Law enforcement officers interact with the public on a daily basis as part of their normal duties. However, few officers are trained specifically to communicate effectively, especially in the most stressful of situations. The outcome of an encounter can be altered dramatically simply by using carefully selected phrases delivered in the appropriate manner. Realizing this and drawing on his experience as both an academic and a police officer, Dr. George J. Thompson developed the technique commonly referred to as “Verbal Judo.” This method of communication uses the principles of physical judo, translated as “the gentle way,” to successfully interact with other people and obtain voluntary compliance. As in physical judo, rather than resisting one’s opponent, verbal judo teaches how to move with him and redirect his energy towards your desired outcome. The following Training Key® discusses several of Dr. Thompson’s methods and uses some examples of situations encountered in the law enforcement field.

Verbal judo employs seemingly simple approaches to defuse potentially difficult or confrontational situations. These approaches include developing mind/mouth harmony; learning how to talk to people without involving pride and ego; and assisting individuals to think the way they would normally, without the interference stemming from the stress and fear of the police encounter or traumatic situation. Too often under stress, emotions cloud judgment and result in ineffective and sometimes damaging verbal communication. Experienced law enforcement officers understand that there are typically several sides to every communication – my side, your side, how I see myself, how you see yourself, how I see you, and how you see me; but it is only the last side that truly matters. As an authority figure, an officer’s words and actions represent his department and others in uniform. Very rarely will a member of the public remember the officer they interacted with but they will attribute their experience, good or bad, to the officer’s department and all its associates. Have you ever conducted a routine traffic stop, only to be greeted by a rude and highly defensive driver the minute you walk up to the vehicle? You may simply be dealing with an individual in a bad mood, but his or her attitude may also be the product of previous ineffective communication by a law enforcement colleague.

The Basics

The basic principles of verbal judo will be briefly outlined before we discuss examples of appropriate responses to specific communications encounters. First, it is important to understand the components of communication and their comparative importance.

In any face-to-face verbal communication, the total impact of the verbal transaction can be divided as follows: content, or the message that one is trying to impart amounts to roughly 7 to 10 percent; one’s voice inflection and other characteristics of delivery is between 33 and 40 percent of the transaction; and non-verbal actions, such as body language and facial expressions make up the remaining 50 to 60 percent of the verbal interchange. Therefore, it is truly not what you say, but how you say it.

Secondly, the underlying key to successfully practicing verbal judo is an understanding and awareness of empathy. Empathy should not be confused with sympathy; instead, it can be defined as understanding or viewing a particular situation from the other individual’s point of view. In order to effectively empathize, you do not need to agree with the other individual, only be able to place yourself in his or her shoes for a moment in order to better predict his or her reactions. Communicators must also take into account their own per-
spectives when dealing with others, realizing that theirs may be vastly different from others. Each individual’s view of a situation is greatly affected by his or her knowledge, background, and experience. Making an effort to recognize another individual’s perspective can greatly assist in achieving voluntary compliance with the least amount of conflict.

By empathizing with the other person and recognizing your own personal perspective and attitude it is easier to effectively engage in translation. Essentially, translation means communicating the content of your message in the most appropriate way in a given situation in order to minimize the chance of misunderstanding. Not only will the specific words you utter need to be considered, but also how you deliver them. For example, even though the content of your message would remain the same, your posture, demeanor, attitude, and phrases used in an encounter with an elderly woman outside of a grocery store would most likely be vastly different from that used when communicating with a teenager hanging out at a local arcade.

Finally, communicators should be familiar with the three basic types of people. These include nice people, difficult people, and wimps. The first category, nice people, is comprised of individuals who will do what you ask them to do the first time. These are, for example, the drivers who immediately hand you their license and registration after they are pulled over for speeding. However, it must be remembered that these individuals also have a hard time saying no and sticking up for themselves, therefore care should be taken so their pleasant natures are not exploited. Unfortunately, nice people are fairly rare when it comes to law enforcement encounters, so their cooperation must be nurtured and appreciated.

Difficult people are the exact opposite of nice people. They will not do what you ask of them the first time, but will instead be eager to ask “Why?” or “What for?” almost as if they are looking for an argument. The key to handling these individuals is to appeal to their selfish side by explaining what decisions relating to the encounter will be the most beneficial to them. In the case of a driver pulled over for speeding who refuses to relinquish his license and registration, the officer should point out that by not cooperating, the driver is risking being taken to jail, therefore missing out on the opportunity to enjoy watching tonight’s ballgame in the comfort of his own home. Difficult people will often bombard you with questions. Instead of viewing these as reasons to get angry, view them as an opportunity to explain yourself and your actions and to gain respect. By not becoming defensive, you have taken the spark away from the difficult person and now have control over the situation.

