Module: Preventing and Defusing Anger and Hostility
By Lisa Schirch and Dave Dyck; Eastern Mennonite University, Conflict Transformation Program, 1200 Park Rd., Harrisonburg, VA 22802; 540/432-4497; fax: 540/432-4449; e-mail: schirchl@emu.edu and dyckd@asian.emu.edu

Goal
To learn how to prevent, defuse and de-escalate security incidents which involve dealing with angry, hostile people.

Objectives
- To understand how respectful behaviors reduce vulnerability
- To explore how principles which work to redirect and de-escalate aggression
- To learn specific behavioral approaches and communication skills which de-escalate anger and hostility through nonverbal, listening, and speaking skills
Key Learning Points

- Anger and aggression are often the product of frustration and a feeling of powerlessness.

- Respect is a key principle in de-escalating and defusing anger and aggression. The ability to communicate skillfully and appropriately so as to foster acceptance has a great impact on security.

- Cooperation is a key principle in all efforts to defuse anger unless cooperating causes harm to you or others. Efforts to resist physically or verbally are often counterproductive, putting the aggressor(s) in an even more defensive position. Use both nonverbal and verbal postures that reflect your calm and confident ability to respond and interact with the aggressor.

- Listening is an important skill in defusing anger. While it may seem easy, skillful listening is quite difficult. Close attention to non-verbal cues for listening, along with the skills of paraphrasing and questioning are important means of defusing anger.

- Learn to redirect and reframe anger and positional arguments into a discussion that involves an analysis of the real interests involved.
Definition of Terms

**frame**: refers to the perspective from which one is looking at a given situation.

**paraphrase**: refers to restating what has just been said using different words

**positional arguments**: refers to arguments which insist on one specific solution to a problem

**empower**: to give someone power, or a feeling of control over their environment
The Importance of Respect as a Principle for Security

NGO personnel may find themselves in situations where they need to attempt to defuse aggressive, angry people. For example, if you are driving across an international border in late afternoon or evening, you may have to deal with drunken, angry border patrols in some regions.

Demonstrating respect for others is a primary means for de-escalating hostility and aggression. When faced with anger and the threat of violence, it is of course difficult to respond with respect. When a person shows initial signs of hostility or begins to respond angrily to an incident, the following general principles which stem from the “acceptance”, or relationship-focused dimension of the overall security paradigm are important to remember:

- Recognize that the aggressor is often feeling threatened, anxious and fearful, and will respond even more aggressively if s/he feels more threatened.

- Focus on communicating respect with appropriate listening skills and non-aggressive, non-challenging body language. The ability to show concern for the specific, personal needs of others while maintaining a non-anxious demeanor in the midst of an angry interpersonal encounter, may defuse the situation.

- More specifically, being a good listener of others, in interpersonal exchanges, is a far more powerful tool than speaking when trying to defuse hostility. (The components of good listening are detailed later in this module.)

- Cooperate with an armed aggressor’s commands, unless they are completely unacceptable. Unless the commands given would result in harm to yourself or another member of your team, a general attitude which communicates a desire to cooperate in solving the problem is almost always the most appropriate response.

- Attempt to establish some type of significance with the aggressor’s humanity and personal dignity. When confronted with an unacceptable demand, an appeal to the aggressor's humanity has proven effective.

- Remain calm yourself; reduce physiological stress through some form of relaxation; talk calmly to yourself using strategies that you have practiced and found effective in the past. Holding an open and relaxed body posture communicates respect and attention to the aggressor.

- To whatever extent you are able, show an interest in resolving the issue or meeting the other’s needs and concerns:
  - emphasize willingness to be cooperative and address the issue(s) being raised
  - acknowledge the importance of whatever concern they are expressing

- Help the other person maintain their dignity
  - reassure him/her that their concerns are legitimate
  - offer the option to pursue the issue/problem later if possible
  - refrain from openly judging his/her behavior.

