ROBERT JOHN BONUS CONSULTING

De-escalation Under Pressure

A practical field guide for loss prevention and security professionals

Mission: Critical companion guide

Control the temperature. Protect people. Know when to disengage. Write the report so the facts stand on their own.



THE OPERATING PRINCIPLE

Win the encounter by making it safer

De-escalation is not surrender and it is not passive. It is deliberate control of pace, space, language, and options so a volatile encounter has fewer ways to become violent.

Primary rule: People are never worth risking for merchandise. Your job is to protect life, maintain awareness, follow policy, and preserve usable information.

The professional sequence

1. **Recognize.** Notice changes in voice, movement, fixation, proximity, threats, clenched hands, scanning, or attempts to close distance.
2. **Assess.** Check weapons indicators, exits, bystanders, partner location, available cover, communication, and whether contact is still necessary.
3. **Stabilize yourself.** Slow your breathing, lower your shoulders, soften your stance, and decide on one clear objective.
4. **Communicate.** Use short sentences, a low and even tone, reflective listening, and choices that let the subject leave without losing face.
5. **Disengage or resolve.** If risk rises, create distance and call for help. If it falls, close the contact cleanly and do not restart the argument.
6. **Report.** Document what happened in sequence using direct observations, exact words when material, and named actions.

One-contact rule: Do not stack three officers talking over one another. When practical, designate one communicator while others provide safety, observation, and radio support.

This guide supports training and field judgment. It does not replace employer policy, post orders, site procedures, applicable law, emergency services, or law-enforcement direction.

READ THE STATE, NOT JUST THE WORDS

Threat narrows the subject's options

A subject who believes they are trapped, humiliated, or under attack may shift into a fight, flight, or freeze response. Attention narrows. Flexible thinking, impulse control, and the ability to process long explanations can drop under acute stress.

What you may see

- Repeated phrases or demands
- Fast, shallow breathing
- Raised volume or sudden silence
- Clenched jaw, fists, or rigid posture
- Pacing, blading, closing distance
- Fixation on a single grievance

What it means for you

- Reduce the number of words
- Give time to process
- Avoid public humiliation
- Do not crowd or corner
- Offer two safe, realistic choices
- Watch behavior more than promises

The brain lesson in plain language

Under high stress, the brain prioritizes immediate threat detection and action. The systems used for planning, weighing consequences, and changing course can become less reliable. Research on acute uncontrollable stress describes rapid weakening of prefrontal cortex functions that support working memory and higher cognition.[1]

You do not need to diagnose anyone. You need to recognize that a long lecture, a public challenge, or a rapid series of commands may add load to a brain that is already overloaded.

Field translation: fewer words, slower delivery, more space, simple choices, and time to respond.

Escalation is reciprocal

Your nervous system is in the encounter too. If your breathing speeds up, your voice gets louder, your stance becomes squared and rigid, or you rush to win the argument, the subject may read you as an added threat. Control your own physiology before trying to influence theirs.

LOWER YOUR OWN TEMPERATURE FIRST

Regulate before you communicate

The subject will hear your physiology before they process your words. If you look rushed, angry, or eager for a confrontation, even good language can fail.

The five-second reset

1. **Exhale longer than you inhale.** One slow breath helps interrupt your urge to match the subject's speed or volume.
2. **Drop visible tension.** Lower your shoulders, unclench your jaw, keep your hands visible, and avoid pointing.
3. **Angle your stance.** Avoid a chest-to-chest challenge. Maintain reactionary distance, access to an exit, and awareness of bystanders.
4. **Choose one objective.** Examples: create distance, move bystanders, get the subject toward an exit, or hold position until support arrives.
5. **Deliver one sentence.** Speak slowly enough that you can hear every word you say. Then pause.

Use the pressure controls

Control	Increase risk	Lower pressure
Voice	Match volume; talk over the subject	Lower volume and pace; pause after a sentence
Position	Block the only exit; crowd; surround	Preserve space and a safe path away
Posture	Point, glare, square up, smirk	Neutral face, visible hands, angled stance
Language	Threats, sarcasm, lectures, absolutes	Concrete observations, limits, and choices
Timing	Demand immediate answers to everything	Ask one question and allow processing time

> **Do not confuse calm with casual.** Stay alert. Keep distance. Track hands, movement, exits, other people, and changes in the environment while you speak.

STOP ARGUING WITH THE EMOTION

Listen, label the concern, offer a way out

Your goal is not to prove the subject wrong. Your goal is to reduce the immediate threat, establish workable limits, and create a safe next step.