The final category, the wimp, is perhaps the most frustrating of all. These individuals appear to be nice people, but are actually difficult people. They do not like being told what to do in any circumstance, but are not assertive enough to challenge authority. Unfortunately, it usually does not become apparent that these individuals are wimps until after the encounter, if at all. These are the individuals who seem cooperative when you approach them at a traffic stop or other situation, but then file a complaint with the department later that day. If you are able to identify a wimp, the best course of action is to tactfully expose them for what they are. If the driver of the vehicle begins mumbling under his breath, simply ask him if he could repeat the comment, as you genuinely are interested in what he has to say. Once he realizes that his cover is blown, the wimp will usually back down and begrudgingly cooperate.

**Triaging a Verbal Encounter**

Much like a doctor in an emergency room, it is important for a law enforcement officer to be able to quickly assess a situation and determine how best to proceed. In the case of verbal encounters, the triage should focus on the following aspects. First, the officer must view the situation from the perspective of the individual(s) involved. Take, for instance, a minor traffic accident involving a teenage female driver in her parents’ car. From the officer’s perspective, this is a routine situation where the concerns are, among others, ensuring that no one is injured, limiting the accident’s impact on surrounding traffic patterns, and obtaining the necessary information for the incident report. However, within the confines of verbal judo, what truly matters is the perspective of the other individuals involved, in this case, the teenage girl. From her point of view, this is a catastrophic event that will no doubt greatly affect the remainder of her teenage years in terms of her popularity, freedom, and overall happiness.

Next, the officer should identify how the other individual is different from himself or herself with respect to his or her beliefs, background, and emotional state. In the previous example, the teenage driver will most likely be highly upset and agitated during the encounter and will, therefore, appear to be uncooperative. Rather than become frustrated, the officer should tailor his or her approach in a manner that will help calm her emotions and generate a trusting relationship. This could be accomplished by simply using comforting phrases and allowing the girl some time needed to compose herself. Similarly, the officer must also recognize constraints in the situation, which can be avoided, ignored, or used to the officer’s advantage. These constraints might include such conditions as intoxication, phobias, and paranoia.

Once the triage is complete, the officer can formulate a communications plan for the situation. As previously stated, the more information that can be gathered relating to the factors that motivate the individual, the more effective the response will be. Admittedly this can be difficult in a short period of time and not all information relative to an individual’s motivation can be gleaned during relatively brief encounters. Through it all, a professional presence should be maintained, but the act of showing empathy and compassion is often enough to deflect the majority of tension and antagonism.

**The Five Basic Tools for Generating Voluntary Compliance**

Much like an officer’s duty belt, verbal judo houses its own set of tools for use during verbal encounters. The first of these is listening. While, at first glance, this appears trivial, it is actually a skill that must be developed with practice. People very rarely say what they mean, especially when under emotional distress. The key to listening is to grasp the speaker’s intended meaning after stripping away the anger, fear, and related emotions. In addition to this, once a person has had the opportunity to vent to an attentive audience, he or she is much more likely to voluntarily comply.

The second tool, empathy, has been discussed previously, but its importance cannot be overemphasized. Employed
properly, this one tool alone can often overcome the majority of difficulties met during verbal encounters.

The third tool is asking; specifically, using the five different types of questions to obtain information and build trust. Fact-finding questions are those that ask for specific data and are usually easy to answer, although they are not always well-received. General questions are usually open-ended and allow the individual to choose how he or she wants to respond. Opinion-seeking questions are typically very well-received, as they indicate to the individual that the asker is genuinely interested in what he or she has to say. These three types of questions are the most valuable during verbal encounters and should be used as much as possible. Opinion-seeking questions are especially beneficial for relieving tension and for building trust in verbal communication. Officers should avoid direct (i.e. yes/no) and leading questions if possible, as they are often seen as accusatory and antagonistic.

