

From Crisis to Calm

Achieving Safer Outcomes in Difficult Encounters

By Jeffrey G. Scholz

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CHAPTER 1:

WHY DE-ESCALATION MATTERS NOW

The Encounters We Face

It's a Tuesday afternoon when Susan Dickinson realizes her master's degree in social work hasn't quite prepared her for this moment.

The man across the desk is shouting. Not at her, exactly, but at the system, at his circumstances, at the universe that has placed him in a position where he needs to beg strangers for help feeding his children. His voice grows louder. His hands clench. Susan feels her own heart racing, and her mouth is dry. She'd been trained to assess eligibility for benefits, to navigate complex regulations, and to document cases thoroughly. No one had taught her what to do when someone is three seconds away from flipping her desk.

Susan isn't the only one right now struggling with how to act, what to say, and what to do if she has to protect herself.

Alice Strauss, a nurse at the hospital's emergency department, watches a family member's frustration escalate as he explains for the third time why their loved one can't be discharged yet. The family member steps closer, jaw clenched, finger jabbing the air near Alice's face.

In a suburban department store, a college student who's a part-time sales associate approaches a customer who's been asked to leave. The customer's voice rises. Other shoppers stop and stare. The associate's training covered inventory management and customer service recovery. It never covered this.

In a corporate HR office, a benefits specialist tries to explain why a claim was denied. The employee across from her isn't hearing explanations anymore. Instead, they're cataloging grievances, their tone shifting from disappointed to angry to something darker.

Over at the Knolls, a community church, Pastor Brian attempts to mediate a conflict between members of the congregation. What started as a discussion about worship music styles has devolved into personal attacks. Voices echo off the sanctuary walls. Someone stands up abruptly, knocking over a chair.

And in a rural county Sheriff's office, a deputy stands face-to-face with a man in crisis who has stopped responding to verbal commands and whose hand keeps drifting toward his waistband. Everything she learned in the academy feels simultaneously critical and completely inadequate.

As outlined earlier, the communication principles at play here are consistent across roles, but the decision to stay engaged, disengage, or intervene physically depends entirely on authority, policy, and safety. These scenarios illustrate the types of encounters that professionals in my training sessions face with troubling frequency. They share three things in common:

First, most professionals receive inadequate preparation for these moments. They have excellent training for the technical aspects of their roles, but when it comes to managing another human being in emotional crisis, they're operating on instinct, improvisation, and hope.

Second, in every one of these scenarios, there is a reason behind the other person's behavior. The father who can't feed his kids, the family member watching a loved one suffer, the employee whose claim was denied... they are not operating from a calm, fully regulated state. They are responding the way many people do under significant stress. You don't have to agree with how someone expresses their emotions to recognize that the emotions themselves are valid.

But here's the reality: you don't always know what's driving the behavior in front of you. In the moment of an encounter like this, the deputy isn't trying to diagnose emotion in the abstract. She has to assess behavior and possible intent in context, with limited information and real safety stakes. Situations like this require the same foundational skill as every other difficult encounter in this book: the ability to accurately read what is unfolding without defaulting to assumption. Sometimes that assessment points to legitimate distress. Sometimes it points to a credible threat. The difference matters, and this book addresses both.

Third, these encounters don't always have to escalate. With the right skills, framework, and mindset, they may be guided toward safer, calmer resolutions.

The consequences are real. But so is the evidence that proper training works: when the Louisville Metro Police Department implemented comprehensive de-escalation training, they saw a 28% reduction in use-of-force incidents, a 26% reduction in citizen injuries, and a 36% reduction in officer injuries.¹

Based on my training and experience across law enforcement and civilian settings, those results are consistent with what I have observed more broadly: when people are trained to recognize escalation earlier, regulate their own responses, and communicate with greater intention, encounters are less likely to deteriorate, even in civilian and non-enforcement roles where authority, force, and legal thresholds differ.

