Conflict management skills

The skills needed to support the non-physical aspects of conflict management to reduce the risk of officers and staff being assaulted and increase public safety.

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Guideline – conflict management skills

Chief constables should ensure officers and staff are sufficiently skilled in the following non-physical aspects of conflict management to reduce the risk of them being assaulted and increase public safety. These include:

- situational awareness, including awareness of the impact factors that may affect the likelihood of officers/staff and the public using force
- emotional awareness and self-regulation
- active listening
- verbal and non-verbal communication and negotiation skills

The most effective way for officers and staff to develop and maintain these skills is likely to be realistic scenario-based training that draws on evidence from real-world situations (eg, body-worn video footage). Such training should be linked to, and build on, the initial and annual personal safety training on the physical aspects of conflict management that forces deliver to their officers and staff.

Evidence summary

There was promising evidence to show that training associated with reductions in incidents of aggression and physical violence shared common features, such as:

- a focus on understanding the motivations of others and showing empathy
- teaching specific interpersonal communication skills (eg, non-verbal communication and active listening)

- a focus on how to control one's own emotions and remain calm
- some element of scenario-based role-play or live simulation

This evidence was based on 18 studies that tested de-escalation or conflict management training. The majority of studies were carried out in a healthcare setting, and five in a policing context.

Empirical evidence
Moderate

Practitioner evidence
Available

Dialogue and communication

Officers and staff routinely find ways to manage conflict situations without physical force. While many are already highly skilled in the non-physical aspects of conflict management, forces have responsibility for ensuring that all officers and staff have these skills to a consistently high standard.

Dialogue and communication are central to specialist training in public order, crisis negotiation and firearms. How much other frontline officers and staff are taught the non-physical aspects of conflict management currently varies between forces. This is due to competing training priorities and time/resource pressures. These skills are sometimes included in forces' personal safety training, the content and delivery of which is determined locally.

Personal safety training standards are currently set by the College of Policing and supported by the **Personal safety manual** (you need to log in to our learning platform to see this). The manual comprises a comprehensive set of learning resources and guidance on all aspects of officer and staff safety, including a module focused specifically on tactical communication techniques to prevent, defuse and manage conflict situations without using physical force.

Situational awareness

Situational awareness is the ability to perceive and process potential threats in the environment. The importance of maintaining high levels of situational awareness in conflict situations was stressed both by officers and staff in the forces groups, as well as by members of the guideline

committee. The evidence review found that situational awareness was a skill that could be taught.

Situational awareness can help officers and staff make a dynamic risk assessment and to decide whether, when and how to be assertive and seek to take control of a situation. The National Decision Model – which officers and staff should understand and be able to use – involves assessing the situation, including any specific threat, the risk of harm and the potential for benefits. Wherever circumstances allow, officers and staff should:

- obtain as much information as possible from the control room before arriving
- gather as much information as possible from the scene on arrival (eg, from what is seen and heard, witnesses and CCTV)
- make a threat/risk assessment based on this information

Example model – BUGEE (Taser curriculum)

Following the BUGEE mnemonic may create time and space for officers and staff to assess risk, decide on the most appropriate course of action, and potentially defuse the situation:

- **B**e prepared to back off
- **U**se of effective cover
- **G**ive space and time if possible
- **E**arly negotiation
- **E**vacuate immediate area

Practical advice from the front line – situational awareness

- Where possible, take a moment to assess the threats that you, the person and other members of the public face in the situation.
- Try to create a clear safe distance in case of escalation or going 'hands-on'.
- Maintain awareness of your surroundings (eg, the presence of bystanders, busy roads, the arrival of backup).
- Think about what else could be going on (eg, the person being in mental health crisis or having difficulties communicating).