- Individual NGO personnel who have strong skills in understanding power dynamics and who recognize and use their own power in ways that are assertive but do not threaten others are more able to defuse aggressive behavior by giving recognition and respect, in a variety of ways, to these aggressive persons. (See Image, Acceptance, and Reciprocity by Koenraad Van Brabant and Power, Image, and Security by Schirch and Dyck for more information on this topic).

Factors That Escalate Hostility and Aggression

- Insecurity: We all experience insecurity whenever we are fearful or feel a loss of control and predictability in our lives. When this basic degree of order and safety are threatened, people become increasingly volatile and unpredictable.

- Lack of choices. In general, humans respond with hostility and aggression when they perceive that their choices
are limited. The sense of powerlessness that comes with feeling that one has little or no options often produces violent or hostile responses. Feeling powerful (that is, able to significantly influence situations affecting one’s group or person), is a prerequisite to dealing positively with other people. Just as a cornered rat fights the dirtiest, so too do humans. When there is dirty fighting, someone is usually feeling powerless. This is hard to remember. Cornered people are often intimidating and can inflict serious injury. Worse, they mask their powerlessness - from themselves as well as others. *Nothing suppresses a whimper better than a snarl!* This hostility is most likely to be directed at you if people feel that either you are responsible, directly or indirectly, for their predicament or that you have options that they do not.

- **Asymmetrical power:** When one person or group has or is perceived to have more power than another, the less powerful person may feel threatened.

- **Ostentatious use of symbols of power:** The tangible, concrete things that are associated with having a high degree of influence. e.g. hi-tech equipment, expensive vehicles, contextually extravagant lifestyles, uniforms, guns, association with Western culture and education, money, understanding of the local language, etc., may be seen as threatening to people without such resources. (See Module on Image, Acceptance and Reciprocity)

- **Disrespectful behavior:** Any actions which are considered inappropriate in terms of a lack of deference to local customs, leadership, and ethical/moral norms. This behavior is often engaged in by those who lack a knowledge of their context and/or themselves and the way they are generally perceived by others.

- **Inconsistent Team Behavior:** The lack of a systematic, consistent philosophy and approach to issues within the community on behalf of personnel associated with the same, and sometimes even different, NGOs. In other words, when there is a lack of sufficient communication within and between NGOs.

- **High Levels of Intra-Team Discord and Conflict:** The presence of highly conflicted relationships within the team can provoke animosity within the community towards certain individuals on the team.

- **Aggressive or Passive Responses:** Aggressive or passive responses on behalf of NGO personnel to concerns within the community or to the hostility can easily escalate that hostility to deadlier levels.

**The Aikido Principle for Defusing Anger**

Aikido is a martial art which moves to dissipate the power of the attack by leading the attacker in a new direction so that the attack is neutralized. Rather than resisting or fighting against an opponent, aikido realigns the attacked with the direction of the opponent's attack.

While extensive physical training is needed in order to use Aikido moves to defuse a physical attack, the principle is appropriate for understanding how to defuse verbal anger and aggression. Rather than opposing your opponents anger and/or needs in a security context, it may be helpful to re-direct their verbal aggression into a non-threatening form of discussion that can bring a cooperative, problem-solving approach. The following communication skills outline how to defuse anger with nonverbal, listening and speaking skills based on the principle of redirecting the energy of the attack.

**The Importance of Communication in Preventing and Responding to Hostility**

NGO personnel use communication skills in every aspect of their work. Within their organization, NGO personnel need good communication to make sound decisions and build good working relationships with one another. With the local population, communication skills are helpful to get through government bureaucracy, to travel through check points, or to manage one’s own perspectives and emotions.
When dealing with situations that involve the potential for violence, it is imperative that we think critically and carefully about the way that we communicate about our interests, needs, emotions, limitations, and purposes to others. Being able to communicate one’s perspective is vital to effective negotiation and crisis management, and communication skills are of utmost importance when facing hostile or threatening people.