Who This Book Is For

If you're reading this, you likely recognize yourself or your colleagues in the scenarios we just covered:

Healthcare workers: Physicians, nurses, emergency department staff, mental health professionals, patient services representatives

Social services professionals: Eligibility workers, case managers, child protective investigators, housing counselors, benefits specialists

Educators: Teachers, administrators, school counselors, support staff

Retail and customer service workers: Sales associates, managers, customer service representatives

Security and loss prevention professionals: Security officers, asset protection and loss prevention specialists, campus and event safety personnel

Human resources professionals: Benefits specialists, employee relations staff, workplace investigators

Faith community leaders: Clergy, pastors, rabbis, ministers, gurus, elders, staff, counselors, volunteers

Law enforcement: Police officers, troopers, sheriffs' deputies, corrections officers, probation and parole officers

Anyone who regularly faces the public: Court clerks, DMV employees, library staff, transit workers, government agency frontline personnel, insurance industry, and so on

In short: if your job involves interacting with people who might be stressed, angry, scared, or in crisis, and if you've ever felt underprepared for those moments, this book is for you, because the gap between what professionals need and what they receive has reached crisis proportions.

The Growing Crisis in Crisis Management

Let's start with some uncomfortable numbers.

Federal surveys and safety agencies estimate that nearly 2 million American workers report being victims of workplace violence each year, with many additional incidents likely going unreported.² The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and various industry analyses estimate that the national economic impact of workplace violence reaches into the tens and potentially hundreds of billions of dollars annually when accounting for both direct and indirect costs including lost productivity, increased security measures, workers' compensation claims, and employee turnover.³

And while these numbers focus on incidents reported by workers, workplace violence doesn't stay contained to one side of the interaction. Patients, clients, customers, visitors, and bystanders are all part of the picture. When a situation escalates in a hospital lobby, a government office, or a retail floor, everyone present is affected, and everyone could be at risk.

But the real story isn't in the aggregate statistics. It's in the sector-specific data that reveals just how pervasive this problem has become.

Healthcare: The Front Lines of Crisis

Healthcare workers experience workplace violence at rates far exceeding those in other industries. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that workers in the healthcare and social assistance sector account for roughly 70 to 75 percent of all nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses due to violence, despite representing a much smaller share of the workforce.⁴ OSHA and related federal guidance report that healthcare workers are approximately five times more likely to experience workplace violence than workers in other industries.⁵

These aren't just statistics. They represent experienced nurses leaving the profession, physicians experiencing trauma, and healthcare organizations struggling with staffing crises driven in part by workplace safety concerns. The Joint Commission (the independent nonprofit organization that accredits and certifies more than 22,000 healthcare organizations and programs in the United States) now includes workplace violence prevention elements in its accreditation standards.⁶ Yet healthcare workers often report receiving little more than a brief video module and instructions to call security.

The financial impact is substantial. While comprehensive cost data varies, healthcare organizations face significant expenses related to workplace violence incidents, including medical care for injured staff, workers'

compensation claims, increased security measures, legal costs, and the considerable expense of replacing experienced healthcare workers who leave due to safety concerns.

That doesn't account for the broader organizational impacts: decreased morale, increased sick leave usage, the reluctance of experienced staff to work in high-risk areas, and the ripple effect on patient care quality when experienced professionals leave or avoid certain assignments.

Retail: When Customer Service Becomes Survival

Retail workers increasingly report hostile encounters with customers. Research from the National Retail Federation (NRF) indicates that violent incidents and organized retail crime have increased substantially in recent years, with both theft-related confrontations and customer aggression becoming more common.⁷

Store associates, often part-time employees, are expected to enforce store policies, prevent theft, manage returns, and handle customer complaints, all while maintaining a friendly demeanor. Their training in difficult encounters is often simply, "We tell them to comply with customer demands" or "We train them to call security or management."

In other words: give in, retreat, or escalate to someone else. None of these responses actually equip workers with the skills to reduce emotional intensity or guide an encounter toward a safer resolution.

The numbers bear this out. A 2024 survey of 600 in-store retail workers conducted by Theatro, a Motorola Solutions company, found that 80 percent don't feel protected by their employer while on the job. Eighty percent of those workers have considered purchasing personal safety devices like pepper spray or personal alarms because of safety concerns at their store. When asked what's driving the stress, 33 percent cited increases in shoplifting and in-store crime, 27 percent pointed to staffing shortages, and 23 percent said unreasonable customers. Sixteen percent said they simply don't feel safe at work.⁸

The human cost is measured in injuries, trauma, and turnover. Turnover among hourly, frontline retail workers routinely exceeds 60 percent annually in many settings.⁹ Workplace safety concerns are frequently cited as a contributing factor. When employees don't feel safe, they leave. When they leave, stores lose institutional knowledge, spend enormous sums on recruiting and training, and create service gaps that frustrate customers, which leads to more conflict. The cycle happens over and over.

