

Taming the Dragon

Managing Verbal and Physical
Aggression



Participant Guide

West Virginia Department of Transportation

Taming the Dragon: Managing Verbal and Physical Aggression



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Course Overview

The scope of aggression at work ripples out like a pebble on a lake, from seemingly insignificant instances of verbal aggression to shockingly violent physical incidents. In order to prevent aggression and violence before it gets started, we have to learn how to recognize and identify potentially aggressive employees, how to prevent them from acting out on their anger and learn the basics of de-escalation of aggressive behaviors.

Too often we see aggressive situations that could have been prevented by intervention before the conflict occurred. Additionally, it's important to be able to recognize how our own aggressive behavior can escalate as a natural response to others' aggression.

Agenda

- Introduction: Video
 - What is Anger?
 - Different types of Aggression
 - Three Phases of Aggression
 - Un-Magnificent Seven
 - Prevention of Aggression
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The Harassment Case

Situation One

You are Raymond Morris a Crew Supervisor at the Division of Highways. Raymond is a new hire. Every morning, Raymond would notice Jane and Patricia congregating outside the back of the building whistling and smiling at him. Raymond (*being a nice guy*) would just smile and wave as he went on with his daily duties. One morning, Jane decided to ask Raymond out on a date. Raymond agreed to the date that same evening.

Apparently, the date did not go as well as she expected. The next morning, Jane decided to start nasty rumors about Raymond. Jane persisted in spreading rumors to anyone at work who would listen. That afternoon, word got back to Raymond and he became very upset. Raymond approached Jane and calmly talked to her about her behavior and how it was affecting him.

1. Did Raymond make any mistakes? If so, what were they?

2. Did Jane make any mistakes? If so, what were they?

Verbal Aggressiveness Scale

This survey is concerned with how we try to get people to comply with our wishes. Indicate how often each statement is true for you personally when you try to influence other persons. Use the following scale:

1 – almost never true

2 – rarely true

- _____ 1. I am extremely careful to avoid attacking individual's intelligence when I attack their ideas.
- _____ 2. When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften the stubbornness.
- _____ 3. I try very hard to avoid having other people feel bad about themselves when I try to influence them.
- _____ 4. When people refuse to do a task I know is important, without good reason, I tell them they are unreasonable.
- _____ 5. When others do things I regard as stupid, I try to be extremely gentle with them.
- _____ 6. If individuals I am trying to influence really deserve it, I attack their character.
- _____ 7. When people behave in ways that are in very poor taste, I insult them in order to shock them into proper behavior.
- _____ 8. I try to make people feel good about them even when their ideas are stupid.
- _____ 9. When people simply will not budge on a matter of importance I lose my temper and say rather strong things to them.
- _____ 10. When people criticize my shortcomings, I take it in good humor and do not try to get back at them.
- _____ 11. When individuals insult me, I get a lot of pleasure out of really telling them off.
- _____ 12. When I dislike individuals greatly, I try not to show it in what I say or how I say it.
- _____ 13. I like poking fun at people who do things which are very stupid in order to stimulate their intelligence.
- _____ 14. When I attack a person's ideas, I try not to damage their self-concepts.
- _____ 15. When I try to influence people, I make a great effort not to offend them.
- _____ 16. When people do things which are mean or cruel, I attack their character in order to help correct their behavior.
- _____ 17. I refuse to participate in arguments when they involve personal attacks.
- _____ 18. When nothing seems to work in trying to influence others, I yell and scream in order to get some movement from them.

- _____ 19. **When I am not able to refute others' positions, I try to make them feel defensive in order to weaken their positions.**
- _____ 20. **When an argument shifts to personal attacks, I try very hard to change the subject.**

VERBAL AGGRESSIVENESS SCORING

1. Add your scores on items: 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 19
2. Add your scores on items: 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 20
3. Subtract the sum obtained in step two (2) from 60
4. To compute your verbal aggressiveness score, add the total obtained in step 1 to the result obtained in step 3

INTERPRETATION:

59 - 100 = High in Verbal Aggressiveness

39 - 58 = Moderate in Verbal Aggressiveness

*From: Infante, D.A., & Wigley, C.J., (1986). Verbal aggressiveness: An interpersonal model and measure. *Communication Monographs*, 53, 61-69.

Primal Aggression

Primal Aggression is the body's instinctive response to the mind's input, natural and physiological reaction (both chemical & neural) the body takes to preserve and protect itself (adrenaline).