We often think we have two choices when threatened in a conflict: fight or flee from the situation. These responses may seem instinctual, but there is another option. Appealing to the other, gathering information without antagonizing, drawing out underlying needs, concerns and fears, and learning to make requests and communicate one’s own limitations or needs without antagonizing can be very helpful in communicating with others in an insecure environment. Improving our ability to communicate and negotiate effectively results in better personal and group outcomes. These outcomes are not only related to the immediate task, they also contribute to overall improved relationships and a higher degree of acceptance of the NGO within the community in which it is active. The ability to communicate skillfully and appropriately so as to foster acceptance may have a greater impact on security than any other single factor. In addition, interpersonal skills are considered by some analysts to be the most neglected area of security training today.

Encoding and Decoding

Communicating involves verbal, non-verbal and listening skills. Communication theorists talk about speaking as “encoding” and listening as “decoding.” We all speak and listen, encode and decode, through a filter of our own experiences and beliefs. The encoding-decoding process can cause miscommunication - i.e. the message one person encodes in their speech is decoded with a different meaning by the person listening - even in the most stable and trusting environments. When working in a cultural and linguistic context different from your own, where tension and mistrust may already be fairly high, the encoding-decoding process can become extremely difficult and the chances of an angry, explosive reaction greatly enhanced.

A factor that often contributes to the breakdown of communication and leads to conflict and even crisis is the assumptions we all make. In our daily interactions we often misinterpret the behavior of others during the decoding process of communication. When people are under the stress associated with conflict or insecurity, the tendency to misinterpret each other is greatly increased. When the above mixture of ingredients is combined with cross-cultural dynamics, a particularly ripe setting for miscommunication and assumptions is created. These assumptions can have deadly consequences in settings of vulnerability.

We have a tendency to assume the other’s intention from the effect their action has on us. For example:

If I am offended, angered, or feel threatened by the actions of another person I will tend to assume s/he intended me to feel this way.

In the same way, the actor or sender of the message assumes that the other individual receiving it will correctly interpret the intent of the message or action. Do not let statements like “I thought that...” go unchecked. Such phrases may be indicators of assumptions that need to be clarified.

Similarly, if you are disturbed by the behavior of another person or group, do not simply make assumptions about the intent underlying the action. Instead, take responsibility for both inquiring about their intent and informing them of the effect on you. To communicate effectively and reduce our vulnerability, we must make our intentions clear and check out our assumptions. By themselves, actions, tone and words can all mislead.
Non-verbal Communication: Defusing Hostility Through Body Language

Communication research shows that at least 80% of communication is non-verbal (tone and visual). Of this total, most is communicated through the body. Human beings exchange meaning through eye movements, facial expressions, body posture, gestures, and proximity. Just as with verbal communication, there are many languages of nonverbal communication that vary greatly with culture.

Often NGO personnel work in countries where the local language is not their first language. If NGO personnel do have knowledge of the local languages, it is usually fairly limited. In these situations, to a great extent, local people rely on understanding the goals of NGOs and their expatriate workers largely by what they communicate non-verbally.

Because so much of our understanding of a situation and our ability to communicate in that context is dependent on nonverbal communication, it is particularly important to observe and learn from local people in the cultural context where your NGO is located. It is usually extremely helpful to have a local person train new expatriate staff in cultural nonverbal communication. How NGO personnel behave, in terms of body language, in response to aggression can dramatically affect their ongoing relationship with the local population and can greatly heighten or downgrade the risk in a particular incident. The following list highlights several areas which should be given particular consideration.

We increase our nonverbal communication skills by:

- Trying to pay extra attention to the nonverbal signals your body is giving when dealing with anger. Are you frowning or shaking your head while they talk? Are you receptive to the information being shared? Make sure your body posture is open rather than closed, inviting information rather than shutting yourself off from the speaker
- Being conscious of our facial expressions and our body posture in terms of the local, culturally appropriate customs;
- Learning what kind of eye contact (from direct to indirect) is appropriate in various settings;
- Paying particular attention to the physical distance between you and the person speaking. This varies widely according to culture;
- Being very sensitive about the kind of gestures you are using. A gesture which communicates warmth and acceptance in one culture may mean something highly offensive or communicate intense animosity in another;
- Being aware of standing eye to eye with a person. Communication specialists stress that standing at an angle (sideways) rather than directly across from someone can help keep a situation calm and non-adversarial;
- Heightening our awareness of all of the above whenever we are dealing with a hostile or potentially hostile person.