The Theatro survey quantifies this flight risk: 73 percent of in-store workers are considering leaving their jobs, with the combination of safety concerns and staffing shortages cited as the top reason. Among those contemplating departure, 25 percent attributed it to both safety and staffing issues combined, while another 18 percent cited safety alone. Perhaps more alarming for retailers, 64 percent said they would consider suing their employer over an injury or safety issue from a store crime incident. The cycle is self-reinforcing: understaffing creates safety gaps, safety gaps drive turnover, and turnover deepens the understaffing.

Social Services: Helping Under Pressure

Social services workers occupy one of the most challenging spaces in public-facing work. They encounter individuals at their most vulnerable, most desperate, and sometimes most volatile moments. County eligibility workers, child protective services investigators, housing counselors, benefits specialists, and many other job titles regularly face clients experiencing mental health crises, substance use disorders, trauma, housing instability, and profound financial stress, often simultaneously.

Research consistently documents that social workers experience workplace violence at concerning rates. A national study of NASW members found that 62 percent reported experiencing physical or psychological assault by a client, with verbal aggression representing the most common form of violence.¹⁰ In my training sessions with social services departments across New York State over the past decade, these concerns have been universally expressed.

Yet most social services agencies provide minimal crisis de-escalation training beyond a brief orientation session. When I work with county DSS offices, case managers and eligibility workers consistently report that, while they encounter aggressive or threatening behavior regularly, often multiple times per week and sometimes per day, their initial training in managing these situations typically consists of a short video or lecture with no opportunity to practice these skills.

The consequences extend beyond worker safety. When social services professionals don't have effective de-escalation skills, they're more likely to disengage from clients who need help the most, more likely to experience burnout and compassion fatigue, and more likely to leave the profession entirely. Workforce retention in child welfare and social services has been a persistent challenge,¹¹ and while the inherent difficulty of the work contributes to turnover, inadequate preparation for managing hostile encounters is a factor that participants in my training sessions frequently identify as contributing to their stress and their colleagues' decisions to leave.

Education: Classrooms in Crisis

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that during the 2020–21 school year (the most recent year for which this series is available) about 6 percent of public school teachers reported being threatened with injury by a student from their school, and about 4 percent reported being physically attacked by a student from their school.¹² Using conservative estimates of the number of public school teachers in the United States, these percentages translate to well over 100,000 teachers who report having been threatened with injury or physically attacked by a student in a single school year. Educators consistently describe an environment where hostile interactions, with both students and parents, have become more frequent and more intense.

But the challenge isn't just student behavior. Teachers and administrators also describe increasingly hostile interactions with parents. Issues ranging from curriculum decisions to discipline policies to pandemic-related requirements have generated confrontations that sometimes feel threatening. School board meetings, once quiet affairs attended by a handful of community members, now sometimes require law enforcement presence in response to documented threats and safety concerns.¹³

What training do educators receive for managing these encounters? In most cases, minimal preparation at best. Teacher preparation programs focus on pedagogy, classroom management strategies for typical student behavior, and subject matter expertise. Crisis communication, if addressed at all, might receive only an hour or two during in-service training, often delivered through a lecture or video presentation without an opportunity for practice.

The impact on teacher retention is significant. We're losing talented, dedicated educators not because they don't love teaching, but because they don't feel safe or adequately supported in managing the non-instructional challenges they face daily.¹⁴

Corporate Environments: HR and Beyond

Even traditional office environments face workplace violence challenges. Human resources professionals, corporate security teams, and managers increasingly encounter employees in crisis, dealing with denied benefits claims, terminations, disciplinary actions, or the accumulated stress of modern work life.

Data on workplace homicides from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other federal sources show that these rare but severe incidents arise from a range of circumstances, including robberies, customer interactions, coworker disputes, domestic violence that spills into the workplace, and employment-related conflicts such as disciplinary actions or terminations.¹⁵

Now, as we'll discuss later, if you're faced with that kind of violence, you're not going to stick around and try to talk to someone. Your best bet to stay safe is to get out. But what about the much more common disputes, arguments, and misunderstandings that occur? Those are the encounters that while difficult, may be influenced toward a better, safer outcome through awareness and communication. Yet organizational investment in de-escalation training for HR professionals and managers remains limited. I've found that while some organizations may provide active shooter awareness training, specific skill-building in de-escalation and crisis communication is uncommon.