- Fight or flight when threatened
- Driven by adrenaline
- Indicative of loss of control and eventual attacks

The Crisis Phase and loss of verbal control follow intimidation and threats. These are signs of the Crisis Phase in its beginning stages and as it escalates. The aggressor loses verbal control. Verbalization first becomes disjointed, and then stops, followed by three stages

1. Loss of verbal control
2. Loss of physical control
3. Violence

Behaviors in these stages in order of general occurrence are:

- Direct prolonged eye contact
- Conscious thought further diminished
- Increased sweat production keeps muscles cool – preparing for battle
- Moves in and out of your personal space
- Kicks the ground
- Verbalization becomes disjointed, then stops
- Purses lips
- Bares teeth
- Growls

Bared teeth and growling are the signs of “animalistic behavior.” These are signs of loss of verbal control.

There is continued aggression in the Crisis Phase as he nears violence:

- Head back – he continues to detach himself by moving his head back and away from his victim
- Distorted facial coloring –now his face looks pasty white due to vasoconstriction
- Lips pursed
- Breathing changes from shallow/fast to fast/deep
- Palms clench instinctively looking for weapons – if he has a weapon, he may have it cupped in his hand; if not, he may grasp for items nearby
- Bulging veins
- Shoulders shift – from squared to the victim to a 45 degree angle (blading) – defensive. Some may square off or turn equilateral
- Target glancing – his eyes begin moving around looking for vulnerable areas on the victim – watch where his eyes go and prepare to protect yourself there.
- Stance – he makes the final disconnect by turning away from the victim, then springs into action

Knowing these non-verbal cues offer you the ability to remove yourself as a target. Once you have removed yourself, get assistance and then you must document the incident. Can you document in a way that will justify your actions as a professional? Will it enable you to come through the incident professionally unscathed? You must be able to describe for the court, judge, your bosses, etc. the behavior, body language, and communication of the aggressor in a clear, clinical way. This would convince whomever you need to that you acted in a professional way.

Five Universal Approaches

- **Separate** – get him away from the crowd. You must first separate the aggressor from the crowd or the perceived source of concern or stress. This could mean removing the aggressor OR the crowd. You want the aggressor's undivided attention – anything less will diminish your ability to persuade him from aggression. Once removed, it will be easier to focus the aggressor on the issue at hand. Removing the crowd will also eliminate the concerns of the aggressor's humiliation in front of others or the crowd fueling the aggressor. If possible, you should have a place set aside to take him that's distraction- and interruption-free. This doesn't mean you should be alone with him – or isolated. You should determine whether you should have an advocate to assist and witness.
- **Compliment** – start with a constructive statement, not a punitive one. Use this technique to redirect his focus away from his aggression. Positive results start with a positive beginning. You are attempting to create a positive environment to calm the individual and change focus away from the negative situation. Ex.: “The proposal you worked on last week really helped us solve that construction problem” or “You have great talent, great skills.” Be specific.
- **Lay out before him the documented issues** – Documentation from previous encounters provides valuable, neutral and reflective information. Keep records current and review them periodically. Neutral and reflective documentation provides the opportunity for the aggressor to realize that his behavior isn't in his best interests. Although this part of the process can be communicated verbally, it's extremely difficult to submit this documented behavior to the aggressor in a neutral way. If you demonstrate a judgmental attitude, it could inhibit the process. It's recommended that you present the documentation in a written format. These documents help you make your case to the potential aggressor. In the event of litigation, records could prove invaluable. Provide direct quotes, if possible.
- **Convince** – explain that his present behavior isn't in his best interests.
- **Team productivity** – explain how you will help him to become more productive. Ask him to come up with solutions to the situation and encourage him to take an active part in resolving the issue. The template phrase is: “Joe, how can we work together as a team to become more effective?” This 5th element is essential because it ties everything else together. It shows that you care and respect him enough to help him work through this process – resulting in better productivity for all involved.

You will operate by anticipating the end result of most situations – you should already have contemplated what he's likely to do and should attempt to guide him toward a more desirable solution. By having him perceive that the solution was his idea provides an opportunity for ownership by the aggressor. He'll more likely follow through with the solution. “You know, Joe, participating in this constructive solution will clearly be in your best interests, as well as your being seen as a fair-minded guy.”

Tactics for Aggression Management

Consider these tactics carefully and by each situation.

1. Invoking Spite

People are often motivated to act out spite. They resent being thought of as inferior. Tactical statements that invoke spite:

“These may be a little pricey for you, but we have some less expensive items over here.”

“You may not understand what I’m about to tell you” or “You don’t understand.”

2. Reduced Concession

We tend to concede to a smaller demand, if we just turned down a larger one.

“If you aren’t able to help me on this larger issue, certainly you can help me on this smaller one.”

3. Credibility – Liking

3 kinds of lies – lies, huge lies, statistics

We tend to like products, services, or suggestions that are endorsed by people we like or respect, whether they are really credible or not.

Most of us tend to agree to proposals, products, services or suggestions that will be perceived as acceptable by the majority of others or the community.