Think about the following use of nonverbal defusing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Security handbooks advise keeping one's hands on the steering wheel and in plain sight when approaching border checkpoints. Why is this important? What does this communicate and how does it contribute to defusing a potentially dangerous situation? Would one attempt to communicate this message verbally? Why or why not?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(For more on checkpoints, see the module on Vehicles and Movement)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listening: The Key Defusing Strategy

Listening skills are crucial to security. The ability to listen well will assist NGO personnel in gathering information about their context, particularly in relationship to assessing threats and analyzing the context as a whole. While many
people believe it is more important to speak well than to listen well, listening is a powerful and transformative tool in crisis situations. Everyone wants to be listened to and to be understood. People often become angry or aggressive only after a lengthy period of not being listened to or acknowledged both collectively and individually. By listening effectively, people can often defuse an angry or threatening situation.

Many people think listening is easy. In fact, it often requires years of practice to learn how to listen effectively. It is very difficult to not make assumptions, judgments, or responses when listening. Yet it is very important to let yourself focus on listening rather than thinking about your own concerns.

How to listen effectively:

- **Empathize** - put yourself in the other person’s shoes and try to understand how s/he feels.

- **Listen** - for the feelings or emotions of the speaker, the meaning of their message, and the specific content they are trying to communicate. Angry people often say aggressive, inappropriate, offensive, unfair, unfounded things. Nevertheless, do not lose control of your emotions and begin arguing. Do not give into the temptation to start interrupting, correcting, and arguing with the angry person. When people are escalating, rational arguments have little to no effect except to further provoke their hostility. Instead, focus on the deeper issues the person is so eager to communicate. (See discussion below on Aikido listening, reframing positions to interests)

- **Validate** - let the other person know that her/his experience is valid. This does not mean that you agree with them, only that you have listened to their experiences and can understand why they might be feeling the way they do.

- **Paraphrase** - Paraphrasing is restating in your own words the core of what the other has expressed in a message. A good paraphrase gets at content and emotions (see below)

- **Clarify** - ask questions to get more information about the problem (see below)

- **Gather information** - try to gain a better understanding about the situation without antagonizing

- **Recognize your own prejudices** - be aware of the way in which your feelings or reactions to a person influence your interpretation of what is being said. *Change your judgment to curiosity, even when what the angry person is saying seems unfair or ridiculous.*

- **Draw out underlying interests** - use open-ended, non-threatening questions (see below)

- **Be Quiet!** - Too many people talk too much when facing escalated situations. People usually do not want to be told how they should think, feel, or act in the midst of their anger. Often, people become angry because of a lack of a sense of control or influence over their own lives. Telling them what to do only exacerbates this tension.

- **Use the other person’s name** respectfully (if you know it)

- **Be prepared to patiently repeat yourself**

- **Match and lower intensity**

**Questions as a key element to effective listening**

a. **Questions which escalate hostility**

*There are many types of questions which we use reflexively which often prove unhelpful and can escalate the situation. Some of these questions may be divided into the following types:*
WHY - draws out information but, depending on tone, can have the impact of challenging, blaming or calling upon the other person to justify or defend his/her actions or position. Many “why” questions are intended to prove wrong-doing. For example, “Why would anyone do that?”

LEADING - is really a disguised statement. The speaker attempts to express his or her opinion through a question. For example, “Don’t you think, given the implications of not returning the radios, that you would be better off simply settling this quickly?”