- High levels of adrenaline can result in a loss of peripheral vision. Try to sweep your head and glance sideways at regular intervals to stop yourself focusing your attention exclusively on the person, and maintain an awareness of the wider environment.
- Pay attention to potential danger cues the person may be displaying (eg, clenching ?sts, raising hands above waist) to help you make a more accurate risk assessment, predict the person's actions, and increase your reaction time.
- Recognise that what someone says may be different to their body language.
- Remember that anxiety and/or loss of verbal or physical control can be early indicators of a potential physical act being carried out.
- Consider that a person's behaviour and reactions to a situation may be due to a mental or physical illnesses, physical disability, reduced mental capacity or neurological difference (eg, autism).

Impact factors

The Personal safety manual sets out a series of 'impact factors' that are thought to make potential conflict situations higher risk, such as weapons, crowds, alcohol, prior knowledge about or the relative size and build of the people involved.

Dynamic risk assessments of situations can be supported by officers and staff being aware of such impact factors and taking them into account along with other information about the threats they face.

The evidence review showed that the chances of officers being assaulted increased in high-crime neighbourhoods or when citizens were hostile towards the police and/or intoxicated.

The evidence review also highlighted factors – mainly from US research – that have increased the likelihood of the police use of force. Some of these are not recognised impact factors and do not justify using force (eg, someone who happens to be young, male, or Black). Others, however, could be relevant to dynamic risk assessments and might be regarded as potential impact factors (eg, weapons, intoxication, or resistance or abusiveness). Understanding which factors can affect safety and give sufficient reason to use force might support better decision making.

People with communication difficulties

Officers and staff may inadvertently escalate conflict by the way they interact with people who find it difficult to communicate. These may include people with mental or physical illnesses, physical disabilities, learning difficulties or reduced mental capacity, or developmental or neurological differences differences (eg, autism). They may also include people who are not fluent in English or are intoxicated. Officers and staff will need to keep an open mind about what could be causing someone's communication difficulties, as appearances can be deceiving (eg, someone in diabetic crisis may appear drunk). It is not the job of the police to make clinical decisions.

Regardless of why someone might have communication difficulties, the potential for confrontation is likely to be increased if that person:

- is agitated, confused and/or scared
- cannot understand what is happening or what they are being asked or told
- is unable to follow instructions, or cannot behave in ways that officers and staff expect them to

There is also **growing recognition** that using force and restraining people who are in mental health crisis, is experiencing acute behaviour disturbance, or suffering from drug- or substance-induced psychosis can pose a life-threatening risk.

Officers and staff may need to adjust how they interact with people with communication difficulties, and consider how people may perceive and respond to the presence, attitudes and demeanour of the police. Effective communication could enable officers and staff to make more accurate risk assessments, by giving them extra time in dynamic situations and encouraging people to provide more information.

Further information:

- **Authorised Professional Practice section on mental health**
- **National Autistic Society guide for police officers and staff**
- **National Police Autism Association**

Practical advice from the front line – mental health and capacity, and neurodiversity

- Approach the person calmly with an open, non-threatening stance.
- Don't get too close to the person. Give them plenty of space.

- Use a low, consistent voice. Do not shout or use threatening language.
- Introduce yourself, ask for the person's name and use it.
- Be sensitive and compassionate.
- Break up complex information into short sentences with simple language.
- Consider using pictures or symbols if the person responds better to non-verbal communication.
- Remember the person may take what you say literally (eg, 'it will take a couple of minutes').
- Be patient, pause regularly and check the person's understanding.
- Try to explain, as much as possible, that you are no physical threat to them.
- Try to move the person to a calmer and more familiar place, with fewer people and less noise.
- Avoid any physical contact (eg, a reassuring hand on the shoulder) unless it is necessary (eg, to restrain them).
- Ask whether the person has any problems you may not know about.
- Be alert to changes in behaviour.
- Understand that the person may become defensive or aggressive because of previous experiences with people in authority.
- Ask them what has been happening.
- Patiently try to draw out an explanation for their behaviour (eg, to understand and respond to the impact of any trauma).

