but must also maintain a sensible, safe distance from them. They must not be too close as to appear intimidating, but they must be far enough away to be able to react if the situation escalates.

The cover needs to be slightly further away, and off to one side. This again will prevent the person you are dealing with from feeling crowded or surrounded and this allows the cover enough space to be able to observe the encounter and anyone else nearby. The cover should, however, be close enough to step in to assist if required.

The contact and cover need to be able to see each other clearly at all times and the other person needs to be able to see the cover in the background but be left to deal with the contact.

GOOD contact and cover:



- person can see both contact and cover
- person does not feel blocked in or intimidated
- contact and cover can see each other
- contact at a sensible distance
- contact showing non-aggression
- contact can deal with the person on a one-to-one basis
- cover slightly further away and to the side
- cover can see encounter and surrounding area/people
- cover showing non-aggression
- cover is close enough step in to assist if required

POOR contact and cover:



- person can see both contact and cover, but they are too close together
- person will feel blocked in or intimidated as contact and cover are too close to them
- contact and cover cannot see each other
- contact is too close and may appear threatening
- contact appears overly aggressive, poor body language
- contact is too close if person strikes out
- cover is too close and almost next to contact
- cover cannot see surrounding areas/ people as they are too close
- cover's stance is slightly aggressive
- cover is also too close if person strikes out

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The careful and proper use of contact and cover will allow the contact to deal with the situation effectively, without escalating the problem, while being able to call upon immediate support from the cover if it is needed.

Properly considering positioning and using effective communication skills will vastly increase the chances of security operatives being able to deal with conflict situations successfully and safely.

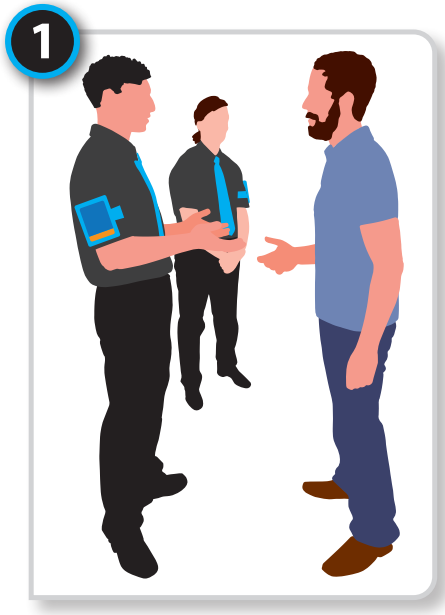
Switching

When dealing with a situation with a colleague, there may be occasions during the encounter where it may be useful or helpful to switch (swap) positions.

This is where the cover takes over as the contact and starts to deal with the person, and the contact drops back to the supporting role as the cover. There is nothing wrong with doing this and this should be done it if it will improve or resolve the situation.

You may decide to switch if the:

- person takes a dislike to the contact
- person gets more frustrated or angrier
- contact feels they are getting nowhere
- cover feels they may be able to communicate better with the person
- cover feels they may be better placed to resolve the problem



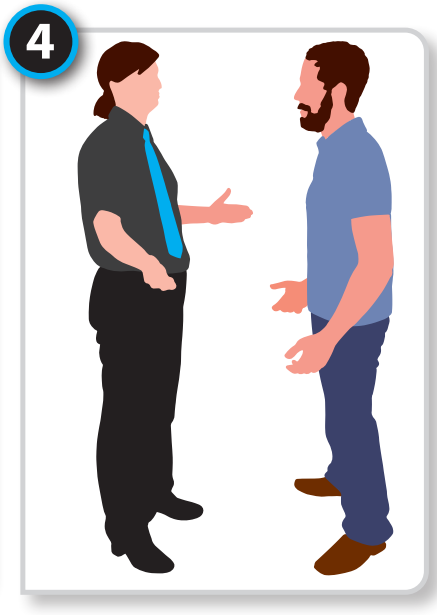
Contact dealing with the person.



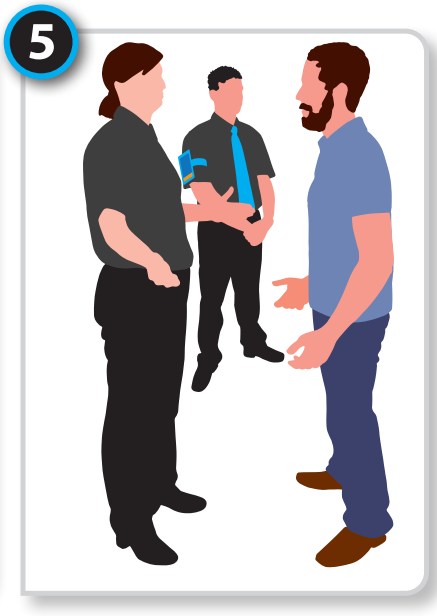
Situation escalates.



Cover approaches.



Cover draws the person around allowing the contact to step back.



Cover takes over the encounter and former contact takes over cover position.

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Passing the baton

Another widely used technique for solving conflict situations is what is called 'passing the baton'.

If you cannot successfully resolve a conflict situation yourself or it continues to escalate, you may need to make the decision to pass the situation (baton) on to someone else, giving them the opportunity to try to deal with it. The idea is to hand the situation to another person who is more able or better placed to deal with it.

You may be able to pass the problem on to someone with:

- more seniority (supervisor or manager)
- more experience
- specialist skills or knowledge, e.g. medic
- more time

Passing the baton should not be confused with the term 'passing the buck'. You are not handing over the problem because you can't be bothered to deal with it or because you are bored with it. You are simply finding someone who may be able to deal with it better than you are able to at that time.



It may even help to calm the situation down if the person you are having problems with feels that you are taking the situation seriously by passing the matter on to a higher authority.

The proper debriefing of these types of incidents can help you to improve how you deal with similar problems in the future.

You may even be able to reduce the chances of them happening in the first place, or stop them from happening at all. And if they do occur, you should be able to provide an agreed, common positive response each time, automatically improving your own safety, as well as the safety of customers, colleagues, other members of staff and the public.

All members of the security team, particularly those involved in the original incident, should take part in this process so that they can help to make the changes required to deal with future conflict situations more effective.

It is always important to reflect on post incidents, (see chapter 11 in module 1).