

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

New Mexico Department of Transportation  
Transit and Rail Division  
with Ream Lazaro Safety Consulting, LLC

Revised and Expanded January 2022



1

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## Introduction

2

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## What's in it for you?

- Build on your conflict management and de-escalation skills
- Lower your stress while interacting with difficult passengers
- Reduce your sense of isolation when facing a problem passenger on bus, even if assistance is available via radio
- Awareness of new tools for dealing with difficult or dangerous passengers so you safely go home at end of your shift

3

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Agenda

- General Customer Service Skills
- The Risk
- CAIRO Method of Conflict Management
- Passenger Against Driver De-escalation Strategies
- Passenger-on-Passenger De-escalation Strategies
- Signs of Escalating Conflict
- Reacting to Potentially Dangerous Situations
- Review and Wrap up



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## General Customer Service Skills



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Basic Needs of a Transit Passenger

- Reliability
- Safety and security
- Convenience and accessibility
- Cleanliness and comfort
- Simplicity
- Affordable
- Friendliness and empathy



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Key Customer Service Strategies

- Listen
- Show the passenger respect
- Identify the problem
- Try to solve the problem
- Thank the passenger for their patience



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### The Risk



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What is Conflict?

*Conflict is a disagreement in which the people involved see a threat to their needs, interests, or concerns.*

- Conflict key element – the idea that each person may have a different perception of any given situation



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What is De-escalation?

*De-escalation - when we use communication skills to calm a person who is angry, out of control, or disturbed.*

- Escalation phase – when interaction turns into conflict
- Critical to deploy de-escalation techniques during this phase




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Passenger Traits that May Lead to Conflict

- Under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Mental health issues
- Under high personal stress
- People who are transient or homeless
- Resent authority and regulations
- Teenagers acting out
- Angry about transit service




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Examples of Conflict Sources

- Pandemic requirements
- Fare disputes
- Use of profanity
- Bringing food or drink onboard
- Delays in service
- Vandalism of vehicle
- Objects being thrown
- Unwanted advances or harassment
- Shouting or loud music
- Bullying
- Language or cultural differences
- Other inappropriate behavior




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Types of Conflict

- Passenger against driver
- Passenger-on-passenger

13 

---

---

---

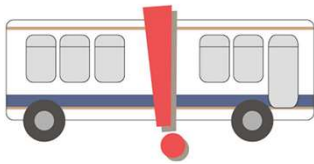
---

---

---

---

---



### CAIRO Method of Conflict Management

14 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### CAIRO

- **Calm**
  - **Don't** raise your voice – use neutral, consistent tone
- **Assertive**
  - **Don't** come across as controlling, parental, insecure, or aggressive
- **Informing behavior**
  - Use "we" statements rather than "you"
- **Reflect / Redirect**
  - Listening and showing person you heard them
- **Opening behavior**
  - Ask questions that enable person to open up and express themselves

15 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### Passenger Against Driver De-escalation Strategies

16

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Three Aspects of Communication

- Words (what we actually say)
- Tone (how we say the words)
- Body language
- Combine to express an overall message
  - A powerful form of communication

17

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Making a Good First Impression

- First impressions form within the first second of interaction
- First impression is an evaluation based on your
  - appearance
  - body language
  - demeanor and
  - mannerisms
- Greet passengers with warm, confident smile to put at ease
- Make eye contact to create connection
  - May identify passengers who might be inclined to be disruptive
  - Way of letting passengers know you are watching what is going on

18

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Triggering Events

- Triggering event – an incident perceived as a threat by an individual
- Two types of triggering events:
  - *Fear inducing* – person feels threatened or believes is about to lose something of value
  - *Frustrating* – person feels their needs are not being met

19 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Situational Awareness

- Situational awareness helps you recognize and “read” the indicators of difficult passengers
- Assess situation in a non-emotional way
- Be mindful of your own stress responses
- Don’t allow yourself to be provoked
- Maintain your self-control and composure

20 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Identify Your Hot Buttons

- Know your hot buttons
- Develop strategies to overcome reactions to your hot button being pushed
- Practice positive self-talk to calm yourself down and maintain self-control
- Don’t take the bait

21 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Take a Time Out

- Give yourself time to calm down
- Think through how to handle the situation

22 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Listen and Repeat Key Points

- Listening – most critical element of communication
- Listen to:
  - Identify the problem
  - Filter out unnecessary information
- Put into words what you think problem is
  - Repeat back the key points for clarification

23 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Ask Open-ended Questions

- Ask questions to make passenger *think* rather than *react*
- Use “*who, what, where, when, and how*” questions
  - To further clarify the situation
  - Get passenger to respond rationally

24 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### Offer Help or Options

- Offer help or options
  - To emphasize your concern and empathy
- Keep messages short and clear

25

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### Passenger-on-Passenger De-escalation Strategies

26

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Reduce Potential of Passenger-on-Passenger Violence

- Stay aware of general customer service skills and passenger-on-driver de-escalation skills
- Make eye contact with each passenger during boarding
  - Visually assess passengers for indications
  - Passengers know driver is aware of them
- Greet each passenger during boarding
  - Sends message driver is aware of passengers and in control
- Use rearview mirror - keep an eye on passengers that raised concerns during boarding