MULTIPLE - is when two or more questions are asked immediately following one another without adequate time for response. This is often confusing for respondents because they have trouble focusing on what is being asked. For example, “Is it true you’re intentionally provoking animosity towards our organization and, if so, are you aware of the legal implications of this and what will happen should this go to a formal investigation?”

CLOSE-ENDED - invites a one or two word answer, “Are you in a position to make that move?” The possible responses are often limited to “yes” or “no”. Closed questions narrow the amount of information that is given and, while sometimes useful, often have the effect of creating an adversarial atmosphere.

ASSUMPTIVE CLOSURE - gives the expected answer in the question. “Now I know you don’t want this project delayed any longer, right?” or “This is a pretty basic question isn’t it?”

b. Questions that can defuse hostility

In effective conflict defusing, questioning can be used to probe for information. It is **not** used to prove a point, to demolish an argument, or to get compliance. As with any technique, there are also helpful ways to use questions. **When undertaken with care, questioning can help clarify assumptions and uncover vital information and effectively defuse a situation.**

OPEN-ENDED questions, ones which cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”, move away from judgment towards curiosity. Open questions invite a longer response, giving a choice of how to respond and thereby moving the control from the questioner to the responder. This type of questioning may seem risky because the questioner cannot know exactly what direction the conversation will go. Although this may seem to be a disadvantage in a purely adversarial environment, open questioning often results in creation of a more open, co-operative forum. Open questions encourage answers which provide unanticipated information, reveal interests, and provide clarity for all involved. Open-ended questions are questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer and demonstrate an interest in the other’s concerns. However, in some cultural contexts, use extreme caution with open questions because they can be seen as intrusive, disrespectful and inappropriate. There are a number of different types of open questions:

- **Probing questions** ask for more information about concerns or emotions.
  
  “What is it you want to see happen in this situation?”
  “How did your group react to that news from our NGO?”
  “What are your concerns with the policy?”
  “What are some other possibilities to resolve this situation?” (Brainstorming)

- **Clarifying statements or questions** seek to understand particular aspects of the message.
  
  “What do you mean by ______?” , "Are you saying that ______?”
  “Could you help me understand how you came to ______?”

- **Consequential questions** are used to get the speaker to think about the consequences of what they are saying. It is a form of “reality testing.”
  
  “So what do you see as the potential implications of us taking ______?”

**Paraphrasing as a Key Approach to Effective Listening**

*Angry Statement:* “You North Americans are all the same…you’re here until some problem erupts and then you leave! I’m so sick of this happening again and again! Well, this time you can’t just take all your fancy stuff with you! This equipment was intended for us and this is where it’s staying or somebody is going to get hurt!”
Paraphrase: “Sounds like you’re really fed up with our pattern of just taking off…”

Paraphrasing is one way to make sure you have understood the intended message. It has a number of purposes:

1) It provides a climate in which the speaker is more likely to feel understood.
2) It allows you to check to make sure you understand the speaker’s intent.
3) It allows the speaker to correct you if you have misunderstood something, thereby preventing misunderstandings.
4) It allows the speaker to correct themselves if they feel they inaccurately expressed what they were trying to communicate.
5) It provides you the opportunity to focus on understanding the other person rather than thinking of your own response.
6) It conveys to the speaker that you are interested in him or her and what s/he has to say. This often allows the person the freedom to continue talking.

Re-Framing Positions to Interests

Reframing, like paraphrasing, is another way to respond to a hostile speaker to let her/him know that you understand what they are saying. However, unlike paraphrasing, which simply repeats back what has been said, reframing is a way of changing directions. When faced with hostility, it is natural to push back. However, rather than opposing your opponent’s anger in a security context, it may be helpful to re-direct aggression into a non-threatening discussion of their underlying needs. At its best, reframing can elicit a more cooperative, problem-solving approach to address the concerns and interests rather than the positions of an attacker.

POSITION - A position is one specific solution to a problem, usually stated as a demand in an attempt to resolve a conflict. Often the positions of people in conflict are mutually exclusive because each person is attempting to address only his or her own needs. Positions often arise out of impulses that seem to demand immediate reaction. Common motives for becoming positional are the desire to be taken seriously, fear, revenge and unmet expectations from the past.