The consequences of mishandling these encounters may be severe: wrongful termination lawsuits, workplace violence incidents, damage to employee morale, and in extreme cases, targeted violence. The financial risk alone should compel organizations to invest in proper training.

Security and Loss Prevention: The Training Desert

Perhaps nowhere is the gap between responsibility and preparation more apparent than in the private security industry. Estimates suggest that there are well over one million private security officers in the United States, a workforce that outnumbers sworn law enforcement officers.¹⁶ Private security personnel are often the first point of contact when situations become tense or volatile.

But the training requirements for security officers remain minimal in most jurisdictions. Requirements vary substantially by state. As of this writing, California requires 8 hours of initial training for security guards, New York requires 24 hours total (8 hours pre-assignment plus 16 hours on-the-job training), Florida mandates 40 hours for Class D licensure, and Texas requires 6 hours for Level II non-commissioned security officers.¹⁷ De-escalation and crisis communication, when included at all, typically receive minimal attention within these already brief training programs, often taught through lecture with no practical application, or even through remote video training.

Ongoing training requirements are even more limited. Many states require only minimal annual refresher training covering all mandatory topics, not specifically focused on de-escalation, but addressing all required subject areas in just a few hours per year.¹⁸

Compare this to law enforcement training. While police training certainly has gaps, even basic police academies typically provide substantially more instruction dedicated to interpersonal communication and crisis intervention. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that state and local law enforcement training academies provide an average of 806 total training hours for basic recruit training.¹⁹ Security officers, who

often work in hospitals, retail environments, and public spaces where they routinely encounter individuals in crisis, receive a fraction of that preparation.

In my training sessions with security teams, this disparity is a source of consistent frustration. These professionals recognize the importance of communication and de-escalation skills but report receiving minimal preparation beyond their basic licensing requirements.

This isn't a criticism of security professionals themselves. Most security officers are dedicated, skilled, and doing their best with inadequate preparation. It's an observation about an industry and regulatory system that assign enormous responsibility without commensurate investment in training.

Houses of Worship: Sacred Spaces, Human Conflict

Religious leaders and faith community staff face unique challenges. Pastors, priests, rabbis, imams, elders, staff and volunteers regularly counsel or encounter individuals and families experiencing profound stress: financial crises, relationship dissolution, grief, mental health struggles, spiritual doubt. They may mediate conflicts between congregation members, deliver difficult messages, and occasionally need to enforce boundaries with individuals whose behavior has become disruptive or concerning.

Yet theological education rarely includes practical training in crisis de-escalation. Seminary students learn scripture, theology, homiletics, and pastoral care theory. They don't typically learn how to respond when someone experiencing a mental health crisis becomes agitated during a counseling session, or how to manage a congregant whose anger feels threatening.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has documented persistent concerns about threats against faith-based organizations, including houses of worship, through its hate crime statistics and public safety advisories.²⁰ Armed guards are becoming more common at places of worship, but when in place, they are there for the worst-case scenario. In an active lethal-force situation, armed intervention may be required to stop immediate harm. Thankfully, most encounters in houses of worship never reach that threshold. Many begin with conflict, distress, or disruption long before violence becomes imminent. While much attention focuses on external existential threats, these other conflicts can also escalate to concerning levels. Those spreading the word face these challenges with minimal formal preparation, relying primarily on intuition and pastoral presence rather than specific crisis communication skills.

Law Enforcement: My Starting Point

I came to this work through law enforcement, starting in 1994 with the Schenectady County (NY) District Attorney's office as an investigator and then spending nearly twenty-five years with the New York State Police, including service as a major crimes investigator, a crisis negotiator and, eventually, as Division Coordinator for the entire NYSP Crisis Negotiation Program. Law enforcement taught me that communication is the most powerful tool we carry. It can be more effective than any physical intervention in the vast majority of encounters, more versatile than any technology, and more lasting in its impact than any display of authority.

In law enforcement, where use-of-force considerations receive enormous attention and where many agencies now mandate crisis intervention training, significant gaps remain between the skills police need and the training they receive.

