

# Handling Conflict and De-escalation Skills for Transit Drivers & Supervisors

## Video Handout

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## Title

Welcome to this presentation on handling conflict and de-escalation skills for transit drivers and supervisors.

## Introduction

My name is Ream Lazaro, and I am a safety contractor to the New Mexico Department of Transportation, Transit and Rail Division. I have over 40 years of experience in transit safety and security, and I can honestly say that conflict between drivers and passengers has always been a serious concern.

This video presents information on handling conflict with passengers and how to attempt to de-escalate conflict to help ensure that it doesn't lead to violence and injury.

Although in this presentation we talk primarily about interactions between driver and passengers on the transit vehicle, the strategies for de-escalation and responding to danger can also be helpful to supervisors when they are interacting with passengers on a transit vehicle, at a transfer point, or in a transit facility.

## Agenda

We've divided our agenda into 5 sections. The first section, The Risk, defines conflict and de-escalation and provides some information on passenger traits and sources that may lead to conflict.

In the second section, De-escalation Strategies, we discuss proven strategies that may help you significantly reduce potential conflicts.

During the third section, Signs of Escalating Conflict, we focus on signs that may mean a conflict is escalating and some ways to help reduce aggression in a passenger.

In the fourth section, Responding to Danger, we will talk about some key factors that may affect how you respond to a dangerous situation.

Finally, we'll review some of the key points discussed during the presentation before we wrap up.

## The Risk (Section)

First, we're going to discuss what we mean by conflict and de-escalation.

Then we'll talk about the basic needs of passengers, and what kinds of passenger traits may lead to conflict.

We'll end this section on a discussion of examples of conflict sources and types of assaults.

## What is Conflict

Just what is conflict? It's a disagreement in which the people involved see a threat to their needs, interests, or concerns. A key element of conflict is the idea that each person more than likely has a different perception of a situation than another person has.

People experience conflict regardless of time, place, or culture. At one time or another, we've all probably experienced the effects of conflict in terms of words spoken, actions taken, and injuries suffered.

Conflict is part of what makes us human and, more likely than not, shows itself in almost all aspects of human activity and relationships we create.

Conflict will always be with us, but it does not have to be destructive. The key is to work out differences with your passengers before a situation escalates to a more difficult or dangerous encounter.

## What is De-escalation

Now that we know what we mean by conflict, let's talk about the meaning of de-escalation. De-escalation is when we effectively communicate to calm a passenger who is angry, out of control, or disturbed.

De-escalation strategies can reduce the possibility of violence once a conflict begins to intensify or escalate. The escalation phase begins when an interaction turns into a confrontation. This

phase is the point when you want to employ your de-escalation techniques to keep the conflict from getting out of control.

## Basic Needs of Transit Passenger

To help us understand why a conflict may begin on a transit vehicle, we need to first look at some things most passengers are expecting from your transit service. Because if a passenger is unsatisfied, that could lead to them becoming angry and taking it out on you, the driver.

Reliability— passengers want to know they can rely on your transit system to get them where they're going on time.

Safety and security – your customers want to feel safe when they use your transit system.

Convenience and accessibility – passengers expect your transit system to be easy to use, no matter what their personal travel needs may be.

Cleanliness and comfort – passengers also expect their mode of transportation and the transit facilities they use to be clean and comfortable.

Simplicity – your customers want to be able to learn how to use your transit system quickly.

Affordable – customers want to feel that fares are reasonable and that they can afford to ride your vehicles frequently.

Friendliness and empathy— your passengers expect to feel that your transit system cares about their needs, is willing to listen to and answer their questions, and does not ignore their concerns.

## Passenger Traits May Lead to Conflict

So, what traits might make a passenger more susceptible to creating conflict?

For the next few minutes, we're going to discuss a few of these traits, but remember that no single specific trait is necessarily an indication of a problem. But it can be a clue for you to pay closer attention.

We've probably all experienced someone under the influence of alcohol or drugs. We know this influence can cause overreaction and a tendency to confront others.

Then we have those passengers that are experiencing mental health issues or cognitive decline, and these issues can influence how they react to others.

How about a stressed passenger? Many people are under a great deal of stress – it could be due to their job, their health, or some situation at home – there are many reasons. However, as a driver, there is no way for you to know who may be under stress. But stress can lead people to overreact and suddenly become aggressive at the slightest provocation.

