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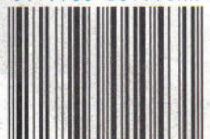
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# CRISIS MANAGEMENT

## The Art of Using Words to Defuse Aggression

### Part 2

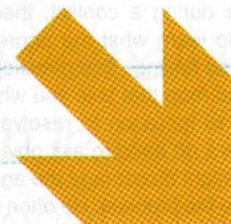
by Michael Lizarraga

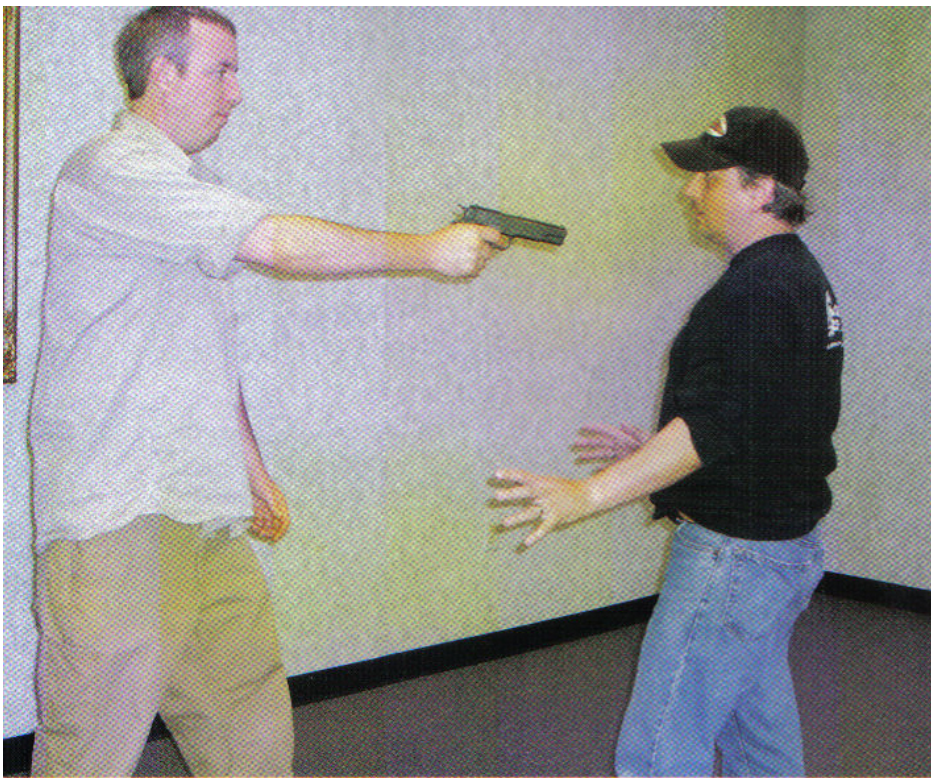
The movies *Dirty Harry* and *Lethal Weapon* each feature a scene in which a tough “top cop” acts as a negotiator and uses his own unique method for getting a suicidal person down from a building: One jumper is punched out, and the other is pushed off.

Although comical, the scenes reflect popular attitudes toward using talking tactics as a means of conflict resolution. For many Americans, a warrior is one “whose face is marred by dust, sweat and blood and [who] strives valiantly,” as President Theodore Roosevelt said.

Martial artists aren’t that shortsighted. They’re taught that, whenever possible, retreat is preferable to a fistfight. Recently, they’ve been exposed to an even more beneficial message: When you can’t back down and are reluctant to throw down, conversation can often help you avoid violence.

During any interaction with a hostile person—whether he’s confused, aggressive, suicidal or just unpredictable—de-escalation hinges on demonstrating that the person is not just being heard but is also being listened to and understood.





"Because self-image is greatly cherished, we feel threatened by any direct attempt by others to challenge or change it," says Doc Elliot, a lifelong martial artist who works as a law-enforcement and psychiatric-ward negotiator. "For violent individuals, self-image is defended even more strongly from these perceived threats. While objective observers might view these efforts as constricted thinking and rigid behavior, to the aggressor, they represent the only avenues open to preserve a sense of themselves amid the chaos in their lives.

"As active listening poses no threat to an individual's self-image, it can help a subject become less defensive, creating fertile ground for negotiation and, eventually, change and resolution."

The following tactics for active listening—compiled by Elliot and other experts and modified for martial artists and civilians—will show you how to avoid intimidating, demanding, demeaning, lecturing, criticizing and evaluating aggressive people. They'll also help you create an atmosphere of empathy, respect, safety and stability that will increase your chances of ending discord with discourse.

## Open-Ended Questions

Asking open-ended questions prevents you from having to supply most of the dialogue during a conflict, thereby enabling you to learn what the aggressor is thinking and feeling. This questioning develops a road map that tells you where to go and what to focus on to resolve the problem. There's no need to ask obvious questions that might discourage the aggressor or escalate the problem. He often hopes, overtly or subconsciously, that you'll pick up on the issues behind the attention-based be-



*The goal of a negotiator is to use carefully worded statements, probing questions and active listening to convince an aggravated person that violence isn't the answer, says Doc Elliot (right), a law-enforcement and psychiatric-ward negotiator.*

havior and talk him out of it.

