Strategic Communication

De-escalation Skills for Challenging Conversations

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De-escalation Skills for Challenging Conversations

I. Important Considerations in Communication
II. Framework for a Successful Conversation
III. Redirecting Behavior Using Empathy and Strategic Language
IV. De-escalation Principles (non-violent, early intervention and solution oriented)
V. Action Steps

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Important Considerations in Communication

- **Implicit Bias** - Our unconscious attitudes and stereotypes (both positive and negative) that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions towards specific individuals or groups.
  - All of us have it.
  - It can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, especially when things get heated.

Important Considerations in Communication

- Approach conversations with cultural sensitivity and humility.
  - Communication styles vary from individual to individual and across cultures and backgrounds. It's important to recognize this, be aware of differences and avoid assumptions.

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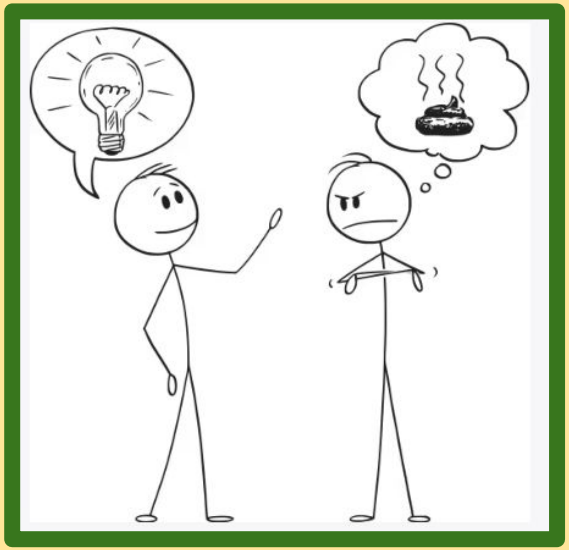
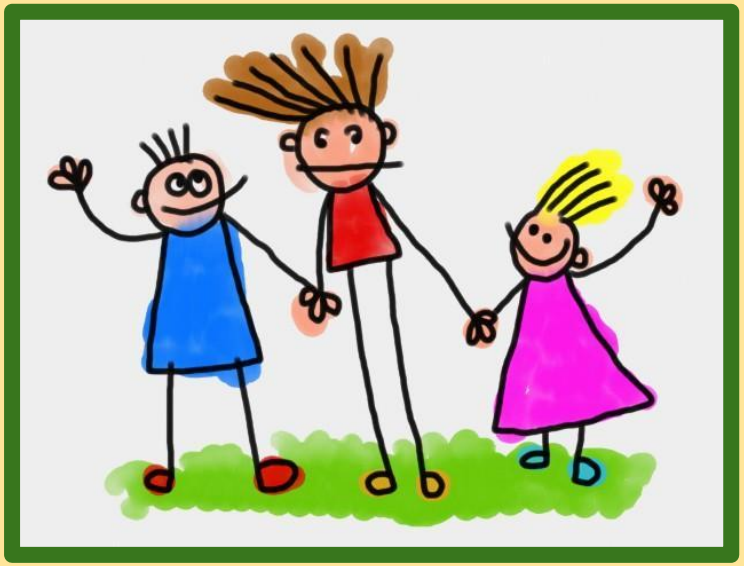
Important Considerations in Communication

- The term “brutally honest” is horrible. You can be honest in your communication without being brutal.





Framework for a Successful Conversation

1. **Prepare for the conversation**
   - Goals/Outcome
   - Manage your emotions
   - Prep and practice
   - Timeliness

Framework for a Successful Conversation

2. Approaching the person - Tone

- I’d like to talk about something with you, do you have a few minutes today?

- I’d like to discuss something with you. I think we may have different perspectives and I want to understand your point of view and share mine.

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Framework for a Successful Conversation

3. Specific strategies during the conversation

- Present the facts - use specifics and avoid vague language
- Ask for the other person's perspective. Practice Active Listening
- Offer empathy
- Know if/when to take a break
- Develop a plan and a follow up protocol

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Recap: Framework for a Successful Conversation

1. Preparing for the conversation
2. Approaching the person
3. Strategies to use during the conversation

Now… let's practice!