It goes without saying that people who are transient or experiencing homelessness have difficult lives, to say the least. These difficulties they are experiencing may lead to negative behavior when they use public transportation.

And we need to include resentment of authority. The passenger that resents authority may act out when they are asked to abide by a regulation or requirement. This “acting out” can boil up into a confrontation between the passenger and the driver.

The rebellious behavior of teenagers on transit vehicles has always been a concern and can challenge a driver's skill in trying to keep things under control.

When customers are angry about reduced service or late transit vehicles, this can grow into frustration with the transit agency, which they may take out on you, the driver.

I'm sure, based on your experience, you could add to this list.

## Examples of Conflict Sources

Now that we've talked about passenger traits, let's go over some of the sources of conflict that we may experience in a transit environment.

During a pandemic, when social distancing and face-coverings are requirements, the potential for conflict between passengers and drivers can increase.

Then there's the age-old dispute about fares. This has always been a source of confrontation between drivers and passengers. These disputes continue to be a leading cause of confrontation and conflict on transit vehicles.

Other sources of conflict include the use of profanity, bringing food or drink onboard, delays in transit services, and vandalism of vehicles.

A passenger throwing objects on a vehicle may lead to a conflict, as may unwanted advances or harassment of a passenger by another passenger, shouting or playing loud music, or bullying.

Unfortunately, differences in language and culture can be a source of conflict. When an individual doesn't understand what another person is saying or isn't familiar with that person's cultural background, there can be a disconnect, which may lead to disagreements that can grow into conflict.

I'm sure you can name many other inappropriate behaviors that could lead to conflict. The important thing is to be aware of the source of conflict and use your de-escalation skills so the conflict does not escalate and result in injury to you or your passengers.

## Nature of Assaults

We all know there are a variety of different kinds of assaults that can occur in a transit environment. But I wanted to just briefly mention them now before we talk about strategies that can help de-escalate situations before they rise to a serious assault.

Although words don't physically harm you, they certainly can generate stress and possibly chaos when they occur on a transit vehicle. What's significant about verbal assaults is that they can be a first step in an escalation to physical violence.

Unfortunately, an increasingly common type of assault is a passenger spitting on a driver. This kind of assault is always demeaning and carries with it a certain risk of infection, especially during a pandemic. If a passenger has previously entered into a verbal conflict with you, pay particular attention when the passenger leaves the vehicle and turn your head away from them.

Concerning assaults with objects, obviously if a passenger is carrying an object, they can either hit someone with it or throw it at someone.

A not uncommon type of assault is an out of control passenger using their hands or fists to hit you or another passenger.

But, it's no surprise to anyone, the most dangerous type of assault is one that involves a weapon such as a knife or a gun.

## De-escalation Strategies (Section)

Now we move on to discuss some strategies for de-escalating conflict to help prevent the types of assaults I just mentioned.

In this next section, we address aspects of communication, the importance of making a good first impression, responding to triggering events, situational awareness, and the CAIRO method of conflict management.

## Types of Conflict

As I discuss the strategies in this section, I want you to keep in mind that they can be used to help de-escalate three types of conflict:

- Passenger against driver
- Passenger against supervisor and
- Passenger against passenger

## Three Aspects of Communication

Communication is so important when you are interacting with passengers. How you communicate and the ways that you communicate can help de-escalate conflict.

The three basic aspects of communication are body language, tone, and word choice.

All three of these elements conveyed at the same time to express an overall message are a powerful form of communication.

How you look and handle yourself when you're talking to a passenger, in combination with your tone of voice and choice of words, can make a critical difference in trying to calm an angry or upset passenger.

## Making a Good First Impression

Studies show that first impressions are formed within the first seconds of any interaction. That first impression is communicated to your passengers based on your appearance, your body language, your demeanor, and your mannerisms.

Greeting passengers with a warm and confident smile can put both you and your passengers at ease.

And, if at all possible, try to make eye contact with your passengers. Eye contact is the most fundamental way to create a connection with a person.

Making eye contact might also help you identify a passenger who may be inclined to be disruptive. And it's a way to let your passengers know that you are watching what is going on within the transit vehicle and you have things under control.