Police academies provide substantial preparation compared to many other public-facing professions, especially compared to the security field, yet the allocation of police academy training reveals priorities. Defensive tactics, firearms, and other physical skills typically receive more extensive training time than communication and de-escalation techniques, despite the fact that communication skills are used in virtually every police encounter, while physical force is used rarely by comparison.

The good news is that many agencies are recognizing this gap. Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) programs, which provide roughly 40 hours of specialized training in mental health crisis response, have expanded to more than 2,700 communities nationwide, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).²¹ This represents real progress. But these programs typically train only a subset of officers, often a specialized team, while the majority of officers, who handle most crisis calls, receive only the basic academy preparation in crisis communication and de-escalation.

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

When professionals lack effective de-escalation skills, the consequences ripple outward, physically and financially.

The Human Cost

First and most important: people get hurt. Workers experience physical injuries, psychological trauma, and lasting fear that affects their ability to do their jobs and their quality of life outside work. Individuals in crisis, who might have been helped, may instead experience physical confrontation, arrest, injury, or, in the worst cases, death.

The difference between escalation and a de-escalated outcome often comes down to a few critical choices made in the first moments of an encounter: the words chosen, the tone used, the patience shown, the space given. When someone responds to an individual in crisis with commands and urgency rather than communication and patience, they can inadvertently transform a manageable situation into a dangerous one, considering safety first, of course. That's why *From Crisis to Calm* focuses on awareness and recognition of threats, and how (and why) to respond after things have gone wrong.

The Financial Cost

Beyond the immeasurable human cost, there's a significant financial burden. Estimates vary by methodology, data source, and whether indirect costs are included, but multiple federal and industry analyses converge on aggregate annual costs in the tens to hundreds of billions of dollars.

- Direct medical costs: emergency treatment, hospitalization, ongoing care for physical injuries, and psychological trauma
- Workers' compensation claims: medical benefits and wage replacement for injured workers
- Legal costs: defense costs for liability claims, settlements, and judgments
- Increased insurance premiums: particularly for organizations with multiple incidents
- Security enhancements: additional guards, surveillance systems, and access controls implemented after incidents
- Lost productivity: time away from work for injured employees, reduced efficiency among traumatized staff, distraction of witnesses and colleagues

But a significant cost category is often overlooked: turnover.

When employees don't feel safe, they leave. Replacing experienced professionals is expensive across every sector. Replacing teachers involves substantial costs, including recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and productivity loss during vacancy periods.²² Replacing social workers and other human services professionals likewise involves considerable expense.²³ These costs accumulate quickly, particularly in organizations experiencing chronic workplace safety challenges.

Organizations experiencing ongoing workplace violence often find themselves in a vicious cycle: incidents lead to turnover, turnover leads to understaffing, understaffing leads to longer wait times and higher stress, which leads to more incidents.

The Organizational Cost

Perhaps less quantifiable but equally important is the impact on organizational culture and effectiveness.

When employees don't feel safe, they:

- Avoid certain clients, patients, or customers who seem potentially volatile
- Become more rigid and less empathetic in their interactions, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of conflict
- Spend mental energy worrying about their safety rather than focusing on their work
- Experience increased stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue
- Become less willing to go "above and beyond" in their roles
- Warn others considering the profession about the dangers, which could affect recruitment

When organizations experience repeated workplace violence incidents without adequate response, they send a message, whether intended or not, that worker safety is not a priority. This erodes trust, damages morale, and ultimately affects the quality of service the organization can provide.

The Societal Cost

Zoom out further, and the consequences of unmanaged crisis extend well beyond individual encounters or single workplaces. There is a broader societal cost to environments where professionals routinely feel unsafe, unsupported, or unprepared to manage high-stress interactions.

The following discussion is descriptive rather than prescriptive and is intended to highlight observed patterns rather than assign blame to individual professionals or institutions.