27

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Reduce Potential of Passenger-on-Passenger Violence (cont'd)

- Identify a problem?
  - Pull vehicle to safe location off roadway and park
  - Open doors – allow escape opportunity
- Facilitate movement of problem passenger to another seat
  - Alternately, move passenger being harassed
- Contact dispatch if passenger doesn't cooperate or problem behavior doesn't stop
- Carry out required and voluntary post-event activities

28 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### Signs of Escalating Conflict

29 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Some Signs of Conflict Escalation

- Sudden change in tone of voice or volume
- Clenching fists or tightening and untightening jaw
- Begins fidgeting or pacing
- Crossed arms
- Change in type of eye contact or evasive eye contact
- Rooster stance
  - Chest protruding out more and arms more away from body

30 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### More Signs of Conflict Escalation

- Lowering of the body
  - Not standing up straight or hunched over
- Heavy breathing
- Raised / hidden hands
  - Holding hands in air out of frustration
  - Hiding hands behind back or in pockets
- Disruptive behaviors
  - Yelling, bullying, actively defying or refusing to comply with rules

31 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Reducing Escalation - Aggression

*Aggression breeds aggression, escalating a bad situation into an emergency.*

- Handle the situation from the driver's seat when possible
- Respect the offender's personal space
- Maintain a calm demeanor
- Project a sense of control without being aggressive

32 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Reducing Escalation - Tactics

- First, calm yourself before interacting with person
  - Take a deep breath
- Don't get defensive even if insults are directed at you
- Try to look as non-threatening as possible
- Listen to persons concerns without passing judgment
- Use a low, dull tone of voice
- Make personal connection
  - For example, "What's your name?"
- Get them to say "yes"
- Shift conversation to future
  - Creates hope; makes you less threatening

33 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Reducing Escalation – More Tactics

- Treat every passenger with respect
  - Don't embarrass or humiliate person
  - Don't intimidate person
- Speak clearly and calmly
- Use repetition
- Cameras on vehicles
- Don't be surprised if they overreact
- Don't touch sleeping passengers
  - May be under the influence, confused, violent, armed

34 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Reducing Escalation – Phrases you should NOT use

- “Calm down”
  - May be perceived as an order
- “I understand”
  - Understanding must be demonstrated
- “Why”
  - Feels accusatory, creates defensiveness
- “You should” and “You shouldn't”
  - Judgmental statements that may cause feelings of inadequacy, shame, or anger

35 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Reducing Escalation - Things you should NOT do

- Make light of person's experiences
- Trivialize person's problems
- Dismiss person's feelings
- Blame person
- Be sarcastic
- Treat person as unintelligent
- Argue moral issues
- Expect agreement to develop quickly

36 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### Reacting to Potentially Dangerous Situations

37 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Give Choices and Consequences

- Set limits
  - When passenger's behavior indicates further conversation will not help
  - To make clear there are expectations for acceptable behavior
- State expectation
  - Give negative choice and consequence first
  - Give positive choice and consequence last

38 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Take Action

- Ask
  - Ask passenger to comply with your request
- Explain
  - Explain why your request ensures a safe environment on your vehicle
- Present options
  - Tell passenger what will happen if they don't comply and if they do comply
- Confirm
  - Confirm passenger understand the options
- Act
  - Take action based on passenger response to options

39 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Responding to Danger

- Request supervisor or law enforcement response
  - Panic button or silent alarm
  - Verbal emergency code
- Vehicle positioning and doors
- Choose escape route
- Rural and remote locations

*Follow agency specific procedures for handling conflict and responding to danger.*

40 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### Review and Wrap Up

41 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Review of Topics Discussed

- General Customer Service Skills
- The Risk
- CAIRO Method of Conflict Management
- Passenger Against Driver De-escalation Strategies
- Passenger-on-Passenger De-escalation Strategies
- Signs of Escalating Conflict
- Reacting to Potentially Dangerous Situations

42 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### CAIRO Method Review

- **C** – calm
- **A** – assertive
- **I** – inform
- **R** – reflect and redirect
- **O** – opening behavior

43 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### General Key Strategies Review

- Treat all passengers with respect
- Speak clearly and calmly; use repetition
- Make eye contact
- Employ body language, tone of voice, and words to communicate
- Be non-threatening in words and actions
- Listen to their concerns
- Ask open-ended questions
- Get them to say “yes”

44 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Remember

- Be aware of signs of conflict escalation
- Pursue other options if de-escalation fails
- Post-event consider seeking counseling

45 

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Wrap Up

Thank you for all you do  
and stay safe !

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Source Credits

- "The Art of Defusing Conflict: De-escalation Techniques for Transit Operators"
  - Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) and Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)
- "Tools for Defusing Conflict with Public Transportation Passengers"
  - Zach Stone, Co-founder/Chief Strategy Officer of Red Kite Project, Metro Magazine
- "Crisis Recognition and Response"
  - Adapted from Nassau County New York Police
- "Unruly Bus Passengers"
  - Chester Patton, San Mateo County Transit District
- "Managing Difficult Passengers"
  - Bus Safety Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
- PennTrain, SAFTI, and Amtran in Pennsylvania
- National Transit Institute Operator Assault and Workplace Violence Training Courses

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---