Scenario 1

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"Unsafe Work Practice" Scenario

Background: A crew is working on a high-priority, physically demanding project. A new crew member, Sam, is known for their strong work ethic and gets along well with others but has a habit of ignoring safety protocols to work faster. Last week, you, the crew leader, twice noticed Sam not wearing their hard hat. You gave them a verbal warning after the 2nd time. Yesterday, on the way back to the campsite you realized he wasn't wearing his seatbelt. Sam also seems resistant to your feedback and has made a couple of sarcastic remarks about "micromanagement" to other crew members.

Focus on…

- Preparing for the conversation
- Approaching the person
- Strategies to use during the conversation

Scenario 1 Questions:

Preparing for the conversation

- What are the three specific, recent facts you will present to Sam? What is your single, non-negotiable goal for this conversation?

Approaching the person

- After presenting the facts, what is an open-ended question you will use to ask for Sam's perspective? How will you then offer a sentence of empathy without excusing the unsafe behavior?

Strategies to use during the conversation

- After listening to Sam's perspective, what process (not just a promise) will you both agree to that addresses the problem and leads to a change in behavior?
- Since this is the third safety discussion, what is the clear next step/consequence if a fourth violation occurs? How will you state this firmly but professionally?

Methods to Redirect Behavior Using Empathy and Strategic Language

- Effective Communication
- Redirect Hostility
- Build Trust & Respect

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Methods to Redirect Behavior Using Empathy and Strategic Language

Effective Communication

1. Ask, don’t tell.
2. Paraphrase and clarify.
3. Offer options, not threats.
4. Guide the conversation to response not reaction.

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Instead of saying…		Try saying….
1. Calm down.	→	I can see you're upset.
2. You're wrong.	→	I see things differently.
3. That's not what happened.	→	My understanding of the situation is different.
4. Why did you do that?	→	What was the thinking behind that?

Methods to Redirect Behavior Using Empathy and Strategic Language

Redirect Hostility

1. Stay calm and maintain your composure.
2. Acknowledge their feelings.
3. Redirect to the facts.
4. Set boundaries, take a break if necessary.

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Methods to Redirect Behavior Using Empathy and Strategic Language

Building Trust and Respect

1. Be consistent and fair.
2. Follow through on what you say.
3. Maintain confidentiality.
4. Show empathy and practice active listening.

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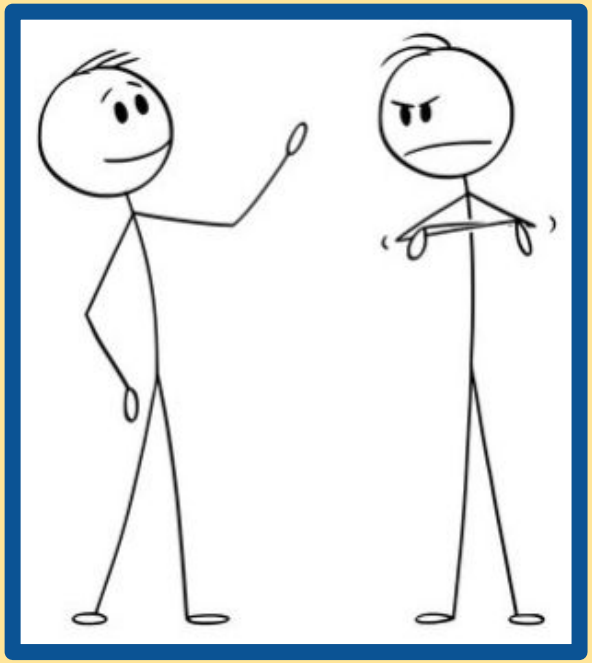
Methods to Redirect Behavior Using Empathy and Strategic Language

Recap:

- Effective Communication
- Redirect Hostility
- Build Trust & Respect

Let’s Practice! Scenario 2



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“Gear Recall” Scenario

Background: You’ve gotten an email from a manufacturer about a *potential* safety recall for a popular piece of equipment - a specific model of climbing harness. Several of your guides, including Alex, an experienced and well-respected senior guide have often use this harness model on trips. Alex has a strong personality and prides themself on being an expert on all gear. You call Alex into your office to inform them of the potential recall and say that you’d like to immediately pause using that harness until the manufacturer provides more information. You recognize this will be a costly pause but you feel it is the right move. They immediately become defensive and hostile, saying they’ve been using the gear for years and it’s completely safe. This is just another example of office staff questioning my expertise, overreacting to every little thing, and not trusting our professional judgement.