## Triggering Events

A triggering event is an incident that is perceived as a threat by an individual. There are two different types of triggering events – fear inducing events and frustrating events.

In a transit environment, a fear inducing event is when a passenger feels threatened or believe that they are about to lose something of value, such as their pride, self-esteem, or social status in the eyes of others.

A frustrating event is when a passenger feels that their needs are not being met.

These triggering events can cause a person to become confrontive or engage in conflict. A triggering event could even lead to an assault.

You need to be aware of whether a person is experiencing a triggering event. Your awareness can help you take immediate actions to defuse a situation.

## Situational Awareness

Situational awareness is knowing what is going on around you and staying vigilant to any changes or threats.

Using situational awareness will help you recognize and read the indicators of difficult passengers, as well as be mindful of your own stress responses.

When you recognize your own stress responses, you can better maintain your self-control and composure and not allow yourself to be provoked.

Practicing situational awareness will enable you to take a step back, assess the situation in a non-emotional way, and respond proactively to create the best possible outcome.

The way you approach and evaluate a situation can make the difference between a good day and a very bad day.

## CAIRO Method

Managing hostile events and violence is a gamble. There is no silver bullet.

Human emotion in times of extreme stress can be unpredictable. Having to operate a vehicle while managing conflict, only makes things harder.

When dealing with erratic, aggressive, or emotionally unstable people, we often choose the least effective methods of de-escalation. These mistakes lead us to our discussion of the CAIRO method for conflict management.

There are five tools in the CAIRO method, and each of these tools start with one of the letters of the word CAIRO – a helpful way to remember the tools when you need to use them. But you don't have to use the tools in any particular order.

The first tool is CALM. When passengers are challenged, they often raise the level of their voice. Out of instinct, you may be tempted to try to meet them where they are by raising your voice. But you will find that keeping a neutral tone of voice consistently throughout a heated or hostile encounter may effectively help you defuse the situation.

It also helps you stay calm while you survey the situation for other potential threats or escape routes.

The second tool is ASSERTIVE. When our tone of voice and body language betray us, we often come across as controlling, parental, aggressive, or insecure.

Try to project confidence in your ability to maintain a safe transit vehicle environment. A strong and confident tone of voice coupled with a calm demeanor can help stabilize an altercation.

When you take the middle road between aggressive and passive language, you let the person that you are in conflict with know that you are not afraid of them, but you aren't going to attack them either.

The third tool, INFORMING BEHAVIOR, involves making statements that let the irate passenger know what's going on without using "you must" or "you should" messages.

I'm now going to give you some sentences that are examples of informing behavior that don't include a "must" or "should" message.

"That is a company policy, not my personal rule."

"We are moving on now."

"The fare is \$1.00."

Remember to use a non-aggressive tone of voice when making informing behavior statements.

Also, don't order or command the passenger to do something. Rather, tell them what you will have to do if they continue to engage in disruptive behavior.

Here's an example of that kind of statement: "I won't be able to move the vehicle until you have a seat." Isn't that better than ordering them to take a seat?

Sometimes, just providing information can de-escalate the situation.

The fourth tool is REFLECT-REDIRECT. Listen to understand what a passenger is communicating. Let them vent and don't interrupt them.

Reflective or active listening shows the passenger that you heard them. The tactic is to acknowledge an angry passenger's feelings and appear sympathetic to what they are feeling.

You can use a reflective statement with an informing statement to calm a passenger who is angry because the vehicle is late. For example: "I understand you are frustrated because you might be late for work, so I'll do my best to get you there safely and on time."

The last tool, OPENING BEHAVIOR, is when you ask the angry passenger questions that allow them to open up and express themselves. Human beings sometimes purposely draw attention to themselves, even negative attention, just to be seen and heard.

Asking the passenger questions can make them feel acknowledged and, at the same time, tends to interrupt violent thought patterns. By asking open questions, you are allowing them a chance to address their feelings and get back in control of themselves. Here are some examples of open questions:

"Can I help you?"

"Do you need something?"

"How are you doing today?"

"What do you need?"

"What do you think about what I'm saying?"

Remember, you don't have to use these tools in order, and you can use different combinations of these five tools to try to bring the person down to a manageable level.

