



# TACTICAL COMMUNICATION DOES NOT EQUAL WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PREVENTION

By Hugh Pelmore

When we advise clients on the implementation of sound safety policies and procedures, we usually need to assist them in clarifying what is expected from workers under certain circumstances. Workplaces are often challenged with issues like whether or not to chase and detain shoplifters, how to cut off a customer's power for payment failure, removing children from an abusive home, upholding the rules in an aquatic centre or how to issue a by-law ticket or stop work order.

## Inconsistent Messaging

Organizations struggle with regards to developing a safety policy that limits how far workers are expected to go to 'get their job done'. Infrequently do we see workplaces with logical and safety focused policies effectively in place. Workplaces tend to get lost in emotionally based arguments about whether or not we should have to put up with individuals who break rules or exhibit bad behaviours. Rather than simply asking, 'what is the safest approach in this circumstance', they focus on 'getting the job done', following through on writing that ticket, not tolerating that abusive language etc.

For many, the challenge of implementing best practices is further hindered by certain training and philosophies that have been introduced to the workplace. One example of this is Tactical Communication training. The root of the problem is not the Tactical Communication training itself but rather its promotion and application for a purpose it was not designed for. This criticism could just as well be directed at the misuse of conflict resolution, anger management, counseling, customer service excellence training or any other programs that were not designed with workplace violence prevention in mind.

## Right to Control vs Duty to Be Safe

Tactical Communication training was designed for law enforcement. Its goal is for one party (the police or 'right side') to effectively and expediently control the outcome of an interaction with another party (the 'wrong side') while ensuring they remain in a position to legally apply use of force if deemed necessary to achieve the desired outcome. The message of the training curriculum is:

You have the right to control the other party, especially when they are wrong. Of course, voluntary compliance is most desirable, but if the other party doesn't see things the same way, then you can feel comfortable in knowing you can 'defend' yourself if a physical altercation

occurs during efforts to gain compliance. The training provides the tools to support and reinforce this notion.

In other words:

If the party doesn't comply, you have the right to escalate the situation to a point where physical intervention could become part of the scenario. Ultimately, getting the job done may be viewed as more important than safety considerations. For employees that have already exhibited a history of poor communication choices and perhaps a tendency to be overly authoritative, this training may serve to support their existing and unsafe 'style' or compliance approach.

**Focus on Control vs Assessment and Prevention**

Tactical Communication training confuses or equates 'control' with 'prevention'; the reality is that in most circumstances 'control' actually means the opposite of 'prevention'. Focusing on controlling the patron can actually lead the worker away from making safe decisions, trusting their intuition and recognizing that violence prevention is ultimately the priority, not compliance. When the worker is no longer objectively assessing the situation, their actions are more likely to be governed by how they think the situation should be going rather than how it is 'actually' going. Theoretically, by controlling the interaction with the patron, one is able to control the outcome. However, when an individual does not want to be controlled, the interaction will almost certainly lead to escalation and greatly increases the risk of physical altercation.

Workplace violence prevention training should give the employees the ability to safely assess, approach and gain compliance; however, when the employee runs into a non-compliant and potentially assaultive member of the public, the employee should now be thinking about "what do I need to do to be safe," not "what can I do now to take control of this person, what is legal and when should I defend myself as this situation escalates."

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