Strategic Communication

Mastering the Art of Challenging Conversations and De-escalation

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Our Agenda

Building Up Our Toolbox

1. Important Considerations in Communication
2. Self Regulation Strategies
3. Setting up a Difficult Conversation for Success
4. Redirecting Behavior Using Empathy and Strategic Language
5. De-escalation Principles (non-violent, early intervention and solution oriented)
6. Action Steps



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.

AMERICAN CONSERVATION EXPERIENCE



Misinterpretation fuels escalation



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.

Personal experiences and triggers can influence responses



Core Idea: You can't ***control*** another person's behavior - but you can strongly influence whether a situation escalates or de-escalates.

This is not about "winning" conversations

It's about:

Maintaining safety

Preserving relationships

Getting to workable outcomes



Self Regulation: Your regulation sets the tone for the conversation.

Understand what’s happening and normalize emotion



Emotions are adaptive.

Emotions are not a threat but a signal.

Regulation must come before we can respond in a calm, focused way.

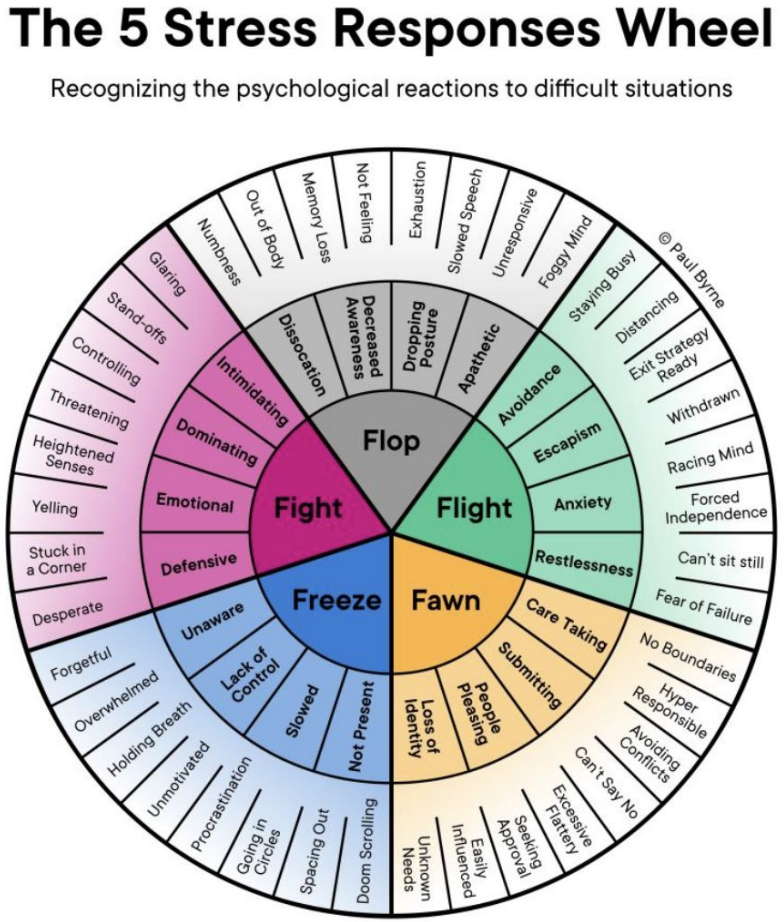
Sometimes the body has to lead before the mind can catch up.

The Five Stress Responses Wheel

Recognizing the psychological reactions in difficult situations

Source: Paul Byrne, “The 5 Stress Responses Wheel”

Informed by Polyvagal Theory, trauma psychology, somatic coaching practices, and Steve Athey.



Tactical Self Regulation tools

1. 4 Second Pause or exhale focused breathing
2. Physical grounding - curl your toes, press your heels firmly into the floor.
3. “I can tell” awareness (naming it = controlling it)
4. Go into scientist mode.
5. Model calm: people mirror nervous systems.





Self Regulation Scenario

You are the lead guide on a backcountry hiking trip with five participants and another assistant guide.

- It's late afternoon on Day 3.
- The group has had a long day - everyone is tired
- Weather is moving in faster than expected.
  - One of your participants stumbles on some rocks and falls hard.
  - They are not seriously injured, but they are shaken.
  - You get them to a safe spot and begin assessing the situation.

Then.... ➜



During this Scenario:

- One client is asking you repeatedly, "Are they okay?"
- The assistant guide is looking to you for direction
- You can hear thunder getting closer
- You realize you are behind schedule
- You notice your hands are shaking and you're having trouble slowing your thoughts down



For the Scenario:

As you think through this:

- What emotions are you experiencing?
- What physical signs tell you you're getting activated?
- What could happen if you respond immediately?
- What self-regulation tools could you use?

Setting Up A Difficult Conversation for Success

A

Go in with the right mindset: Curiosity and with something to learn (not something to prove.)

B

Prepare effectively

Know your goal (it must be something you are in control of.)

Gather facts

Rehearse your opening

Choose the right timing

C

This is not the time for small talk.

Start with: “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

Setting Up A Difficult Conversation for Success

D

Be clear about the topic.

“I’d like to talk with you about…..” “I think we may have different perspectives and I’d like to better understand yours and share mine.”



E

If you have bad news, tell them.

“This is going to be a difficult conversation.” or “This is going to be hard to hear” or “We’re here to talk about…”

Clear is Kind.



F

Frame the outcome.