4. Limited Offer – Scarcity

When we perceive that something we want is limited in quantity or time, we believe the value is greater than if it’s in abundance.

The harder it is to acquire, the greater it’s value in attainment

No urgency (time), no scarcity = no desire

Make it rare and hard to find/get = increases its value

“You’ve worked hard to gain this important position (years of tenure, etc.) – you may never get this opportunity again, so why risk losing it?”

5. Reciprocity

When someone gives us something of perceived value, we feel we should give something back – often something of greater value. We often dislike “owing” others.

Beware of free offers – they usually have a trick or hidden obligation

“I really don’t have time for you today, but I’m going to make an exception because I believe your issue is important” What do you want in return- his cooperation. If he doesn’t cooperate, you can say “Well, I’ve made the time for you, won’t you please cooperate or try to work this out?”

6. Creating Expectation

Our expectations of ourselves and others play a powerful role in how we digest information and how we perform.

When someone we believe in and respect asks us to perform a task or act in a certain way, we tend to fulfill his expectation – whether positive or negative.

“Stick with me. I’ll make you both winners.”

“I know I can count on you. I know you can do it.”

7. Contrast/Comparison

When 2 items are relatively different from each other, we see them as more different if we place them in close proximity – either in time or space. If we want to show stark contrast, show or share them together. Bring them up together. “You can enjoy watching your daughter grow up every day, or you can face the possibility of years in jail away from her. It’s your choice.”

If you want to decrease the differences, show them apart. Show one today, the other a week from today. “I haven’t mentioned it before, but I think you prefer being a free man with no criminal record and being able to watch you daughter grow up every day. I know I would.”

8. Projected Thinking

We perceive what we’re conditioned to perceive. We see and hear what we expect to see & hear, even if it differs from our actual perception. We project our views on reality so that reality becomes/changes to what we project. “It’s perfectly clear. This ballot is valid because the voter didn’t punch a hole through the indicated area in accordance with clearly visible instructions.”

9. Continuity

We tend to react in a way that’s consistent with what we believe/perceive as truth and is a continuation of our current perspective. If we begin our persuasion from what the aggressor perceives as truth, he will more readily accept and respond to your persuasion.

Identify what the aggressor’s predispositions are and build your persuasion from them. If he illustrates a pattern of behavior, it’s assumed he’ll continue that behavior. Predictability gives us a sense of control and comfort - we expect and desire it. Behavior that has no continuity or purpose keeps us off balance and causes increased anxiety. “You remember when I helped Jack work through a similar issue. I can do the same for you if you’ll let me.”

10. Acceptance by Association

We tend to agree with others we respect and listen to people like. We tend to accept opinion and ideas endorsed by others we trust and admire. “You don’t have to take my word. Ask your friends at work – those you trust – how I’ve always supported them, just like I want to help you now.”

11. Infectious Emotions – emotions are infectious – fear, anger, calm, panic

12. Reducing Isolation

We are social creatures by nature and crave contact with others. In moments of danger and uncertainty, we need to resist the desire to isolate ourselves and seek out friends to come to our aid. Isolationism can become a prison. If you see someone beginning to isolate himself, encourage him to rely on his network of friends.

13. Fears

By focusing on things that cause anguish and anxiety we give them power. We must be aware of those things that cause us anxiety but must focus on things that produce solutions. Bank tellers are told not to focus on the gun, because that puts the weapon in charge. When we dwell on a petty problem, we give it credibility and existence. We are motivated toward pleasure and away from pain, and are more motivated by fear of pain than by the desire to seek pleasure.

14. Friends

It’s important to be perceived as a friend if you’re to be successful in persuasion. When we like someone, we want to do what they ask.

15. Expanding on Perspective

When someone says in writing or verbally that he's taking a position on a subject or issue, he will tend to strongly defend that belief regardless of its accuracy even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. You may find it easier to convince an aggressor that he's not an aggressor than it is to convince him to act aggressively.

16. Peer Conformity

We tend to agree to ideas or proposals we perceive as acceptable to the majority of others in our peer group. "I'm sure you're proud that your work team has a record of zero claims over the last 5 years. Everyone's working so hard to continue this excellent record."

17. Power

People can exercise power over others to the degree that those exercising power are perceived as having greater authority, strength, or expertise.

18. Words with Power

Use the aggressor's name – preferably 1st name

"Please" & "Thank you"

"Don't" - we don't always make a picture in our minds of the word – because it's not a noun. What's stated as a negative may be heard in the brain as a positive.

"Don't feel as though you have to buy something today."

"Don't decide now. You can do it later if you're uncomfortable. (may be heard as decide now).

"Might" and "Maybe" help persuade others more gently.

"You might want to consider another solution."

