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Why de-escalation works

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De-escalation can take many forms, from using conversation to put yourself “on the same side” as the other guy (with mirroring or some other humanizing technique – i.e. the opposite of [Othering](#)) to [Shadow Dancing](#), to pre-emptive violence that prevents more horrific violence later. Sometimes de-escalation works, sometimes it doesn't.

No matter what de-escalation tactics you're practising, no matter if you've managed to de-escalate [some kind of conflict](#) in the past (at work, at home, outside a pub), **there's a fundamental idea that I wanted to get across today**. For some of you this will be old hat, for some it might be a new way of looking at things. It has to do with how communication fits into the paradigm of violence.

Rory Miller and Lawrence Kane have a very readable (and, need I bother saying it – a very worthwhile) book called [Scaling Force](#). In it they describe the varying levels of force, examples of each, application of each etc. They break down force (violence/the road of violence) into 6 levels: **Presence; Voice; Touch; Physical Control; Less Lethal; and Lethal force**. As you can see, communication is counted as lower down on the ladder of force.

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Ah, communication - and they say only Maths is universally understood.

Herein lies the key point for today – while it's easy to put "Communication" as a rung on the ladder of force, it's actually the other way around – **violence is a rung on the ladder of communication**. As Miller has said (in many places I suspect), ***violence is just the most emphatic way you can say "No."*** Communication isn't something that happens before violence ensues*, violence is just another way of communicating.

So reframing things, "I de-escalated things before they turned violent" becomes "I managed to successfully communicate the message using talking before I had to use force to communicate the message". This is unlikely to be the way to explain things to a cop, but if it increases your understanding of things, all the better.

Why do you care? One overwhelming reason – If you think of "talking" and "violence" as separate entities, then it can be difficult to give up on talking and switching to punching (or another level – go read Scaling Force). But if **you understand that talking and punching are merely different ways to do the same thing - communicate**, you're not giving up on communicating to the other guy, you're just using a more emphatic way of getting the message across. This way you can also stay the Good Guy in your own mind because you didn't give up on communicating and go all caveman and hit him, you were just finding the lowest level of communication that worked. So you don't have to "give up" on communicating and try something else, you're just changing the way you're communicating.

When most people say they "de-escalated" a situation, mostly they mean that they managed to use verbal communication to end the conflict. What you now understand is that a low level of communication managed to do the job. **Stabbing someone to death can also be de-escalation** –

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maybe you had to stab him to death before he finally understood the message that you were serious when you said you didn't want him to rape you. In such a case you de-escalated things before you got raped. Or maybe a broken knee-cap would de-escalate things before you have to stab him (assuming that plain old walking away didn't work).

So "de-escalation" is actually just another way of saying "successfully communicated". It's just that people love buzzwords. That way an asshole prosecutor (there are rumours that there are other types, but so far unsubstantiated) can accuse you ("ask") "Why didn't you de-escalate things". *He* means "why didn't you manage to resolve things at a lower level of force" (he still thinks communication is on a ladder of violence after all). What his question really means (taken literally) is "Why didn't you successfully communicate things". Well, actually you did, it's just that the moron didn't take the message to heart until you grabbed his nuts and tried to [pull-start a lawnmower while holding them](#). If it gets to the point that a prosecutor is involved, you're going to have to change a lot of people's understanding about violence anyway (in which case you REALLY need MacYoung's [In the Name of Self Defense](#) – really, it is **that good**)

At this point my nit-picky nature requires me to clarify that, although I used the term "ladder of violence" (because it sounded snazzier than the alternative, and more instinctively grasped by most people) it's actually a spectrum, or continuum. There are discrete, separate rungs on a ladder, where you're definitely on one rung or the other, and it's an obvious jump to get between rungs. In a spectrum there are infinite places you can stop between "official destinations". How many fractions are there between 1 and 2? Infinite. Just depends on how many zeros you're willing to bothering writing. How many options are there between say "stop" and hitting him? Human creativity and time are your main constraints.

* - Not to mention that violence happens way before the first punch is thrown. MacYoung's [In the Name of Self Defense](#) utilises the analogy of the road of violence very well. You're pretty much on it all the time, just travelling slowly (saying "Please" and "Thank you" to get what you want); but it can escalate (going faster) to manipulation; then faster still when using un-said threats about Johnson needs to finish his report or it will reflect badly on his position with the company etc. All the way to throwing punches (mid-speed) and (what most [comfortable](#) people in [comfortable](#) lives watching comfortable TV don't think about) way beyond punches (MacYoung's 2 questions to evaluating the seriousness of a situation – 1 – Is anybody dead? 2 – How many parts was the body found in?)