Remember you're not looking to make friends. You are just hoping to avoid a violent confrontation.

## Signs of Escalating Conflict (Section)

In this section, we're first going to address some signs of conflict escalation and then talk about tactics for reducing escalation.

We've also included guidance on some things that you should not do.

## Some Signs of Conflict Escalation

Be aware of these signs when you are interacting with an upset passenger:

Does the tone of their voice suddenly change or increase in volume?

Are they clenching their fists or tightening and untightening their jaw?

Have they begun to fidget or pace, or did they cross their arms?

Do they refuse to make eye contact with you?

Have they taken up what's known as the "rooster stance" by pushing out their chest and moving their arms away from their body?

## More Signs of Conflict Escalation

Have they lowered their body – have they hunched themselves over?

Has their breathing become heavy?

Are they holding their hands out in the air demonstrating their frustration?

Have they put their hands behind their back or in their pockets?

Are they being disruptive by yelling or bullying someone?

Are they refusing to comply with rules?

These are some signs that may mean the situation could be escalating. So, what are you supposed to do?

## Reducing Escalation – Aggression

First, you need to understand that if you act aggressively, you will only make the situation worse.

Try to handle the situation from the driver's seat – this projects a less aggressive stance and you're also not invading the other person's space.

Like we discussed in the CAIRO method, you must maintain a calm demeanor while projecting a sense of control without seeming aggressive. And it's extremely important to make eye contact while you are projecting that sense of control.

## Reducing Escalation – Tactics

To maintain a calm demeanor, you first have to be calm yourself – take a deep breath and think before you react or speak with the passenger.

Don't get defensive and take a threatening stance, even if the passenger is insulting you directly.

Remember to employ the reflective listening tool from the CAIRO method. Listen to the passenger's concerns without passing judgement. Then, when it's appropriate, use a low, even tone of voice and try to make a personal connection by asking them a question.

When you communicate, try to ask questions in a way that will get them to say "yes." If they are agreeing with you, it's harder for them to stay angry with you.

When possible, shift the conversation to the future. This can create hope for the passenger, and it makes you seem less threatening.

## Reducing Escalation – More Tactics

Some additional tactics to help reduce escalation include treating every passenger with respect. No one likes to be embarrassed, humiliated or intimidated. A common reason that people act out in violence is because they feel humiliated.

Remember to speak clearly and calmly and use repetition.

If your transit vehicle is equipped with cameras, consider letting the problem passenger know that they are being recorded if you think it will help defuse the situation.

Never be surprised or caught off guard if a passenger overreacts – remain as calm as you can at all times.

And never touch a sleeping passenger. If they're under the influence, confused, violent, or armed they may strike out at you.

## Phrases you should NOT use

In our discussion about the CAIRO method of conflict management, we talked about “informing behavior” statements and provided some examples. Well, here are examples of phrases you shouldn't use.

When you tell someone to “calm down” they may perceive it as an order.

Avoid saying things like, “I understand” or “I know what you're feeling.” Statements like this may further anger the passenger because they don't feel you genuinely understand their circumstances.

Avoid asking the passenger “why” – it sounds like you are accusing them and they'll just get defensive and possibly more out of control.

And judgmental statements such as “you should” or “you shouldn't” may make the passenger feel shamed or inadequate and angrier.

## Things you should NOT do

Remember in the CAIRO method we discussed that you shouldn't order or command a disturbed passenger to do something. Here are a few more things you should not do.

Make light of their experiences, trivialize their problems, or dismiss their feelings. In the Reflect–Direct tool of the CAIRO method, you are reminded to project sympathy for what the passenger is feeling.

Don't blame the person, speak to them sarcastically, or treat them as unintelligent. One of the tactics we just talked about to reduce escalation is treating people with respect.

And never argue moral issues – you aren't going to change their mind.

And this is something for yourself – don't have any expectations that the passenger will agree with you right away. Because it's very likely they won't.

## Responding to Danger (Section)

Within this next section, we're going to cover some key factors for you to consider when responding to danger.

### Key Response Factors

When de-escalation strategies are not working, you need to assume the situation is becoming dangerous. That's when you need to contact dispatch or base. There are a few points I want to bring up about making contact with dispatch or base.

If your vehicle is equipped with a panic button or silent alarm, this is the time you may want to use it to contact dispatch.