Paraphrasing is another useful technique for communicating with others. By repeating an abridged version of what the other person said, emotion is removed, leaving only the content, and allowing for any misunderstandings to be corrected. At this point, the other person can amend their statement so that it reflects what he or she truly meant to say. In addition to ensuring that everyone has a similar understanding, paraphrasing shows the other person that you are listening to what they have to say. This, in and of itself, can prove to be highly effective in removing negative emotions from the situation.

Once the previously discussed tools – listening, empathizing, asking, and paraphrasing – have been utilized effectively, the communication should have reached a point of closure. At this point, the final tool, summarizing, may be employed. Summarizing involves taking everything that has been said and reducing it to a clear, concise statement containing your final decision on the matter. This statement must be brief and cannot be open to discussion or argument. Your summary must be delivered with command presence that indicates you have considered the situation and reached a professional conclusion.

The Five Step Persuasion Model

Now that the basics of verbal judo have been discussed, examples of the practical uses of these tools can be presented. In any verbal encounter it is extremely important to be aware of force options that are available. For law enforcement officers, the first option is a professional presence, which includes facial expressions and body language. Since the goal is to use only that force that is reasonably necessary, it is important to maintain the appropriate presence in any given situation, despite how you may feel internally.

Following is an explanation of the verbal judo five-step model for persuading individuals to comply with your requests. The goal of this model is to ensure that all verbal possibilities have been exhausted before continuing forward along the use-of-force continuum.

• Ethical appeal. Rather than commanding someone to perform an action, phrase your request in the form of a question. Often times, this is all that is needed to generate voluntary compliance.

For example, you are called to a local restaurant to remove an intoxicated patron from the premises. As you enter, you can hear the gentleman verbally assaulting the waitresses, demanding that he has every right to remain in the establishment. While this man is clearly not following proper social etiquette, barging in and demanding that he leave the restaurant will only further provoke him. Instead, calmly ask him if he would be willing to allow you to escort him outside. If this does not work, move on to Step 2.

“Sir, can I ask you to step outside with me for a moment?”

• Reasonable appeal. In this step, the reason for the encounter is explained and the ubiquitous question “why?” is answered. This gives the officer a chance to clearly state the applicable law and how the individual is at fault of disobeying said law.

“Sir, it appears that you have been knocking back a few beers tonight and now you’re starting to feel it a little bit. These other ladies and gentlemen are trying to enjoy a meal with their friends but they can’t do that with you yelling and carrying on. How if we step outside for a minute and let these nice people finish their dinner, okay?”

• Personal appeal. This is where you begin to outline the possible scenarios for the future, depending on whether or not the individual decides to cooperate. By this point in the process, you have probably already come to the conclusion that you are dealing with a difficult person. As stated earlier, difficult people want to know what’s in it for them. Using your words, paint a detailed picture of the individual’s options – the “good” one and the “bad” one.

“Okay, sir, it appears you have two options now. The first is to step on outside with me right now and you’ll get a $100 ticket for disorderly conduct and, provided you find someone to give you a ride, will be free to leave. You can go home and continue your party there in the privacy of your own home and go to sleep in your own bed tonight. Then again, if you decide to remain inside the restaurant, I’m going to have no choice but to call in some backup, who won’t be too happy when they get here. Then we’re going to take you out to the car and drive you to the jail where you’ll stay for at least tonight. We’ll charge you with disorderly conduct AND resisting arrest, which means the fines will be way more than $100 and you might be looking at some jail time. So, really, it’s up to you.”

• Practical Appeal. The goal of this step is to unequivocally answer the question as to whether or not cooperation from the other individual is possible, by asking him or her, point-blank, exactly that. In almost all cases, the individual will indicate that he or she is not willing to appropriately respond to any of your requests. However, this step removes any doubt from the situation.

“Sir, is there anything I can say or do right now to earn your cooperation?”
anger or intimidation. The law and inform the driver of safety laws without the use of
techniques of verbal judo that will allow an officer to both enforce
due to the way in which it was communicated. To follow is a
traffic stops can also be useful by providing an opportunity to
educate the public. Too often, however, this message is lost
coming properly educated in how to conduct these stops in a
professional, yet effective manner. Beyond enforcing the law,
officers and other professionals. This
shows that individuals are much less likely to resort to
abuse if they have your name.

"My name is Officer Jones and I'm with the Orange Police Department."

3. Reason for the Stop. This is the point where you can inform the driver as to why they were stopped, as he or she is most likely about to ask about this in the near future. This information should be provided before asking for any identification.