Questions such as "How are you feeling right now?" or "Are you feeling angry or depressed at the moment?" will usually provoke a one-word answer, which provides little or no information about how he feels. Because of that, you learn nothing that will help you solve the crisis. Instead, you should ask, "Can you tell me more about that?" or "For me to help you, I need more information about how you feel and what's really going on here. Could you help me understand by explaining that further?" This way, he gets the message that you're interested in what lies beneath the attention-based behavior and not simply in the behavior itself. It also makes him more comfortable with the communication process and more open to resolution.

As a side note, you should refrain from asking "why" questions such as "Why are you feeling this?" or "Tell me why you did what you did?" The reason: Such inquiries can turn into an interrogation that not only stalls the negotiation but also escalates the tension, often forcing you to engage in emotional damage control before you can continue.

## Directive "I" Messaging

An "I" message can level the playing




*Directive "I" messaging can build a rapport between the negotiator and the aggressor, which makes the negotiator seem more like a friend than a foe.*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL LIZARRAGA





 *Asking open-ended questions creates a dialogue between the negotiator and assailant, enabling the negotiator to learn more about the assailant's thoughts and emotions.*

field, thereby building rapport between you and the combative person. He hears your own perceptions of the core issues, and that not only breaks down barriers but also conveys that you're not blaming or judging anyone. "I" messages should consist of three elements: the problem or situation, your feelings about the issue and the reason for your concern. Examples: "You and I have been here now for an hour, and I feel as though we're not getting much further than when we started," or "I'd like to come to an agreement so we can both walk out of here safely."

If the aggressor begins verbally attacking you during the dialogue, responding with an "I" message can create a positive atmosphere of emotional control and de-escalation. It can bring you and him to a common ground and create stability. When you're attacked with words, you can reply, "I'm on your side here, and I'm feeling frustrated that you're still yelling at me when all I'm trying to do is help you," or "I thought we were making some real progress, so I'd feel more comfortable if you wouldn't yell at me so I can help make this situation go away."

When setting limits for a person who

requires firm direction after acting aggressively, as well as to help maintain a united front with others involved in the situation (i.e., friends, co-workers, bystanders), the "I" may have to be replaced with "we." That can keep him from focusing on you as the one deciding his fate and reinforce that the request for compliance is coming from all who want to end the situation. However, this approach should be initiated only when you and your supporters have complete control over the situation and no one is in danger.

An example of the "we" response: "We'd like you to cooperate and walk with us outside so you and I can talk about what you need and what we can do for you." While using this tactic or any active-listen-

ing technique, avoid being pulled into an argument or trading personal attacks with the aggressor. An argumentative, sarcastic or hostile tone can reinforce his already-negative view of you and any bystanders, causing him to rationalize increased resistance because of what he perceives to be a lack of concern from you.

## Effective Silence

Because people have a conscious or subconscious reflex to use words to fill gaps in a conversation, you can gather information and get a sense of what a combative person is thinking and feeling by using silence. This method encourages him to speak to eliminate uncomfortable pauses you create. When he does so, his words may not be well-chosen and calculated, which means they might be more honest. That, in turn, will provide you with a better road map.

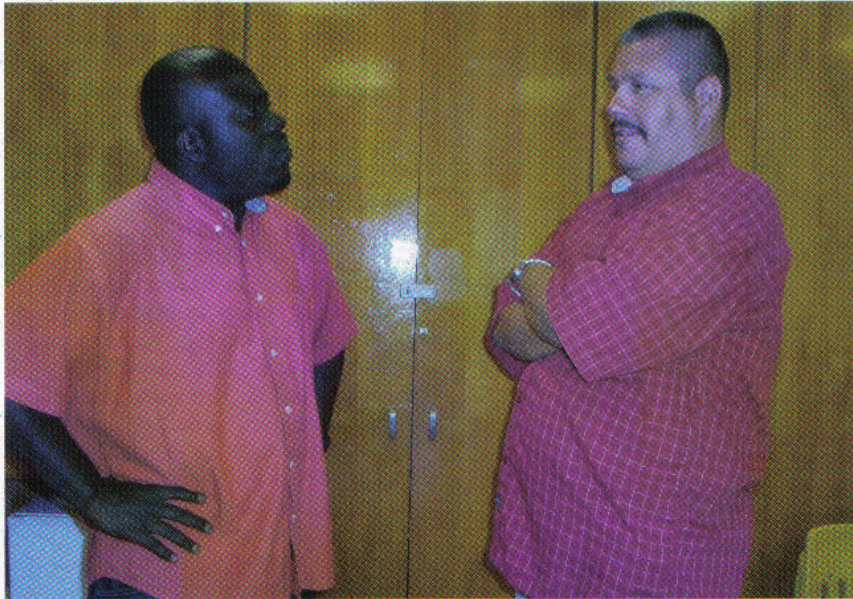
Silence can also be a good de-escalation method when you're confronted by a verbally aggressive person in the middle of an emotional outburst. He'll often expect an equal response from you to justify his initial actions or emotional instability, which may be used to justify further aggressive activity. If you respond with silence, however, he may realize that there's no need to yell, then find a calmer way to express himself. He may check to see if you're still listening while he becomes more open to a resolution. Even the most emotionally charged people find it uncomfortable to stay engaged in a one-sided argument.