INTEREST - Interests are often closely connected to an individual’s values and priorities. These values and priorities can often be identified through an individual’s expression of their underlying wants, needs, fears, hopes and/or concerns. In expressing their interests, parties in dispute often discover that they share many more values and concerns than they assumed while in their positional stance and they are subsequently much less likely to perceive one another in purely adversarial terms. Basic human interests, which often arise in disputes are the need for power, approval, justice, inclusion, identity and security.

While a judgmental reaction to another’s position often leads to no movement and frustration, a curious attitude allows us to uncover the interest(s) from which the position of the other person stems. When NGO personnel learn to speak in terms of their underlying interests, they adopt a much more flexible approach to conflict and reduce the chances of misunderstanding. You can also defuse potential aggression by assertively articulating your own interests rather than aggressively pushing your position.

In reframing the listener takes a statement that is framed, or seen from a perspective of a position that makes it difficult to redirect anger, and reframes it, or looks at it from a new perspective which might allow the discussion to move forward. Reframing is a powerful tool. It can demonstrate that you understand the other person’s interests and turn a potentially destructive comment into a constructive problem-solving comment.

When speaking to an angry, aggressive person, reframing hears the demanding and accusatory statements and then reframes by tentatively stating the underlying interests. Instead of stating what they say they don’t want, the listener focuses on naming what it sounds like they need.

Reframing may also involve:

- changing the emphasis from differences to common ground
- changing the emphasis from negative to positive
• changing the emphasis from the specific to the general or vice-versa

FORMULA TO BEGIN:

It is important to you that
It sounds like ______________ is important to you.
So you value ____________________.

EXAMPLES:

Statement: An angry person approaches an NGO worker preparing to evacuate and says: “If you leave here this time, there’ll be trouble- that equipment was intended for us and we’re not letting you take off with it.”

Interest: Ongoing use of equipment; loyalty to local population

Reframe: “It sounds like you’re really concerned about the loss of the equipment to get your work done. Maybe we could talk together about how to address your concerns.”

________________________________________________________________________________

Statement: “Working here is so depressing. Nobody thanks me for my contributions. I have no way of knowing if I’m even doing an adequate job or not.”

Interest: Acknowledgment or being valued

Reframe: “So, receiving feedback and acknowledgment is important for you? In what ways would it be helpful to you to hear feedback?”

________________________________________________________________________________

Statement: “You’re always checking up on me. It bugs me that you don’t believe I’m working.”

Interest: Trust

Reframe: “So, you’d really like me to trust you...”

Consider a story in which an NGO worker uses reframing skills to focus on interests rather than positions in a security situation:

An NGO in Somalia has had two of its vehicles stolen in a short period of time. Knowing who is responsible, one of the NGO workers, "Stefan" approaches an elder member of the same clan as the two men who stole the vehicles. While the immediate concern of the NGO worker is that the cars are absolutely vital to the NGO’s work that and the theft of vehicles might lead to a decision, by administration, to pull out, posing his concern in the latter threatening manner would likely not be effective. Instead, Stefan defuses a potentially aggressive encounter by discussing the interest of the clan in protecting its reputation and the NGO’s interest in staying active and effective in the community.

Questions for Reflection:
1) What would a positional approach, on Stefan’s part, have sounded like in this scenario?
2) How might a positional response have escalated the elder or the ongoing NGO-community conflict?

In crisis situations, the most important re-framing skills to remember are:

• Reframe a competitive attack into a more cooperative stance;
• Reframe demands or "positions" on issues into a discussion or focus on how to meet mutual needs.

**Assertive Communication: How to Communicate Your Interests**

While listening is a powerful skill in defusing anger and aggression, there may be times when you will need to assert your own needs and interests in a security situation. NGO personnel can sometimes use speaking or disclosure skills to help defuse an angry person or group before they have escalated.