"The reason I stopped you is because I clocked you going 55 miles per hour in a 35 mile per hour zone."

4. Justification. An effective communicator will give the driver an opportunity to explain his or her actions. Most likely, the individual will not have a valid excuse, but it is always a prudent choice to ensure that the driver is not experiencing some sort of emergency, e.g. his wife is having a baby. If no reasonable justification is available, move on to the next step.

"Sir, is there any reason you were speeding?"

5. Request documents and cooperation. By this time, you have already answered the questions “who are you?” and “why are you stopping me?” before the driver has had a chance to ask. By preempting the driver’s questions, his or her verbal assault weapons have been taken away, thereby lessening the chance of a negative encounter. In addition, you have also presented yourself as a friendly, but commanding presence to whom the driver should respond in a cooperative manner. Once again, request, rather than demand to see his or her license and registration.

“Since there do not appear to be any extenuating circumstances, may I please see your driver’s license and vehicle registration?”

6. Clarification. During this step, you should ask for any additional information you might need. For instance, if the address on the license and the registration do not match, you can determine which is correct.

"Sir, I see that there are two different addresses listed here, which one should I use as your current address?"

7. Decision. At this point, it is time to make a decision as to how to resolve the traffic stop. If a warning is issued or a ticket is written, move on to step 9. If additional action needs to be taken, continue to step 8.

8. Search and seize. This step is only necessary if the car is reported stolen, contraband is in plain sight, the driver has an outstanding warrant, or other such situations. If these do occur, follow the proper departmental procedure.

9. Close. As mentioned previously, it is very important that individuals walk away from an encounter with a law enforcement officer with a positive opinion of that officer, his department, and the profession as a whole. For this reason, the closing statements of a traffic stop carry significant weight. The goal is to leave the driver feeling better about the situation than he or she did initially.

If a ticket was written, “Sir, I thank you for your cooperation,” if only a warning was issued, “have a nice day” can be added without the risk of sounding sarcastic.

Summary
Research has demonstrated what has been known in policing for decades; officers who are the best communicators are also generally the most effective law enforcement officers. They are also generally those among the force with the least number of use of force incidents and citizen complaints. Verbal judo is one means of honing the communication skills of officers and other professionals. This Training Key® is meant only as an introduction to the topic. True command of the techniques and strategies noted herein require hands on training and practice.
Endnotes


Acknowledgment

Information for this Training Key® was obtained from “Verbal Judo - The Gentle Art of Persuasion” authored by George J. Thompson, Ph.D. and Jerry B. Jenkins. For more information regarding verbal judo techniques and training, visit the Verbal Judo Institute at www.verbaljudo.com or contact the Institute by telephone at 315-253-0007.
questions

The following questions are based on material in this Training Key®. Select the one best answer for each question.

1. When confronted with a verbal encounter, an officer should do all of the following, except
   (a) View the situation from the perspective of the individual(s) involved.
   (b) Immediately command the individual(s) to calm down.
   (c) Identify how the individual is different from himself/herself in terms of religious beliefs, cultural customs, etc.
   (d) Show empathy towards the individual(s).

2. In the five-step persuasion model, the personal appeal is designed to
   (a) Answer the individual’s question of “why” the police encounter is taking place.
   (b) Unequivocally determine whether or not the individual is willing to cooperate.
   (c) Highlight the individual’s options based on how he or she reacts.
   (d) Beg with the individual to please cooperate.

3. The goal of verbal judo in the law enforcement setting is to
   (a) Leave an individual with a positive impression of the officer involved, his or her department, and police in general.
   (b) Ensure effective communication by reducing the amount of emotion and confrontation involved in a verbal encounter.
   (c) Generate voluntary compliance.
   (d) All of the above.

answers

1. (b) While an officer should have a professional, authoritative presence, he or she should attempt to avoid commands and demands. In addition, directing someone to “calm down” usually only results in the individual becoming more upset.
2. (c) The goal of the personal appeal is to highlight the options that will be most beneficial to the individual. When confronted with positive and negative outcomes, the individual will most likely voluntarily choose the positive, which should also coincide with the officer’s desired outcome.
3. (d) Overall, verbal judo teaches how to listen and speak more effectively.

have you read … ?

Training Key® #440, “Police Communication in Traffic Stops,” International Association of Chiefs of Police, Alexandria, VA.
This document provides more information to officers on communicating effectively while conducting traffic stops.