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Blue Knights

Prepare well both your verbal and physical de-escalation skills

I became inspired to teach the concept of de-escalation thanks partially to the bad example of a “pompous cop” and the good advice of an ancient general

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As a new officer in the 1970s I noticed there was one “pompous cop” no one wanted to work with due to his disagreeable countenance and talent for making things worse with his words whenever he arrived on scene. When the man retired, everyone was glad to see him go.

I became a [defensive tactics instructor](#) early in my career. Since there were no systems taught in those days, I was required to develop my own system for both academy and in-service training. Keeping the difficulties created by the “pompous cop” in mind, I taught officers not only how to physically control suspects, but also how to make certain their words were always designed to de-escalate calls.

I was convinced then and now that many confrontations (but not all) could be avoided if officers were driven to develop what I called a “black belt in dialog.” I speak the truth when I say, “I used my black belt in dialog more often than my black belts in the martial arts, but to make it safely through my career there were times I needed both.”



When words fail to de-escalate, officers need to recognize they have failed and have ready and available physical de-escalation techniques. (Photo/Anya Marcou)

Looking to avoid fights whenever possible and win fights whenever necessary was part of my life long-training in the martial arts, which included the study of the teachings of an ancient general you may have heard of.

WORDS OF AN ANCIENT GENERAL

If I had been inclined to follow the lead of the “pompous cop,” I would have experienced more confrontations in my career. Rather, I chose to be impacted by the words of [General Sun Tzu](#) who valued the ability to achieve a victory without a fight over a victory achieved by fighting. Sun Tzu said: *“To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”*

As a career-long defensive tactics instructor, I saw the value of teaching officers to de-escalate violent persons with well-crafted words while being prepared from the start of every contact to, in a moment, de-escalate the situation with physical techniques when words failed. I always emphasized everything you *say and do should be designed to de-escalate*.

THE MISTAKE OF MODERN DE-ESCALATION PROPONENTS

It is a good thing that [de-escalation skills](#) are now being widely taught in police training. However, many non-police proponents of de-escalation hold the unrealistic perception that perfect words can always guarantee perfect non-physical outcomes. In fact, it would be a critical deadly error for a police officer to believe words will never fail.

For real-world application, police officers should learn to use verbal de-escalation tactics and techniques for conflict and crisis resolution, but they must also be masters at smoothly transitioning to effective physical de-escalation alternatives when words fail.

Sun Tzu addressed this clearly 2,600 years ago when he said: *“He will win, who knows when to fight and when not to fight.”*

DE-ESCALATING WHEN WORDS HAVE FAILED

Police officers around the country can be seen time and time again spending too much time in unsuccessful efforts to de-escalate with words only. Getting bogged down in a failed effort to verbally de-escalate a situation can endanger officers and others, resulting in officers learning the hard way that action is faster than reaction.

Training must be designed to help officers not only craft their words wisely but also to recognize when their well-crafted words have failed. When words fail officers must learn how to transition in a timely manner to physical alternatives.

That training should include the development of all these valuable de-escalation techniques:

1. Professional [crisis communication skills](#) (for the mentally ill in crisis) and de-escalation tactics.
2. Professional conflict communication skills (for general use) and de-escalation tactics.
3. Skills in [hands-on control tactics](#).
4. Skills in the use of [TASER or pepper spray](#).
5. Skills in the use of chemical munitions, and the proper display and use of the police baton.
6. Skills in the use of less-lethal munitions.
7. Firearms skills.
8. Practical knowledge in the legal application of force.

LEADERS, TRAIN YOUR OFFICERS AND EDUCATE THE PUBLIC

The public needs to be made aware that your professional police officers’ de-escalation skills are developed and then finely honed from the police academy onward. This is easy to prove by gathering and releasing statistics in your area to show that most contacts between police and the community end without any use of force.

The public should also be informed that police officers must also possess expertise in the timely transition to legal physical alternatives when reasonable words fail to convince unreasonable people.

CONCLUSION

In a perfect world, both the police and the public would love for each police contact to have a peaceful outcome. However, a police officer in the real world must be prepared throughout every contact for that well-timed moment when the only de-escalation technique that will be effective is a well-trained and objectively reasonable use of force. That use of force will have the best results when as Sun Tzu would say, it is executed: *“Like the well-timed swoop of the falcon.”*

I couldn’t agree more with the General.

NEXT: [De-escalation: A commonsense approach](#)

About the author

Lt. Dan Marcou is an internationally-recognized police trainer who was a highly-decorated police officer with 33 years of full-time law enforcement experience. Marcou’s awards include Police Officer of the Year, SWAT Officer of the Year, Humanitarian of the Year and Domestic Violence Officer of the Year. Upon retiring, Lt. Marcou began writing. Additional awards Lt. Marcou received were 15 departmental citations (his department’s highest award), two Chief’s Superior Achievement Awards and the Distinguished Service Medal for his response to an active shooter. He is a co-author of [“Street Survival II, Tactics for Deadly Encounters,”](#) which is now available. His novels, “The Calling, the Making of a Veteran Cop,” “SWAT, Blue Knights in Black Armor,” “Nobody’s Heroes” and “Destiny of Heroes,” as well as his latest non-fiction offering, “Law Dogs, Great Cops in American History,” are all available at [Amazon](#). Dan is a member of the Police1 Editorial Advisory Board.

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