**Be "hard on the issues, but soft on the person"**, implies that while it is important to communicate your viewpoint, it is important to do so in a way which refrains from personal attack on people who disagree with it. It is important for you to communicate your own perspectives and interests as early as possible (before a situation escalates to an angry encounter). Therefore, do not be overly cautious to say what you need or want from a situation, but speak thoughtfully, so that your words will not provoke the person you are speaking to. When you are actually facing a very angry person, you may need to be more cautious about what you say or divulge in that moment. It is often very important to look for a calm moment to talk/negotiate.

Through careful reflection on how you approach people, you can greatly increase your control over whether your message is received the way you want it to be and decrease the chances of a hostile response. Finally, non-aggressive modes of speaking about our perspective and/or needs encourages others to shift their behavior and do the same. It is important to remember that negotiation is most appropriate before a situation has grossly escalated.

**I/We Messages**

When communicating your interests in a tense atmosphere, it is easier to hear a statement in which the speaker clearly states their perspective or needs (i.e. “I”) than it is to hear a statement which focuses on the other person or parties (“You!”). Speak from your own experience and needs, rather than what you’ve heard others say. Others are less likely to become defensive if you state your own beliefs and preferences rather than using language that focuses on what you dislike about others or attempt to speak for people beyond you or your jurisdiction.

Starting a sentence with “I or We” often lowers the level of escalation and tension. A “YOU” message usually raises the level of pressure and tension. These messages usually blame, accuse, threaten, order, put-down or make the other person feel guilty.

An “I/We” message has three parts:

When _______ happens,  I/We feel/need ______ because it has the effect of __________ on me/us.

- **When** (specific behavior) ....
- **I or We feel/need** (specific feeling or need) ......
- **Because** (tangible effect or rationale)

Each part plays an important role when we attempt to communicate our concerns and/or influence another person’s behavior.

1. The “WHEN” element helps separate the person from the problem. This is extremely important for keeping the discussion in a problem-solving rather than attacking mode. It informs the other person of the specific behavior that is problematic for you.

2. The “I FEEL” component is important because the speaker is taking responsibility for his/her feelings, indicating trust in the listener, and clarifying her/his feelings.

3. The “BECAUSE” is most often missed but is crucial when trying to deal with a conflict. The “because” part of the message pushes the speaker to look beneath a position to clearly define what the situation is in terms of interests. It also allows the speaker to more easily understand and communicate that interest rather than position.
Example: Instead of saying - “The people in this community are constantly after our equipment and vehicles. We may simply have no choice but to withhold our services unless that radio is returned.”

You Might Say - “When our radios disappear, we/I feel concerned and frustrated because it becomes very difficult to carry out our work. We’re also aware that the radios are a big temptation for local people and I’m eager to hear your thoughts on what we can do to solve this problem.”

There are a number of additional principles that can empower you and your organization to share information more effectively and defuse potentially aggressive encounters before they evolve. They are as follows:

- **Reflect** - step back and think about the situation if possible. Clarify your concerns and feelings.
- **Choose a place and time**, when possible, that will facilitate good communication.
- **State your intention to resolve the issues at hand positively**. This can help motivate others.
- Before speaking, try to think of the easiest way it would be for you to hear the message you want to communicate.

### Making an Assertive Request

There are times when NGO personnel are facing an angry person who does not pose an immediate, lethal threat. In such situations it may be appropriate to respectfully but assertively request a specific change in behavior as a condition of continuing a discussion. *It is important to remember, however, that when an individual does pose an immediate, potentially lethal threat because they have a weapon or the authority to use violence, making an assertive request may not be an appropriate or feasible option.*

- **PREFERENCE STATEMENTS**: Clearly communicate your preferences or desires rather than stating them as demands or forcing others to guess what they are.
  - My preference is....
  - If it were up to us...
  - What I would like is...
  - From our perspective, it would be helpful if....