When social workers leave child protective services because they no longer feel safe, the impact does not end with staffing shortages. Vulnerable children face delayed investigations, caseloads grow heavier for those who remain, and systems designed to protect the most at-risk begin to strain under the weight of attrition and burnout.²⁴

The same pattern appears in education. When teachers exit the profession due to safety concerns, students lose experienced educators, institutional knowledge disappears, and schools struggle to maintain

instructional quality and stability. What looks like an individual career decision quickly becomes a systemic problem with long-term consequences for learning and community trust.²⁵

In healthcare, particularly in emergency departments, the stakes are even more immediate. When healthcare workers leave because of repeated exposure to violence, threats, or emotional overload, communities lose critical care capacity. The COVID-19 pandemic made this reality impossible to ignore, revealing how fragile these systems become when skilled professionals are pushed beyond their limits.²⁶

Retail and customer-facing industries are not immune. When workers quit due to abuse, intimidation, or unchecked hostility, businesses struggle to operate, services disappear from communities, and local economic opportunity erodes. These losses ripple outward, affecting not only workers and employers, but entire neighborhoods.²⁷

Viewed collectively, this is not simply a workplace safety issue. It is a public health issue, an economic issue, and ultimately a question of what kind of society we are willing to tolerate. How we prepare professionals to manage crisis shapes not only individual outcomes, but the resilience and stability of the systems we all depend on.

Why Now? The Perfect Storm

Again, in an attempt to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and to highlight observed patterns rather than assign blame, let's look at several factors that have converged to make this moment particularly critical:

Increased Mental Health Crises

America has a mental health crisis. More individuals are experiencing emotional dysregulation, substance use challenges, housing instability, and psychological distress. Public-facing professionals across all sectors encounter individuals in crisis more frequently.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reports that in 2023, 58.7 million American adults experienced mental illness, representing 22.8 percent of the adult population.²⁸ These individuals don't only encounter mental health professionals. They interact with eligibility workers, retail staff, educators, security officers, and countless other public-facing workers who may have minimal preparation for responding effectively.

Emergency departments have reported substantial increases in visits for mental health and substance use concerns in recent years.²⁹ Many professionals in my training sessions consistently describe managing more patients in behavioral health crisis with fewer resources and less support than in previous years.

Erosion of Social Norms

Many social factors appear to have contributed to changes in behavioral norms in public spaces. The Federal Aviation Administration reported a high of 5,981 unruly passenger incidents in 2021, compared to historical averages of several hundred annually.³⁰ While this number has decreased since its 2021 peak, it remains substantially elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels.

Flight attendants, restaurant servers, retail workers, and other public-facing professionals describe hostile confrontations that feel qualitatively different from traditional customer complaints. Whether you attribute

this to pandemic stress, political division, or other social factors, the result is the same: public-facing professionals experience more frequent and more intense hostile encounters.

Reduced Institutional Buffers

Many organizations have reduced staffing, eliminated experienced middle management, and pushed more responsibility onto frontline workers, often without the training or support needed. A retail sales associate is expected to handle situations that might once have been escalated to a supervisor. An emergency room nurse manages aggressive family members with minimal backup. A teacher addresses hostile parents with limited administrative support. They deserve better preparation.

Retail workers feel this acutely. In the Teatro survey, 63 percent said staffing shortages have made it harder to keep their stores safe, and 72 percent reported experiencing incidents in the past year where staff couldn't respond to a security or safety threat because the store was understaffed, with 22 percent saying this occurs frequently. When workers were asked what would help reduce stress during staffing shortages, 46 percent wanted improved in-store communication, 43 percent wanted enhanced security measures, and 40 percent called for better technology to streamline operations. Workers aren't just dealing with difficult encounters. They're dealing with them alone.³¹

Higher Stakes

In our hyperconnected world, workplace incidents don't stay contained. A hostile encounter captured on video can go viral within hours, bringing intense public scrutiny, media attention, and potential legal and reputational consequences. Organizations can no longer treat workplace violence as an unfortunate but isolated occurrence. Every incident is potentially a public crisis.³²

Growing Recognition of the Problem

The positive aspect of all this: there's growing recognition that the status quo is unacceptable. Regulatory bodies are strengthening workplace violence prevention requirements.³³ Professional associations are calling for better training. Workers are demanding safer conditions. Labor unions are prioritizing workplace safety in contract negotiations. This moment of crisis is also an opportunity to fundamentally rethink how we prepare people for one of the most important aspects of their jobs.