Children and young people

The way the police manage confrontation involving children and young people is a sensitive issue. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) **strategy on child-centred policing** states that officers and staff should:

- treat people who are under the age of 18 as children
- regard their safety, welfare and wellbeing, which is required under sections 10 and 11 of the Children Act 2004 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Children and young people will have vulnerabilities because of their physical, emotional and cognitive development. This could mean they behave differently to adults in response to distress or trauma. Some children and young people who come into contact with the police will also have physical and mental illness, reduced mental capacity or neurological differences (eg, autism spectrum disorder). For these reasons, the practice advice in the previous section can also be

applied to conflict situations involving children and young people.

Emotional awareness and self-regulation

Emotional awareness and self-regulation are key aspects of emotional intelligence – the ability to identify and manage your own emotions and the emotions of others. Officers and staff felt that their emotional intelligence was closely linked to their ability to communicate effectively in difficult situations. They talked about the importance of:

- demonstrating empathy
- understanding possible reasons for a person's behaviour
- being aware of the impact of their own behaviour on others
- being aware of how impact factors can affect decision-making

Officer and staff experience was supported by the evidence review. The review showed the training that reduced assaults or violence, or changed behaviour, typically focused on:

- aspects of emotional intelligence
- understanding the motivations of others
- showing empathy
- controlling one's own emotions and remaining calm

Practical advice from the front line – emotional awareness and self-regulation

- Be assertive, signal non-aggression and use active listening skills during an incident.
- Be aware of your body language and how this might come across to others.
- Try to understand that people are shouting at the uniform, not necessarily at you.
- Recognise your own stress and do not let it build up.
- Remember it takes a lot of effort for someone to remain angry and aggressive, and that they are likely to calm down at some point.

Active listening

Active listening is a system of opening and maintaining communications through the use of empathy, listening and body language. It is a skill that can be acquired and developed with practice. However, active listening can be difficult to master so its development may take time and patience.

Active listening should be used throughout an encounter. Being open to what a person is saying helps to build rapport, which could help reduce tension. Crisis and hostage negotiators use 'verbal containment' to lower the risk of violence. If a person is using their energy in communicating, they might be less likely to use force.

Practical advice from the front line – active listening

- Be open, receptive, unbiased and fair, and avoid making assumptions.
- Stand at a comfortable distance from the person and slightly side-on to promote cooperation.
- Look at the person, to show you are listening.
- Make it clear that you have plenty of time for the conversation.
- Use open questions to encourage conversation.
- Use pauses appropriately to allow the person to respond.
- Nod your head to indicate understanding or to encourage the person to keep talking.
- Listen to the whole message, take notice of the use of words, tone and body language.
- Paraphrase what they have told you and check understanding.
- Show empathy and demonstrate understanding.
- Avoid criticism, and praise appropriately.
- If necessary, criticise their behaviour rather than them personally.
- Avoid fake understanding.
- Do not take sides.
- Where possible, act on what is said, however trivial it may seem to you.

Example model – MOREPIES (crisis negotiator training)

This mnemonic was developed by the FBI to help crisis negotiators remember the key steps involved in active listening when they are under pressure. The model may be useful in a wider range of situations:

- **M**inimal encouragers – use verbal and non-verbal communication (eg, nodding) to show you are listening and interested in what a person is saying.
- **O**pen questions – use open-ended rather than closed questions to draw out information from the person.
- **R**eflection – repeat or echo recent words or phrases the person has used.
- **E**ffective pauses – use silences before or after something meaningful to:
  - demonstrate you understand its importance
  - allow the person to vent their frustration
  - give you time to think
  - encourage turn-taking in the conversation
  - help everyone to focus their thoughts and attention

- **P**araphrase – summarise what the person has been saying in your own words to demonstrate understanding and allow for clarification.
- **'I'** messages – start sentences with 'I' to personalise what you are saying, show responsibility and establish rapport.
- **E**motional labelling – tell the person you understand what effect the situation is having them on them (eg, 'I can see you are upset, this must be frustrating for you').
- **S**ummary – sum up what has been said in your own words.

