



LOSS PREVENTION

How to de-escalate tense situations

Conflict management expert Dave Young shares tips for retailers



Peter Johnston, NRF Contributor, June 23, 2020

Dave Young is co-founder and director of training of conflict management firm [Vistelar](#). A veteran of the United States Marine Corps, Young served as a sworn corrections and law enforcement officer in Florida, and all told has more than 30 years' experience in civilian and military law enforcement.

Young and his organization do a lot of training of what they refer to as “contact professionals” — people whose occupations require them to interact with the general public. He specializes in keeping others safe in industries like education, health care, casinos, parking enforcement and, of course, retail.

There have been incidences where asking customers to comply with safety guidelines have resulted in a violent response. In a couple of instances, customers who, when asked to leave a closed dining area or put on a mask, left the scene, armed themselves,

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then came back and (in person or through a proxy) started shooting. NRF spoke to Young about how to manage difficult situations with emotional customers.

How do you ask somebody to do something they don't want to do without things escalating to violence?

The best thing to do is never let it get to that point. And I want to add — a lot of organizations don't understand this — that it's everybody's job. It's not about training supervisors to put the fire out. It's about training the entire staff on how to not have the fire in the first place.

**Treat people with dignity.
Failing to see the world
through someone else's eyes is
where most conflict begins.**

How do you keep the fire from starting?

Treat people with dignity. It starts with empathy — failing to see the world through someone else's eyes is where most conflict begins. Secondly, listen. Most people will say they're listening when they're actually waiting for a chance to interrupt. Instead of that, I want to really listen, with all my senses.

As part of treating people with dignity, I introduce myself, and I ask and explain. "Hi, I'm Dave Young, I'm an assistant manager or an associate or whatever, and I need to ask you to, say, put on a face mask. I don't know if you noticed, but there are signs on the doors requiring all shoppers to wear masks in the store. I know this is an inconvenience, but we could be fined for not following the CDC guidelines about masks."

I'm not just ordering them to do this or do that, I'm telling them why. I want us to be on the same side. I want cooperation.

Then what?

Then I want to offer options. Maybe we've got a whole rack full of masks, and I can let them have one on store credit. The thing is to let the person you're dealing with choose. In reality, as a contact professional, no matter where you are, everybody you talk to has all the power.

If you go into every contact trying to get cooperation, you can always fall back to compliance: "We have to do it because the CDC says so." But if you're in an organization that's focusing on compliance on a good day, you've got nowhere to fall back to on a bad day.

Finally, don't just take a no as no. Give them a chance to reconsider. A quick no comes from feelings. Give the person empathy, see it from their point of view and give them a little room — it can turn to a yes.

That's if all goes well. What if all doesn't go well?

We have five basic indicators that tell you that communications have broken down and there's a possible safety violation. The first one is when you lose the ability to manage distance during contact. You're not comfortable with how close you are to the person.

The second is positioning. Where and how a person stands is usually indicative of the level of respect they want to show you.

The third indicator is tone of voice. The tone of a person's voice usually tells you their level of frustration because tone reflects how your heart feels at the time those words come out of your mouth.

Then there's word choice. The first sign of anger is someone cussing, not caring about the words that come out of their mouth, when their words are insulting, disrespectful, rude, intimidating, threatening. Excessive repetition is another sign of anger.

Now we have hand movements. I've been hit many times in my professional career, and I can tell you that you'll see signs with hand movements — taking a watch off, adjusting a ring, playing with a bracelet. Suppose you look across the parking lot and you see two women arguing. If one of them starts taking her flip-flops off, taking her earrings off and putting her hair in a ponytail — those are indications that communication has broken down, and that you have a possible safety violation.

If you find yourself faced with a situation like that, is it fair to say that if things had been de-escalated from the initial contact, it wouldn't have happened?

Logically, yes. In the reality of the world we live in, no.

Even if you do everything right on the front end, you're not responsible for how they translate it. I've had situations where I've been very kind and considerate, and nothing worked. At some point, it comes time to take appropriate action, which might mean to leave and immediately call the police.

We're responsible for the process. We're not held accountable for the outcome, because the outcome is out of our control.

Any last thoughts for our readers?

The better trained your people are, the more the out-of-control situations are a rarity. It's the same situations most of the time when people call us about arguments: They didn't understand me. They didn't hear me. They miscommunicated.

Well, if I know how, I can control those three problems. I can make sure you hear me, I can make sure you understand me and I can make sure you're communicating with me. It's a two-way street.

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