The Training Gap: Why Traditional Approaches Fall Short

So, if the need is so obvious and the consequences so severe, why haven't organizations adequately addressed this gap? The answer is complex, but several factors contribute:

Misunderstanding What De-Escalation Is

Many organizations believe they're providing de-escalation training when they're actually teaching something else entirely. Common substitutes include:

Conflict resolution training: Useful for disputes between colleagues or parties who are both willing to problem-solve, but inadequate for encounters with individuals in emotional crisis who aren't capable of rational resolution in the moment.

Customer service training: Focuses on satisfaction and resolution, which can actually backfire when someone is emotionally dysregulated and doesn't want their "problem solved". Often, people want to be heard and validated.

Active shooter response: This is critical but often addresses only the most extreme end of the violence spectrum, providing no skills for the vast majority of encounters that haven't reached that level.

General communication skills: Helpful but not sufficient. Influencing a de-escalated outcome requires specific techniques for managing high-emotion encounters that differ significantly from everyday professional communication.³⁴

Inadequate Delivery Methods

Even when organizations attempt to provide de-escalation training, they often rely on methods that don't build actual skill:

Streaming or pre-recorded video modules: Convenient and inexpensive, but insufficient on their own. Watching a demonstration may introduce basic concepts, but skill development requires practice. Just as CPR competence depends on hands-on training and feedback, de-escalation skills must be actively practiced to translate into real-world performance.

Conceptual instruction without application: Training that remains primarily conceptual may improve vocabulary and awareness but does not reliably produce behavioral change. Awareness, recognition and communication skills must be developed through applied learning that connects concepts to real-world decision-making.

"Check the box" compliance training: When training becomes primarily about meeting a regulatory requirement or protecting the organization from liability, it's designed to be completed, not to be effective.³⁵

Retail workers confirm this gap in stark terms. In the Teatro survey, 40 percent of in-store workers reported receiving no training whatsoever in the past year on handling difficult situations such as theft or aggressive customers, and another 22 percent said the training they received was inadequate, a combined 62 percent who feel ill-equipped to deal with the encounters they face regularly. When asked what their stores need, 38 percent specifically requested additional training on handling difficult customer situations, and 36 percent wanted more frequent safety drills. Sixty-six percent of retail workers aren't confident that their employer has invested in the right technology for employees to request help during a safety crisis. Workers aren't asking for theory. They're asking for preparation that actually matches the situations they walk into every shift.³⁶

Lack of Ongoing Practice

Even good initial training degrades over time without reinforcement. Organizations that provide solid de-escalation training during onboarding but never revisit it are setting their employees up for failure. Crisis communication skills are perishable. They require regular practice and refreshment.

Emergency response professionals understand this principle well. Firefighters don't receive fire suppression training once during the academy and never again. They drill regularly. EMTs and paramedics maintain

certification through ongoing continuing education and skills practice. Yet many organizations treat de-escalation as a one-time training event rather than an ongoing skill development process.³⁷

One-Size-Fits-All Approaches

Generic de-escalation training that doesn't account for the specific contexts, populations, and challenges of different professions or organizations often feels irrelevant to participants.

In my experience delivering From Crisis to Calm training across multiple sectors, I've learned that while the core principles and techniques are universal, the application must be contextualized. Healthcare workers need to understand de-escalation in the context of emergency departments and patient care. Social services workers need to understand it in the context of benefits eligibility and child welfare. Educators need to understand it in the context of parent conferences and student behavior management. Training that doesn't connect to participants' actual work feels theoretical and is less likely to be applied.

Insufficient Time Allocated

Perhaps most fundamentally, organizations often don't allocate sufficient time for meaningful skill development. A one-hour overview might raise awareness, but it won't build competence. Effective de-escalation training requires time for:

- Understanding the underlying principles
- Learning specific techniques
- Practicing those techniques in realistic scenarios
- Receiving feedback and coaching
- Reflecting on the application to participants' actual work contexts

That doesn't happen in an hour. It requires sustained, focused attention.³⁸

What's Different About This Approach

This book, and the From Crisis to Calm program it's based on, represents a different approach to de-escalation training. It's shaped by established crisis negotiation principles and refined through a proprietary framework developed over years of real-world application, instruction, and evaluation across multiple professional sectors.

While this approach is informed by foundational crisis negotiation concepts originally developed within the FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit, it is not a restatement of that model, nor is it limited to it.³⁹ Traditional crisis negotiation frameworks were designed for highly specific operational contexts: infrequent, high-risk incidents managed by specialized teams operating with time, structure, and defined authority. Most professionals don't work in those conditions.

