

7 Things Cops Should Never Say to Anyone

Princeton educated, internationally known expert on “tactical communication-verbal judo, Dr. Thompson: 7 Things Cops Should Never Say to Anyone.

1. “HEY YOU! COME HERE!” Thompson describes this oft-heard command as “loose, lazy, and ineffective language.” His preferred alternative? “May I chat with you?” The point? “Polite civility can be a weapon of immense power.”

2. “CALM DOWN!” Thompson says, “This command never works, so why do we always use it? Because it flows naturally from our lips.” As with many effective de-escalation techniques, a counterintuitive approach is best. Our resident professor suggests that officers “look the person in the eye and say, gently, ‘It’s going to be all right. Talk to me. What’s the matter?’ The phrase ‘What’s the matter?’ softens the person up to talk and calm down; where ‘Calm down’ hardens the resistance.”

3. “I’M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU AGAIN!” Have we beaten this one to death? One additional point, from Thompson: “The phrase is, of course, a threat, and voicing it leaves you only one viable option—action! If you are not prepared to act, or cannot at the time, you lose credibility, and with the loss of [credibility] comes the loss of power and safety. Like the rattlesnake you have made noise, and noise can get you hurt or killed. Better to be more like the cobra and strike when least expected.” An example? “‘Sir, is there anything I could say that would get you to do A, B and C?’ I’d like to think so. If the answer is NO, we act while the subject is still talking! We do not telegraph our actions nor threaten people, but we do act when verbal persuasion fails.” (And, he might have added, when we have the authority to do so.)

4. “BE REASONABLE!” The problem with this one, according to Thompson, is that it carries the same emotional baggage as “Calm down!” It raises hackles, and defenses. Instead, he counsels, “Use the language of reassurance-‘Let me see if I understand your position...’” At which point the officer would paraphrase, in language “more professional and less emotional,” what the person has said, which “absorbs the other’s tension and makes him feel your support. Now you can help them think more logically and less destructively, without making the insulting charge implied in your statement, ‘Be more reasonable!’”

5 “BECAUSE THOSE ARE THE RULES!” (or “THAT’S THE LAW!”) If ever there was a phrase that irritates people and makes you look weak, this is it!” Thompson says. “Note, a true sign of respect is to tell people why, and telling people why generates voluntary compliance. Indeed we know that at least 70% of resistant or difficult people will do what you want them to do if you will just tell them why!”

6. “WHAT’S YOUR PROBLEM?” I love Thompson’s explanation: “This snotty, useless phrase turns the problem back on the person needing assistance. It signals this is a ‘you-versus-me’ battle rather than an ‘us’ discussion. The typical reaction is, ‘It’s not

my problem. You are the problem!” I wonder how many times, as a brash rookie, I heard that thrown back at me. Dozens, I’m sure. And, as Thompson puts it, “The problem with the word [‘problem’] is that it makes people feel deficient or even helpless.” (Had I been trying for that effect during my rookie days? Looking back, the answer is “probably.” I know I lorded it over people, baited them, hoping they’d take a swing at me so I could show them what I’d learned in defensive tactics class.) “It can even transport people back to grade school,” Thompson said, “where they felt misunderstood and underrated. . . . When asked, ‘What’s your problem?’ the other already feels a failure. So the immediate natural reaction is, I don’t have one, you do!’ . . . Substitute tactical phrases designed to soften and open someone up, like, ‘What’s the matter?’ ‘How can I help?’”

7. “WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO ABOUT IT?” Thompson calls this a “pseudo question,” one that is “always accompanied by sarcasm,” revealing the cop’s “exasperation and lack of knowledge.” It’s the kind of question “heard from untrained sales clerks and young officers tasked with figuring out how to help someone when the rules are not clear. When you say, ‘What do you want me to do about it?’ you can count on two problems: the one you started with and the one you just created by appearing to duck responsibility. ”The Thompson alternative? “Offer to help sort out the problem and work toward a solution. If it truly is not in your area of responsibility, point the subject to the right department or persons that might be able to solve the problem. If you are unable or unqualified to assist and you haven’t a clue as to how to help the person, apologize. Had the officer said to the complainant, for example, ‘I’m sorry, I really do not know what to recommend, but, I wish I did, I’d like to help you. Remember, insult strengthens resistance and shuts eyes. Civility weakens resistance and opens eyes.”