19. Because

Offering a reason is often a persuasive tool. We need to hear a reason for requests – we respond more favorably. "I need to go to the front of the line because...." It's not always important what the "because" is.

20. Being Credible

Credibility is in the eye of the receiver. 1st rule of credibility is never tell the other guy more than he can believe. Be precise. The more objective you appear, the more credibility you gain.

21. Sharing Secrets

We love secrets. When we share them, we gain a great deal of trust from listeners.

"I shouldn't be telling you this, but...."

"Most people don't know this, but..."

22. Assumption of the Obvious

When we give people credit for knowing something they really know nothing about, they will usually say nothing and allow us to believe they're smarter or more aware than they really are. Your assumption usually flatters them.

"You probably already know that."

"I don't have to tell you that."

23. Framing

People don't like to be told what to do. We like to think each great idea is ours, and when we have some great revelation or insight, we think it's entirely our own.

"I could tell you that you're making a mistake, but I won't. You want to figure it out for yourself."

24. Perception as Truth

How do we come to accept something as truth? It's what each of us perceives it to be. Start with the aggressor's truth and move him to your truth. One way he knows you're telling truth is that you believe the same thing he does - or come to the same conclusion. If you agree with him you're also right and are speaking truth. Any negative statement you make about yourself is instantly accepted as truth, whereas a positive statement by you about yourself may be perceived dubiously. Get him to either say or think "Yes....yes...yes..." So remember what we have in common – dislike of ridicule and embarrassment.

- "It really upsets me when someone embarrasses me in front of my friends, too."
- "Sometimes we move too fast to stop and say thanks, don't you think?"
- "It's not like it used to be. So much has changed, wouldn't you agree?"

HAZARD IDENTIFICATION AND RISK ASSESSMENT

NOTE: This is an example only and may not address all the hazards for these work activities at a specific site.

Task and Location	Hazards	People Affected	How Often	Comments	Level of Risk
Flagger during road construction activities	Irritated driver who is angry because he's late for a meeting				
Salt truck driver during a "state of emergency storm"	Citizen who has been stuck in his/her home for a week with no electricity because the road wasn't cleared.				
Bridge inspector supervisor	Inspecting a bridge with a subordinate who became extremely angry earlier over comments on performance eval.				
HR Personnel	Employee blames HR because he found out his wife's hospitalization was not covered because the surgery was not pre-approved.				
Construction crew working night shift.	Drunk driver returning home from bar.				
Right of Way employee attending meeting with citizen.	Citizen very upset that the fence that (s)he has had up for 32 years is now considered state property.				

Taming the Dragon

Objective:

By the time this session is over, you should be able to: identify and measure aggression, offer effective skills to engage and prevent aggression against you or those you work with, recognize and identify potentially aggressive employees, identify methods to prevent potentially aggressive employees from acting out on their anger, identify basic methods for de-escalating aggressive behavior, recognize how your individual aggressive behaviors can escalate as a response to others' aggression, and identify ways to monitor your individual aggressive reactions.

Glossary:

Aggression	Is behavior, or a disposition, that is forceful, hostile or attacking - It may occur either in retaliation or without provocation. Aggression is an intention to cause harm or an act intended to increase relative social dominance.
Assertive	a form of behavior characterized by a confident declaration or affirmation of a statement without need of proof; this affirms the person's rights or point of view without either aggressively threatening the rights of another or submissively permitting another to ignore or deny one's rights or point of view.
Trigger Phase	The experience of stress and anxiety by an individual which happens almost daily.
Escalation Phase	When stress goes beyond the individual's ability to endure and the level of verbal aggression increases.
Crisis Phase	In this phase you lose verbal control, judgment, and physical control which may result in an act of violence.

Main Points:

- Workplace Aggression has a high cost- decreased production, decreased employee satisfaction and morale, increased absenteeism, loss of valued employees
- Causes of Aggression- anxiety, stress, fear, harassment, threat, Intimidation
- Three steps to Aggression- Trigger Phase, Escalation Phase and Crisis Phase
- There are seven types of personalities: Sherman Tank, Sniper, Exploder, Complainer, Negativist, Clam, and Bulldozer. The five ways to deal with these types of personalities are Separate them from a crowd, Compliment them with something positive, Document everything, Convince them that the behavior is not in his own best interest, and everything ties together and we are more productive as a team.

References:

- *Before Conflict: Preventing Aggressive Behavior* by John D. Byrnes, Scarecrow Press, 2002 Publisher, October 2010
- *Center for Aggression Management*, by Dr. John D Byrnes. www.AggressionManagement.com
- From: Infante, D.A., & Wigley, C.J., (1986). Verbal aggressiveness: An interpersonal model and measure. *Communication Monographs*, 53, 61-69.