Focus on…

- Effective Communication
- Redirect Hostility
- Build Trust & Respect

Scenario 2 Questions:

Building Trust & Respect

- What is one specific sentence you will use to start the conversation that acknowledges Alex's expertise and value *before* you mention the harness?
- What are other ways during the conversation that you could demonstrate trust and respect?

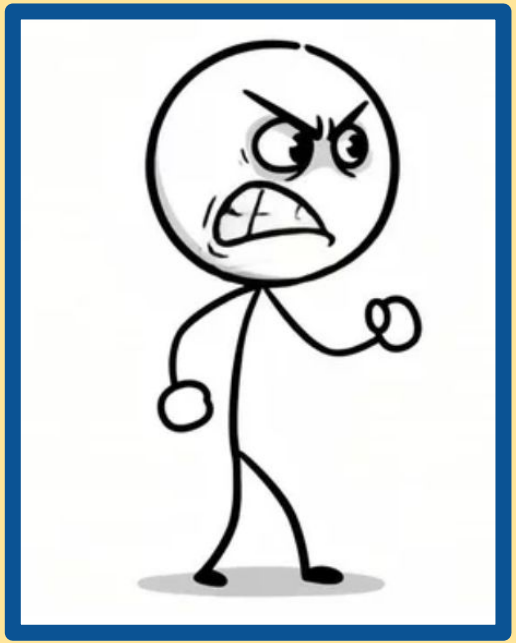
Effective Communication Strategies

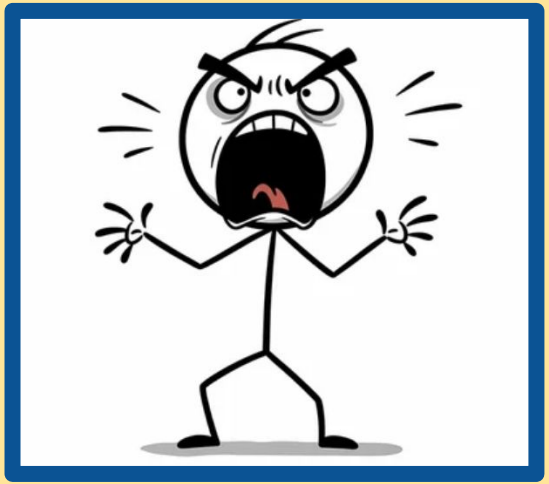
- What is one concrete, short-term choice you can offer Alex that gives him a sense of control over the situation

Redirect Hostility

- What is a way you could defuse and redirect Alex’s hostility
- What is a single sentence you can use to validate his feeling of being undervalued without agreeing with the accusation?

De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented





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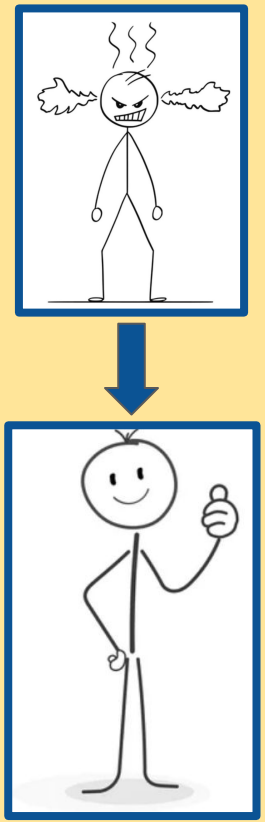
De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- Focus on the acute crisis
- Prioritize safety above all else
- Build rapport and trust
- Show empathy
- Verbal and nonverbal communication
- Situational awareness
- Defusing techniques and choices



De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- **Focus on the acute crisis**
  - You’re not trying to solve the long term problem - you’re addressing the immediate threat or emotional threat
  - The goal is to stabilize the situation and ensure safety for everyone

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De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- **Prioritize safety above all else**
  - Create physical space, remove potential weapons and stay alert to the person's body language

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De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- **Build Rapport and Trust**

  Acknowledge and validate their feelings.
  - Instead of “You need to stop yelling”
  - Try: “I can see you’re very angry right now, and I want to understand what is making you so upset.”