Verbal communication skills

Verbal communication describes the words and phrases, tone of voice, intonation and other expressions used when officers or staff interact with members of the public. Verbal communication was described by officers and staff as their ?rst tactic in trying to de-escalate or defuse con?ict situations. While many in the police already have excellent communications skills, training can help officers and staff to acquire, develop and maintain those skills. The evidence review suggested that speci?c communication techniques were a common element of effective training. Officers repeatedly stressed the value of effective verbal communication to create time and distance, slow things down and help build a rapport with an individual.

Research on procedural justice has highlighted that officers can encourage people to be more cooperative by:

- giving people a 'voice', letting them tell their side of the story, and listening

- making impartial decisions and explaining how they were reached
- showing trustworthiness by being open and honest
- treating people with dignity and respect

The **Personal safety manual** (you need to log on to our learning platform to see it) provides detailed information on the key principles of effective communication to achieve these aims.

Practical advice from the front line – verbal communication

- Avoid commands beginning with 'don't' and use outcome-focused language instead, eg, 'what is going to happen next is …'
- Use open questions to engage the person.
- Explain why you are taking the action you are.
- Be honest about what is going to happen next.
- Keep talking – even during/after going 'hands-on'.
- Speak clearly, use simple language, avoid using jargon and slang where appropriate, and check understanding.
- Do not shout, use a raised voice or use threatening language – remain calm.
- Minimise the number of people dealing with the situation, but keep others on standby in case they are needed.
- Introduce yourself, ask the person their name and use it.
- Use the pronoun 'I' rather than 'you' to take responsibility and promote cooperation and understanding.
- Be assertive rather than aggressive, eg, 'I want to help you (aim) but you make that very difficult for me (consequence) when you shout and swear (situation)'.
- Use de?ection and redirection to deal with swearing, vulgarity and insults, eg, 'I appreciate what you are saying but …' 'I hear what you are saying but/and …', 'I understand you but …'

Example model – five-step appeal (Personal safety manual)

This model provides officers and staff with a way of dealing with resistance, and involves them giving the person every chance to comply with their requests.

1. Simple appeal – ask the person to comply with your request.
2. Reasoned appeal – explain why the request has been made, what law (if any) has been broken, and what has caused the request.
3. Personal appeal – remind the person that they may be jeopardising things that are high priorities to them (eg, loss of free time if arrested, loss of money, loss of income, possibility of a criminal record, loss of respect of their partner and family).
4. Final appeal – tell the person what is required and use a phrase that means the same as the following: 'Is there anything I can reasonably do to make you cooperate with me/us?'
5. Action – reasonable force may be the only option left in the case of continued resistance.

Example model – LEAPS (Personal safety manual)

This simple mnemonic offers a flexible and structured approach to communicating in all situations, not just those that are confrontational.

- **L**isten – listen to the whole message and the feelings. Do not just take the content at face value, and try not to interrupt.
- **E**mpathy – be open-minded about what is said, show understanding, and try not to judge.
- **A**sk – use effective questioning to establish or clarify the facts, seek opinions and check understanding.
- **P**araphrase – repeat back your understanding of what you have heard.
- **S**ummarise – condense everything that has been said into a concise and simple statement, and check on any agreed actions.

Practical advice from the front line – non-verbal communication

- Allow the person time to speak, continue to signal non-aggression, adopt a relaxed posture and use friendly, open gestures.
- Be aware of your own non-verbal signals – signalling a non-aggressive response can help defuse a situation.
- Move slowly, allowing the person space, while adopting a basic or interview stance.
- Be aware of Betari's Box.