Open with an observation, not an accusation.
“I can see this is getting heated. I want to keep this from getting worse.”

Ask one usable question.
“What needs to happen next so we can end this safely?”

Reflect the core concern.
“You're saying you feel singled out, and you want a clear explanation.” Reflection is not agreement. It shows that you heard the message.

Set the limit without a speech.
“I will listen. I cannot let you threaten staff or move closer.”

Give two safe options.
“You can speak with the manager here at a normal volume, or you can leave now and contact the office later.”

Close the loop.
“You're choosing to leave. Keep moving toward the exit. I will not follow you outside.”

Why “calm down” usually fails

It tells the subject what to feel, suggests their reaction is the problem, and offers no action they can take. Replace it with a concrete request tied to safety.

Avoid: “Calm down.”

Use: “Take one step back so we have space to talk.”

Avoid: “You're being irrational.”

Use: “Tell me the main thing you need addressed.”

Working formula: “I hear [concern]. I need [safe behavior]. You can [option A] or [option B].”

MAKE COMPLIANCE POSSIBLE

Give the subject a face-saving next move

People often stay in a confrontation because backing down feels like public defeat. A verbal exit ramp gives them a way to change behavior without being forced to admit they were wrong.

Time: “We do not have to settle every part of this right now. We do need to stop the confrontation.”

Choice: “You can leave on your own now, or wait here while a supervisor responds.”

Dignity: “Let's step away from the crowd and lower the temperature.”

Boundary: “I will keep talking with you as long as you keep your hands visible and stay where you are.”

Reset: “Let's start over. Tell me the most important part in one sentence.”

Safe closure: “The conversation is over for now. Leave the property without approaching staff or customers.”

Listening without surrendering authority

Do

- Let the subject finish a short statement
- Name the concern in neutral terms
- Use the subject's own key words when appropriate
- Separate the person from the behavior
- Repeat the limit calmly when necessary

Do not

- Debate every fact in real time
- Promise an outcome you cannot deliver
- Use sarcasm or humiliation
- Mirror profanity
- Keep negotiating after threats become imminent

The broken-record technique

When the subject tries to pull you into side arguments, repeat the same short safety message without adding heat: “I hear you. The next step is to move back and keep your hands visible.” Consistency prevents a new argument from opening with every response.

> **Watch for change.** Lower volume, slower movement, increased distance, visible hands, questions instead of threats, and acceptance of a safe option are signs the pressure may be dropping. Continue monitoring; do not rush in because the first sign is positive.

KNOW WHEN CONTACT IS OVER

Disengage before the encounter owns you

De-escalation is appropriate only while contact can be conducted safely. It is not a requirement to remain in a deteriorating encounter. Follow site policy, post orders, and emergency procedures.

Disengagement triggers

- Weapon seen, claimed, or strongly indicated
- Credible threat of immediate harm
- Sudden reach, charge, ambush cue, or closing distance
- Multiple subjects or changing crowd dynamics
- Loss of safe exit, cover, or communication
- Subject moves toward employees or customers
- Your own control is deteriorating
- Policy threshold for continued contact is no longer met

The disengagement protocol

1. **End the debate.** Use one brief direction if safe: “Stop. Stay back.” Do not add commentary.
2. **Create distance.** Move toward a safer position, available cover, a controlled access point, or other location defined by site procedure.
3. **Call it in.** Use the radio, duress alarm, emergency number, or law-enforcement request specified by policy. Give location, description, behavior, direction of travel, weapons information, and injuries.
4. **Protect others.** Move staff and customers out of the subject's path when it can be done without increasing exposure.
5. **Observe without chasing.** Preserve last known direction, vehicle details, companions, discarded items, and video locations. Do not turn observation into unauthorized pursuit.
6. **Transfer command.** When supervisors or law enforcement arrive, give a concise factual handoff and follow their direction.

Non-negotiable: merchandise can be replaced. A life cannot. No recovery, detention, or evidence objective justifies ignoring a rising threat.

PROTECT THE OFFICER AND THE COMPANY

Facts first. Sequence always. No labels.

A strong incident report lets another person understand what happened without needing you in the room. It identifies who took each action and separates observation from interpretation.