  Find Common Ground: Look for something you can agree on to build a bridge of understanding.
  - This shifts the dynamic from “me vs you” to “us vs the problem”

De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- **Show empathy: An understanding of the emotions and perspectives of others**
  - Use words that convey understanding and respect, avoiding language that can sound critical or condescending.
    - Instead of: “Why would you say that?”
    - Try: “Help me understand what happened from your perspective.”

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De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- **Verbal and Nonverbal Communication**
  - Pay close attention not just to what the person is saying but how they say it. Notice shifts that can help you understand their emotional state.
  - Practice active listening so you can match your words and tone to their needs.
    - If someone's voice is shaking and they are tense, a gentle, calm tone from you can be disarming. You are an anchor of calm in a storm of emotion.

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De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- **Situational Awareness**
  - Environmental awareness: weapons, exits, proximity, etc.
  - Body language and nonverbal cues: Clenched fists, tight jaw, rigid posture.
  - Acknowledge your own state: Be aware of your own emotions and physical reactions.

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De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- **Defusing Techniques and Choices - You're deliberately choosing from a range of tactics to meet the person's needs.**
  - Offer choices - Choices offer some control
  - Use calming language - your voice is a powerful tool
  - Validate feelings (again)
  - Set clear and calm boundaries
  - Shift the focus to problem-solving

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De-escalation Principles: Non-Violent, Early Intervention, Solution Oriented

- Focus on the Acute Crisis
- Prioritize Safety Above All Else
- Build Rapport and Trust
- Show Empathy
- Verbal and Nonverbal Communication
- Situational Awareness
- Defusing Techniques and Choices

Final Scenario!

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The Overwhelmed Crew Member

The Situation: You are the crew leader for a backcountry trail maintenance project. It's the fifth day of a challenging hitch, and the weather has been hot and humid. Your crew has been working on a particularly difficult section of trail—a long series of switchbacks that requires moving heavy rock.

You notice one of your crew members, Alex, is becoming increasingly agitated. For the past hour, they have been struggling to move a large, stubborn rock with their Pulaski. After a final, unsuccessful effort, Alex shouts in frustration, kicks the rock, and then violently throws their Pulaski to the ground. They toss their hard hat off and move down the trail shouting how they hate this place and want to quit. They are now standing with their hands on their hips, shaking their head, and muttering to themselves. The rest of the crew is watching nervously from a few feet away.

Focus on…

- The acute crisis
- Prioritize safety above all else
- Built rapport and trust
- Show empathy
- Verbal and nonverbal communication
- Situational awareness
- Defusing techniques and choices

Scenario 3 Questions:

1. Prioritize Safety Above All Else & Situational Awareness

- What is the immediate, most pressing safety concern in this scenario?
- What is the first thing you would do to ensure the safety of Alex and the rest of the crew?
- What other factors in the environment (the tool, the crew's proximity, etc.) should you be aware of right now?

2. Focus on the Acute Crisis & Empathy

- What is the *acute crisis* right now? Is it the rock, the trail work, or something else?
- What is one thing you could say to Alex that would show you recognize their frustration and validate their feelings without escalating the situation?

3. Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

- How would you approach Alex? What would your body language be (e.g., where would you hold your hands, how close would you stand)? What could you say to begin the conversation?

4. Defusing Techniques and Choices

- What are some concrete, solution-oriented choices you could offer Alex to de-escalate the situation? (Think about the person's physical and emotional needs).

WRMC Action Steps

Before your next challenging conversation:

1. Isolate the specific, recent behavior and its direct impact
    a. Write it down
2. Practice managing your nonverbal signals by focusing on two things when a conversation escalates:
    a. Anchor your voice
    b. Offer a choice
3. Practice active listening - Listen first and respond second.
4. Commit to consistent follow through - Keeping your promises will help build long term trust.

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Q & A

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