Example model – Betari's Box (Personal safety manual)

Betari's box describes how people can get locked into a vicious or virtuous circle of communication, based on how their attitudes and behaviour respond to each other.
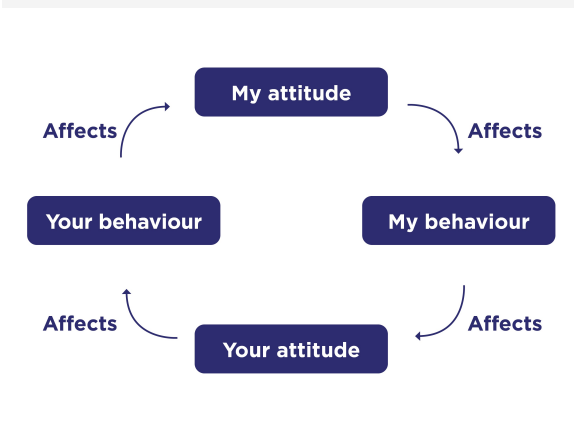
Scenario-based learning

Scenario-based learning normally involves students working their way through a storyline, where they are required to practise new skills to solve an ambiguous situation or complex problem. The evidence review suggested that training that achieved behaviour change included some form of scenario-based learning. Practitioners agreed, suggesting more realistic role-play scenarios in their training.

Use of realistic scenario-based learning may provide an opportunity to integrate personal safety training into routine practice and help officers to acquire, develop or maintain skills **[Wheller and Morris (2010)**]. Doing so may help the transition of behaviour from the 'classroom' to the 'street'. It may be difficult for officers and staff to remember and apply communication tactics in dynamic, high-risk situations without practising them until they are second nature. Scenarios may also make officers and staff more confident and better prepared to use their skills in a variety of real-life situations (eg, those involving people in mental health crisis or with neurological differences).

There are a range of options that could be considered. One of the studies included in the evidence review involved officers practising their use of force decision-making skills in realistic ?eld settings (eg, apartments, abandoned warehouses) with trained actors and stress-inducing environmental

factors (eg, low light, loud noises) **[Andersen and Gustafsberg (2016), Wheller et al. (2013)]**. Other possibilities include role-play scenarios within a more traditional personal safety training setting, which give officers the opportunity to handle the scenario in a range of different ways (including de-escalating con?ict), or the use of body-worn video footage. Other police training studies have highlighted the importance of students being given the opportunity to practise their skills, re?ect on their practice and receive personalised feedback **[Wheller et al. (2013)]**.

Professional development

Forces have flexibility to decide how they ensure officers and staff are sufficiently skilled in the non-physical aspects of conflict management. It may be necessary for forces to review their current training provision, carry out learning needs analysis, and examine their data on use of force, assaults against the police and police/public injuries before deciding on what action to take.

There are advantages in forces including non-physical skills in the personal safety training they deliver initially to new recruits and annually to serving officers and staff. Doing so may help officers and staff to:

- understand the full range of options available to them when trying to resolve conflict safely
- see how physical and non-physical skills complement one another
- not get the wrong idea about the most appropriate action when there is an imminent threat

The downsides with this approach include:

- the time forces have available for personal safety training
- the capacity and capability of instructors to deliver training in communication and negotiation
- the need for officers and staff to develop and maintain their physical skills

By reviewing what they currently deliver, forces may be able to make space within their existing personal safety training for the teaching of non-physical skills. Forces are advised not to include these skills at the expense of essential physical skills that officers and staff need to resolve conflict effectively and safely, because of their duty of care under the Police (Health and Safety) Act 1997.

Forces may have greater capacity to deliver training on the non-physical aspects of conflict management if they do not seek to include them in personal safety training. Communication and negotiation skills also have wider application, not just in conflict situations. However, the main risk

of not taking an integrated approach would be officers and staff not seeing the connection between their physical and non-physical skills.

However forces decide to deliver training, it will require careful handling. If the training content, method of delivery and language used to describe the training is not right, officers and staff could challenge its operational relevance and/or think it is patronising. Forces should also consider how training can be supported through continuing professional development. This approach could help ensure officers and staff retain and improve their skills through practice, self-reflection and personalised feedback. Options include reviewing body-worn video footage and including use of force in professional development reviews and work-based assessments.

Tags

Evidence-based policing   Conflict management