From Crisis to Calm was developed in response to that gap. It translates and expands negotiation-based principles into a broader, more flexible framework suited to everyday, high-frequency encounters and situations where emotions escalate quickly, environments are uncontrolled, and decisions must be made in real time. Over nearly 30 years of experiencing difficult encounters and more than a decade of teaching thousands of professionals across dozens of sectors, I have observed consistent patterns in how crises unfold,

how communication breaks down, and what reliably influences behavior before situations spiral into force, removal, or harm. This framework is the result of that observation, experience, and refinement.

It's Grounded in Evidence

From Crisis to Calm is grounded in evidence-based principles drawn from crisis negotiation research, neuroscience, behavioral psychology, and communication theory. These disciplines help explain how stress affects cognition, how emotions drive behavior, and how influence is established during moments of heightened arousal.⁴⁰

Rather than relying on intuition or luck, this approach focuses on mechanisms that are observable, teachable, and repeatable. The goal is not to sound persuasive, but to understand what actually works when people are overwhelmed, defensive, or emotionally flooded. It applies those principles consistently across contexts.

It's Practical and Applicable

This approach is not theoretical and is deliberately practical. Every concept, technique, and framework presented is designed for use in the types of encounters participants actually face, not idealized scenarios or rare, extreme events.

Exercises and scenarios are drawn from personal experience and recurring real-world patterns observed across law enforcement, healthcare, education, social services, security, retail, and other public-facing professions. Participants don't just learn concepts; they apply them, practice decision-making, receive feedback, and engage in guided discussion. The emphasis is on leaving with usable skills, not just abstract understanding.

It Treats De-Escalation as an Outcome, Not a "Soft Skill"

Communication is often mislabeled as a "soft skill," implying that it is secondary to technical ability or tactical response. In high-stress, public-facing roles, this assumption is not just incorrect, it is dangerous.

Communication is a primary safety mechanism. It can influence perception, behavior, and decision-making before physical intervention becomes an issue. From Crisis to Calm treats de-escalation as an outcome that's shaped by choices, behaviors, and emotional regulation, not as a personality trait or a feel-good ideal. As such, it deserves the same seriousness, structure, and ongoing practice as any other safety-critical skill.⁴¹

It Teaches a Framework, Not a Script

Effective de-escalation can't be reduced to a script or a list of magic phrases. Human encounters are too complex and too varied. Instead, From Crisis to Calm offers a framework: a way of thinking about and responding to crisis encounters that can be adapted to so many different and unique situations. Participants learn principles and practice they can apply flexibly, not rigid procedures that fall apart when reality doesn't match the script.

It Emphasizes Professional Sincerity

At the heart of this approach is a concept I call Professional Sincerity: the ethical standard of influence, credibility, and respect that allows you to communicate authentically with people in crisis without requiring

personal connection or agreement. It's the difference between manipulating someone's emotions and ethically influencing their behavior. It's the foundation that makes all the specific techniques work.

Professional Sincerity is about credibility, consistency, and respect. It enables authentic communication within clear professional boundaries, even when disagreement exists. This principle underpins the effectiveness of every technique taught in *From Crisis to Calm* and allows the framework to function across diverse roles, cultures, and power dynamics.

It Recognizes That Safety Includes Self-Care

De-escalation isn't just about managing others. It's also about managing yourself. The best communication techniques in the world won't help if you're emotionally dysregulated, exhausted from compassion fatigue, or so anxious about your own safety that you can't think clearly. *From Crisis to Calm* includes explicit attention to self-regulation, stress management, and the long-term sustainability of this work.⁴²

What's Next

We've established that the need for effective de-escalation training is urgent, the consequences of inadequate preparation are severe, and that a better approach exists. But where did that better approach come from? The techniques in this book didn't emerge from a conference room or an academic theory. They were forged in tragedy, in moments when the old way of doing things got people killed.

In the next chapter, we'll trace the history and philosophy behind modern de-escalation, from the catastrophic failures of the early 1970s that forced law enforcement to rethink everything, to the development of crisis negotiation principles that have since saved thousands of lives. Understanding where these methods came from, and why they work, provides the foundation for everything that follows in this book.

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