## Perception Checking

Perception checking helps you understand the emotions behind the aggressor's words and even tap into the root cause of his behavior. No matter what behavior he exhibits, there's a clear message that it could become a crisis or a conflict. In negotiator circles, this is called "instrumental behavior." (See the January 2008 issue).

On the other hand, emotional-needs-

*“Silence can also be a good de-escalation method when you're confronted by a verbally aggressive person in the middle of an emotional outburst.”*



*Correct body language can show a combative person that he's being listened to and not just heard. Incorrect body language can worsen the situation. Gestures to avoid include folding the arms (top), looking away (middle) and checking your watch (bottom).*

based behavior (aka expressive behavior) is designed to communicate the subject's frustration, outrage, passion, despair or anger. Those emotions might stem from long-term histrionics, in which he feels as though he hasn't been listened to or understood and the situation is exceeding his ability to cope. Once you tap into the emotional need that drives the attention-based behavior, which is the real cause of the conflict, his desire to exhibit aggression may fade.

### Clarifying

If there's any question about what the aggressor is saying, clarification is necessary. Failure to obtain it may further escalate the crisis. This follow-up process helps you understand the content and context of the words or feelings the person has expressed, which allows you to match your perceptions with his messages. Examples: "I'm a bit confused about what you need. Could you explain it so I can make sure I understand?" or "Tell me again what you meant when you said that you don't feel like yourself."

### Structuring

For an aggressor to feel that there's a defined direction, purpose and outcome to the situation, you might have to create guidelines or parameters with clear priorities to follow and explore—especially if several issues or emotions are in play. After his multidirectional or disjointed rant, you might say: "You mentioned that you don't feel as though this situation is in your best interest, you're afraid your wife will divorce you and you're afraid of losing your job. Which should we talk about first?"

Using that approach, you can direct him to a subject that's emotionally charged and, therefore, possibly the key to the crisis. By eliminating unnecessary time and emotion, you'll create a path for problem solving.

### Pinpointing

Because many internal and external emotionally charged topics can enter a negotiation, an aggressor might jump from one version of reality to another. That's even more likely to happen if he's suffering from an impaired sense of reality. Therefore, you may have to direct the interven-

tion back to the true issue, or at least to one that will yield results and facilitate the identification of a resolution. Example: "I hear you saying that you're glad you left your husband and that you feel much safer now, but I'm seeing some tears. Can you tell me where they're coming from?" In saying that, you redirect the person's attention to where it's most valuable and relevant.

## Body Language and Posturing

Physical messages or body language from you and your supporters are the most important elements in de-escalating a situation and showing an aggressor that he's being understood. The response can either validate the message that's being conveyed or instill a sense of distrust, disinterest and hostility, thus escalating the problem.

To be productive, body language must be consistent and provide a safe and therapeutic environment. While you're listening, avoid standing with a closed posture, crossing your arms, making darting eye contact, checking your watch, working on an unrelated task, interrupting, fidgeting, sighing or answering the phone. Even if you do and say all the right things, bystanders can give the aggressor the wrong impression. They must avoid appearing ready for a fight, glaring and whispering.

## Conclusion

It's said that the pen is mightier than the sword. So, too, is the tongue. And although this part of the anatomy has been described as a "raging fire needing to be tamed," it can squash squabbles if it's used appropriately. Strive for conversation instead of conflict, communication instead of combat, connection instead of contact.

"Unless there is clear and imminent danger to yourself or someone else and the only choice is to act quickly, there's no reason to try to resolve a problem prematurely," Elliot says. "Negotiators generally achieve peaceful resolutions once they demonstrate a nonjudgmental, nonthreatening and understanding attitude [and they're] perceived not as an enemy but as an individual wanting to help." ✕

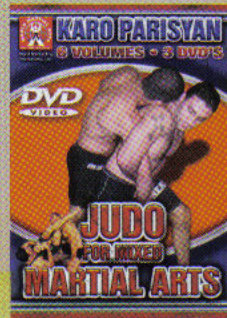
*About the author:*

*Michael Lizarraga is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer and martial artist. Doc Elliot has worked in the psychiatric field for 25 years. His company, New World Education Resource Network, teaches verbal and psychological de-escalation and negotiation, as well as physical self-defense. For more information, visit [www.blackbeltmag.com](http://www.blackbeltmag.com).*

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by Karo Parisyan

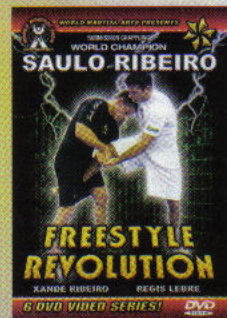
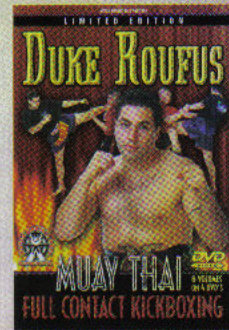
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