If you don't have a silent alarm, your agency may want to consider establishing a verbal emergency code that cannot be understood by the difficult passenger, but dispatch or base would know that you need supervisory or law enforcement assistance.

In the absence of a silent alarm or verbal emergency code, you need to be careful about what you say when call in to request assistance, and also about how you notify dispatch of your location if your vehicle isn't equipped with GPS/AVL. Your request and or notification to dispatch could further escalate the situation.

I want to take a moment to talk about positioning your vehicle. If your vehicle is stationary, don't move it and make sure the doors are open.

This allows the dangerous passenger, other passengers, and yourself to get off the vehicle and escape if necessary.

If you are driving when you determine the situation has turned dangerous and you are in a populated area, you could pull the vehicle off the road in a safe location and open the doors. Again, this provides an avenue for escape.

Many of you provide services that take you into very rural or remote locations. As you know, it may take some time for supervisory or law enforcement response, or it may not even happen in time.

In this type of situation, you will have to rely on your experience and common sense to protect yourself and your passengers. If you can make it to some type of populated area such as a gas station, a small community, or a rest area, you should pull in there.

This will allow you to stop the vehicle where there may be other people around, open the doors, and provide an avenue of escape for the dangerous passenger, other passengers, and yourself. If there happen to be other people in the area, then they may also be able to assist you.

But please, follow your agency's specific procedures on handling conflict with passengers and responding to potentially dangerous situations, if they have them.

## Review and Wrap Up (Section)

Before we wrap-up this presentation, I want to briefly review a few key points we've covered on how to de-escalate conflict and then do a quick overview of the CAIRO method of conflict management.

### Review

I'm sure I don't really don't have to repeat this, but I will. Treat every passenger with respect. A common reason that people act out in violence is because they feel humiliated.

A good start to de-escalating a conflict is to be aware of the bodily signs that the conflict may be escalating. You 'll want to look for such things as a sudden change in a person's tone of voice or the volume of their voice; clenching fists or a tightening of their jaw; pacing; heavy breathing; or a change in the type of eye contact.

When you're dealing with a difficult passenger, you want speak clearly and calmly, use repetition, but don't be surprised if the passenger over reacts.

Eye contact is the most fundamental way to create a connection with a person. Making eye contact might also help you identify a passenger who may be inclined to be disruptive.

Remember that a combination of your body language, tone of voice, and words are a powerful form of communication.

Try to appear as non-threatening as possible. If a person feels threatened, there's a greater likelihood a conflict may escalate.

Listen to the person's concerns – try to acknowledge their feelings without passing judgement on them. Use "I" statements, such as "I'll do all that I can."

Explain what you can do, not what you cannot do.

And, if the situation allows, ask open-ended questions and try to get them to say "yes." It's hard for someone to stay angry if they are agreeing with you.

## CAIRO Method Review

Let's now go over what we learned about the CAIRO Method of de-escalation so every time you step onto your vehicle, you can keep it in mind.

C is for calm. Present a calm outward appearance and try to use a neutral tone and not raise your voice. Also, if you're distressed, calm yourself first before communicating. If you're visibly upset, that may help escalate the situation.

A – assertive. Don't come across as controlling or aggressive. Remember aggression breeds aggression and can escalate a bad situation into an emergency. At the same time, you also don't want to project insecurity or passiveness, either.

I – informing behavior. Let the difficult passenger know what's going on by making "we" statements rather than "you must" statements.

R – reflect and redirect. Actively listen and let the person know you heard them. If they're frustrated, take the time to confirm their frustration.

And finally, O – opening behavior. If you are able, try to make a personal connection. Ask questions that help the passenger feel acknowledged and visible. Something as simple as "what's your name," can help defuse a situation. Most people respond positively to their name. This also may help interrupt their violent thought patterns.

Trust your instincts, if your de-escalation strategies are not working, you could be in a dangerous situation. You may need to consider other options to protect yourself and your passengers.

## Wrap Up

Thanks for taking the time to view this presentation. If you ever experience a conflict situation, I hope these strategies will help you.

Keep in mind that although these strategies have proven to be effective, always also rely on your own experiences and common sense.

We appreciate all that you do – Stay safe!

## Sources

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