

De-Escalation

A GUIDE FOR ELECTION OFFICIALS

What is De-Escalation?

Common Answers

"Trying to calm someone who is losing their temper"

"Holding your anger response in check"

"Being a decent human, even when someone's anger is directed at you"

"Finding common ground"

"Offering a path other than angry disagreement"

"Refusing to escalate"

Our Definition

A set of techniques to help restore calm and prevent a situation from getting out of hand.

WHEN IS DE-ESCALATION HELPFUL?

From first amendment auditors at your front counter to squabbles about no-campaign zones at voting sites, de-escalation techniques can be applied in almost any contentious election setting.

In any interaction that starts to escalate, these techniques can help restore calm. Equally important, you can apply de-escalation principles right from the start of conversations you fear will be difficult. It's easier to maintain a calm tone than to re-establish it after an escalation.

DE-ESCALATION IS DIFFICULT

Anger is reciprocal. It may take two to argue, as the saying goes. But once someone starts arguing, it's difficult to rein in the instinct to argue back.

When anger is directed at you, or even someone on your team, the stress reaction is automatic.

Adrenaline and cortisol trigger changes in the body and the brain.

- **Physical changes:** rapid heartbeat and breathing, elevated blood pressure
- **Mental changes:** narrow focus (tunnel vision), impulsive reactions and black-and-white thinking ignoring areas of uncertainty of possible agreement

Your own reaction can lead to escalation. A critical first step in de-escalation is de-escalating your natural reaction.

How to De-Escalate

The *CLARA Framework* outlines key steps in a helpful mnemonic:

— **Calm, Listen, Affirm, Respond, Address Alternatives** —

CALM

Restoring your own composure is the very first step in de-escalation. Are there calming techniques you already use that work for you?

Slowing the rapid breathing cycle can reverse stress reactions. "Box breathing" involves breathing in for a count of four, exhaling for four, holding your breath for four, then fully exhaling. Another method might work for you, as simple as just taking a few seconds to breathe deeply.

The *5/4/3 method* is another calming technique. Briefly focus on:

Five things you see • Four that you hear • Three you can touch

This can break tunnel vision and, as with deep breathing, lessen the chemical stress reactions that lead to escalation.

Establishing a calm tone for your interaction can subdue the anger of a frustrated person.

A sharp tone of voice, speaking rapidly or giving undue emphasis to specific words can signal impatience, lack of understanding or antagonism, triggering stress reactions in the other person. Set a calmer tone:

Speak at a moderate pace, with a relaxed voice, which deeper breathing can facilitate.

A stiff jaw or posture, an unflinching gaze and gestures that encroach into personal space may suggest an intent to confront or challenge. Calm body language is as important as vocal signals in inhibiting sharp emotional reactions.

Relax your posture, stand to the side, keep your hands down but visible, and try to maintain a relaxed and neutral facial expression.

Keep a relaxed, neutral expression without wincing or frowning at things you disagree with.

Changing the setting, even moving the conversation by a few dozen feet can help. Activity itself can dissipate adrenaline. Moving to a less visible spot can block the "audience effect," where people hold positions longer in front of onlookers.

Tapping in and tapping out is the act of switching places. This can remove the primary target of the person's anger, and simply give everyone a chance to catch their breath.

A back-up also has an opportunity for assessment that the engaged staffer may not have time for. Is the complainant expressing normal frustration? Is there a misunderstanding? Or could there be a mental health or substance abuse issue.

If the situation is trending badly, a back-up staffer should be ready to call security.

Because it's hard to control the instinctive stress reaction when someone starts arguing, "tapping in" may be the most important calming technique an office can put in place.

If someone begins to argue with a colleague, consider tapping them on the shoulder and offering to step in for them. You may be able to reset the tone of the conversation. If they are the subject matter expert and need to respond, it can give them a moment to restore their own composure.



LISTEN

Allowing an angry voter or observer to speak about what concerns them, even at length, can help them focus their energy into words and away from aggression. It may help them articulate exactly why they are upset, start to understand or even resolve the issue.

Even if you think you can explain something, wait for them to finish speaking, paying careful attention. Genuinely listening can help you understand nuances and sides of the question you haven't considered.



AFFIRM

Being affirmative may be the second biggest challenge in de-escalation, after restoring your own composure.

A defensive posture is instinctive. You may believe they have heard incorrect facts or misunderstood. Try summarizing what they tell you, which will require giving some thought to their perspective.

Even if you're right about their misconceptions, affirm them by looking for points of potential agreement or empathy. If they didn't register to vote, affirm their feeling of disenfranchisement, though there may be no legal recourse. If they believe the chain of custody isn't tight, focus on your shared concern about fair elections. Work to find something you can agree with, and mention it. Nodding or smiling at points of agreement can signal you're listening in good faith.

RESPOND

Once you've calmly heard out their complaint, you will need to respond. **Provide factual information, maintaining your relaxed posture and tone of voice.** Try to answer their concerns. If you've anticipated contention around an election issue, you may have prepared answers. That can be very helpful. But it may also lead you astray by failing to acknowledge aspects of the question the visitor raises. Careful listening will help ensure that you adapt and answer questions fully and directly.

ADDRESS ALTERNATIVES

Offer additional steps the person can consider. Your response may not fully satisfy them. To avoid escalation, it's important to complete your response by offering alternatives—someone else they can appeal to or another way to resolve the issue after speaking with you.

If they feel they've reached a dead-end, their anger may mount. Giving them options allows them to keep pursuing a better answer.

De-Escalation as a Standard Operating Procedure

Effective de-escalation requires planning and preparation. You should work with staff to identify situations where disruption or frustration from voters or observers is most likely.

Discuss and establish guidelines for when staff should de-escalate, ask someone to leave or call law enforcement. Think about which staff may be best to work with difficult visitors and also who should make the decision on calling security or law enforcement back-up.

Set a schedule for practicing de-escalation and for revisiting the policy after an election cycle.

Practicing De-Escalation

Because de-escalation is a difficult skill and your instincts are working against it, you will need to practice. Think about what level of de-escalation training and practice is appropriate for front line staff, other staff and even poll workers—whoever is most likely to find themselves in contentious situations or confronted by angry voters or observers.

Role play can be helpful. Come up with a few likely scenarios—a voter with a registration issue, an observer who believes something has been done wrong, maybe a first amendment auditor. Go through scenarios more than once, giving staff the opportunity to play different roles, as the angry person, the confronted person and the back-up waiting to tap in.

Role play develops de-escalation habits, but de-escalating is more difficult in real life. It's easy to stay calm in a mock confrontation; harder when someone is yelling at you and they mean it.

Consider how to practice de-escalation in realistic situations. If you live in a community where people express skepticism about elections online, read what people have to say while taking de-escalation steps, like slowing your breathing, trying to find small points of agreement or empathy. You don't have to engage, though you can.

Practicing composure in the face of arguments that trigger stress will help enormously if those disagreements confront you in person, allowing you to respond with a calmer mind.

Above all, **practice with your staff the skill of tapping in and tapping out**—working together to present a calm face to those who challenge you and your office.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CSSE: [De-Escalation Posters](#)

U.S. Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency: [De-Escalation Guide](#)

States United: [De-Escalation Toolkit](#)