Tell them the ending.“I’d like us to walk away with…”





Scenario: You supervise an experienced, well-liked climbing guide, Alex. Over the past two months, you've noticed a pattern of concerning judgment calls including:

- Continued a climbing objective after weather conditions deteriorated.
- Deviated from an established route plan without notifying the other guide.
- Dismissed a participant's fatigue concern with, *"You're fine—we're almost there."*



You need to sit down with Alex to discuss your concerns.

In pairs, practice the **first 30–60 seconds** of this conversation

- Go in with **curiosity, not something to prove**
- Be clear about the topic
- If it's difficult news, say so
- Frame what you hope to accomplish.
- **Don't try to solve the whole problem in your opening**

Methods to Redirect Behavior Using Strategic Language and Empathy

1. Ask, don’t tell.
2. Listen actively, paraphrase and clarify.
3. Use first person language
4. Offering options/choices gives some control
5. Guide the conversation to response not reaction.
6. Present facts not generalizations - use specific examples
7. Consider your language. Use non-confrontational, neutral and objective phrases.

Scenario: You are co-leading a 8-day backcountry trip.

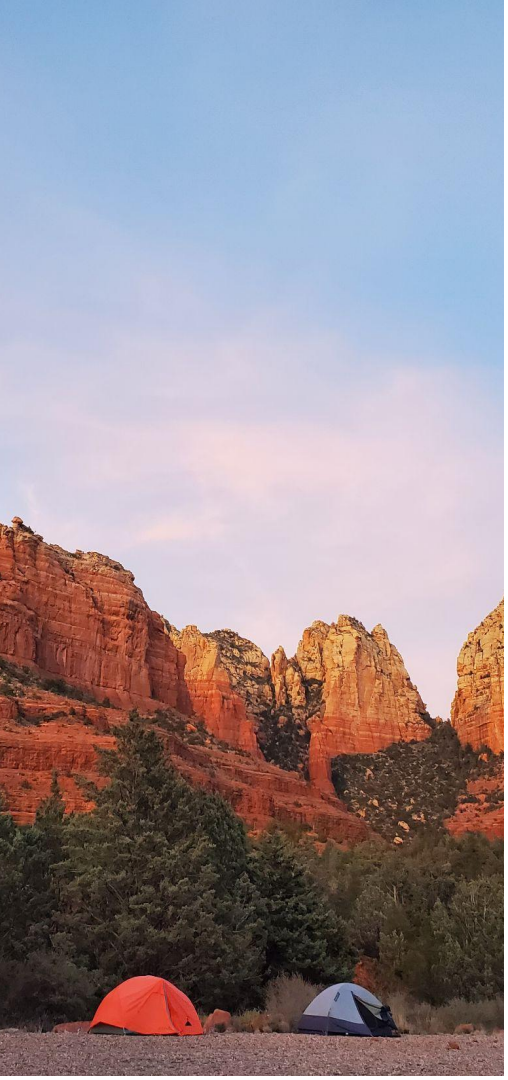
- On Day 4, dark storm clouds are rolling in over a high ridge.
- To stay safe, you feel the group needs to drop down off the exposed ridge immediately and camp in the lower forest - ruining the plan to reach the scenic summit campsite everyone was looking forward to.

- A participant gets extremely frustrated and starts loudly protesting in front of the group “We paid a lot of money and pushed hard all day to get to the summit site.”
- They continue on grumbling to the others that the leaders are overreacting to "a little rain saying they always pull us off the trail at the first sign of weather! This happened the other day and nothing came of it. This is ridiculous, we're fine, and they’re ruining the whole trip for everyone."

One of you is the lead guide and one of you is the escalated participate. The goals is to redirect the participant's behavior, de-escalate the tension, and move them toward safe action without starting an argument or pulling rank aggressively.

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2. Listen actively, paraphrase and clarify.
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5. Guide the conversation to response not reaction.
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De-escalation Principles:

Non-Violent, Early Intervention & Solution Oriented

- Focus on the acute crisis
- Prioritize safety above all else
- Maintain situational awareness
- Build rapport
- Verbal and nonverbal communication
- 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



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



De-escalation Principles:

Non-Violent, Early Intervention & Solution Oriented

Maintain 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. Practice those self regulation techniques.

De-escalation Principles:

Non-Violent, Early Intervention & Solution Oriented

Build Rapport

- 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”

- Listen more than you speak, be transparent and honest. This helps reduce suspicion and builds trust.

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.

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

De-escalation scenario: You are the lead guide on a multi-day backcountry trip.

- One of your participants, Sam, has been struggling throughout the day.
- They are exhausted, frustrated, and embarrassed after falling behind the group.
- After a disagreement with another participant, Sam suddenly drops their pack and says: “I’m done, I can’t do this anymore. I’m leaving!” And storms off down the trail.

The group is several miles from the trailhead and it will be dark in a few hours.

You aren't sure whether Sam intends to leave the group or is simply overwhelmed in the moment.

The rest of the group is watching you to see what you do.

De-escalation scenario:

Partner up: One person is the guide. One person is Sam. Your immediate goal is to de-escalate the crisis and keep Sam and the group safe.

Use the strategies we've discussed:

- Focus on the acute crisis
- Prioritize safety
- Maintain situational awareness
- Build rapport
- Use verbal and nonverbal communication:
- Defuse and offer choices



WRMC Action Steps

Make active listening and empathetic language part of your everyday interactions so you're prepared to use them when situations get difficult.

Build your personal de-escalation toolkit and keep adding strategies you can draw on when you need them.

Practice difficult conversations through role-play to build confidence and comfort with de-escalation skills.

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Q & A

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