- **INTEREST STATEMENTS**: Clearly state your wants, needs, fears, and concerns.
  - What concerns me is...
  - What we really need is... because...

- **PURPOSE STATEMENTS**: Disclosing your intentions enables others to understand what motivates you and minimizes the opportunity for misunderstanding. It also reduces the chance for others to unknowingly operate at cross-purposes.
  - What I’m trying to accomplish with this policy is...
  - We’re out here today because we were hoping to...
  - I am in the process of trying to locate...
  - Our intention with this group of people is to...

- **DESCRIBING OBSERVATIONS**: Describe what you are currently observing between yourself and the other person in a non-positional way. In an unhelpful conversation with a community elder, one might say:
  - “I’m noticing that we seem to be at an impasse in this conversation. It seems like we’re all getting a little tired and frustrated. I’m not sure how to move on. What do you think?”

- **AGREEMENT STATEMENTS**: Acknowledge where you agree with the other party in the midst of a disagreement. This increases the amount you share in common and reduces the conflict field.
  - I agree with you that...
  - We definitely share your concern about...
  - Your interest in...... makes a lot of sense to me.
  - We share your hope that...
• “YES AND ....” NOT “YES BUT...” The word but has been called the “verbal eraser” because agreement statements lose their effectiveness if they are followed by a disclaimer such as but. It is better to make your agreement statement and then raise your other concerns.
  I share your concern about.... and I am also concerned about...
  I agree that we should.... and I also think that...

Things to Avoid When Speaking to/Defusing an Angry Person:

• Blaming - Do not blame. Blaming leads people to become defensive and hostile rather than cooperative and understanding.

• Accusations or Counter-Accusations - Do not accuse. In general, be cautious about starting sentences with “You” or “You people” For example, it usually makes people defensive to begin a sentence with “You didn’t....” or “Your people always....”

• Making Assumptions - Don't assume that your perceptions are correct and others are false. Acknowledge the assumptions that inevitably underlie all our beliefs. We are often unaware of the different ways people experience the world. Individuals perceive the world differently and so react differently. Again, change judgment to curiosity.

Disengaging from an Angry Person

The goal of disengaging is to remove yourself or the other person from the threatening situation when it appears that all your other efforts to listen, make assertive requests and other methods of verbal aikido are failing or that you yourself have become so angry that the interaction is becoming more threatening. Ideally, disengaging from an angry person involves an explanation for your behavior, allowing a cooling off period, and/or scheduling a time more conducive to effective problem solving. It also allows one to deal constructively with safety issues, should they arise during an encounter. When an individual does pose an immediate, potentially lethal threat because they have a weapon or the authority to use violence, disengaging may not be an appropriate or feasible option.

Disengage when:
- You are too angry yourself and you are having trouble self-managing.
- You feel too much discomfort with the situation, due to the rising level of emotion and/or the destructive direction of the discussion or exchange.
- You are nervous about the situation and fear for your safety.
- You both need time to compose yourselves.
- The time or location is not conducive to effective problem solving.

Misused when:
- The angry person poses an immediate, potentially lethal threat and will see your disengaging as an affront or challenge to their authority
- You disengage to provoke or manipulate the other party

A Sample Disengaging Script

Acknowledge:            "I can see you are furious with me,
Commmit involvement:    and we need to talk more about it.
State your needs:       Right now though, I feel like things are too intense. I need to be alone for a while…
State your intention to return:    I'll be back." or “We can work through this later.”
Then leave immediately!
When you feel yourself becoming angry in a situation which could have immediate, potentially life-threatening consequences.

- Be extremely cautious about expressing your anger in any terms
- Place your emphasis on de-escalating yourself and avoiding getting provoked
- Consider and act on ways to disengage from the situation as soon as possible
- Place an immediate priority on defusing the situation (e.g. most often this entails listening to and acknowledging the other’s feelings and needs) rather than on expressing your own frustration or anger
- Remember that there will be other times, places, and means to express your anger and that timing is absolutely crucial when it comes to insecure environments and anger