Record these elements

Element	What to capture
Context	Date, time, exact location, assignment, lighting or crowd conditions when relevant.
Initial observation	What first drew attention and where each person was positioned.
Behavior	Observable actions: pace, distance, gestures, hand movements, property contact, direction of travel.
Statements	Exact words in quotation marks when material; otherwise a neutral summary that is clearly attributed.
Response	Who gave each direction, what options were offered, when contact ended, and why support was requested.
Notifications	Supervisor, dispatch, emergency services, law enforcement, medical response, and time of notification.
Disposition	Departure, detention by authorized personnel, trespass direction, medical care, injuries, property, evidence, video, and witnesses.

Replace conclusions with observations

Weak: “The subject became aggressive.”

Stronger: “The subject stepped from approximately six feet to two feet, pointed at my face, and said, ‘I will knock you out.’”

Weak: “I tried to calm him down.”

Stronger: “I lowered my voice, moved one step back, and offered two options: speak with the manager or leave the store.”

> **Writing rule:** Name the actor. Use direct verbs. Write “I called the supervisor at 14:18,” not “the supervisor was notified.” FBI report-writing guidance emphasizes simple, straightforward language and identifying who performed each action.[2]

Do not diagnose intoxication, mental illness, or motive unless qualified and authorized. Record the behavior that led to your concern. Preserve notes, video references, evidence, and required forms according to policy.

TAKEAWAY

The de-escalation field check

Before contact

- [ ] Know the site policy, radio procedure, exits, safe zones, and support options.
- [ ] Identify bystanders, partners, cameras, cover, and the subject's path of travel.
- [ ] Decide whether direct contact is necessary and authorized.
- [ ] Set one clear objective for the encounter.

During contact

- [ ] Exhale, lower your shoulders, angle your stance, and maintain safe space.
- [ ] Use one communicator and one sentence at a time.
- [ ] Lower volume and pace; do not match the subject's intensity.
- [ ] Reflect the concern without endorsing threats or misconduct.
- [ ] State the safety limit and offer two realistic exit ramps.
- [ ] Track hands, distance, exits, weapons cues, and changes in the crowd.

Disengage when

- [ ] A weapon, immediate threat, sudden reach, charge, or ambush cue appears.
- [ ] You lose distance, cover, communication, support, or a safe exit.
- [ ] Risk to staff, customers, or you now exceeds the objective.
- [ ] Continued contact is outside policy or your authorization.

After contact

- [ ] Notify the required supervisor, dispatch, emergency service, or law enforcement contact.
- [ ] Preserve witnesses, video, evidence, and exact material statements.
- [ ] Write the report in sequence with observable facts and named actions.
- [ ] Record injuries, medical response, direction of travel, disposition, and follow-up.
- [ ] Debrief what increased pressure, what reduced it, and what should change.

Final test: Did your actions reduce danger, follow policy, protect people, and leave a clear factual record?

Quick phrase bank

“I want to keep this safe.” | “Tell me the main issue.” | “Take one step back.” | “I hear what you are saying.” | “You have two options.” | “The contact is over. Stay back.”

FURTHER READING

Sources and professional use

This guide translates established safety, stress, communication, and report-writing principles into a field-ready format for loss prevention and security teams.

1. National Library of Medicine / PubMed. “Chronic Stress Weakens Connectivity in the Prefrontal Cortex: Architectural and Molecular Changes.” The abstract also explains how acute uncontrollable stress rapidly weakens prefrontal connectivity supporting higher cognition.
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2. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin. “Perspective: Writing Clear, Effective Police Reports - No English Degree Required” and “Focus on Report Writing: Old Habits Can Hold Officers Back.”
https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/perspective/perspective-writing-clear-effective-police-reports-no-english-degree-required
https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/focus/focus-on-report-writing-old-habits-can-hold-officers-back

3. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. De-escalation products and resources, including the Recognize-Assess-De-escalate-Report approach and a non-physical de-escalation reference card.
https://www.cisa.gov/topics/physical-security/conflict-prevention/de-escalation-products-and-resources
https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/de-escalation-reference-card

4. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Worker Participation guidance and workplace-violence prevention resources support reporting incidents and near misses, documenting safe work practices, training, and rapid access to assistance.
https://osha.gov/safeandsound/safety-and-health-programs/worker-participation
https://www.osha.gov/ords/imis/establishment.violation_detail?id=760145.015&citation_id=01001

> **Professional-use note:** Adapt this material to the employer's policy, local law, site-specific risk assessment, post orders, emergency action plan, and required training. When immediate danger exists, follow emergency procedures and contact the appropriate emergency service.

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