

Bootcamp: De-Escalation Techniques



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Why De-Escalation Matters

- Reduces workplace stress
- Protects inspector safety
- Builds or protects relationship
- Supports accurate information gathering
- Improves cooperation to improve food safety



Insights



Today you will:

- learn about **yourself** and **others**
- leave with **strategies to de-escalate situations**

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

1. Explain *self-awareness* and *perspective-taking* to recognize how intent vs. impact affects inspection interactions.
2. Define *empathy*, including what empathy is and is not.
3. Demonstrate empathy behaviors that build *trust* and *cooperation* with operators.
4. Apply *credibility* and *confidence* strategies in inspection communication.
5. Apply and analyze de-escalation strategies using brain-based techniques.

Self-Awareness & Perspective Taking

Reflection



Do you know how you
come across to
others?

Poll: Rate Your Self-Awareness

1 = “I have no idea how I come across to others”

5 = “I know exactly how others see me”

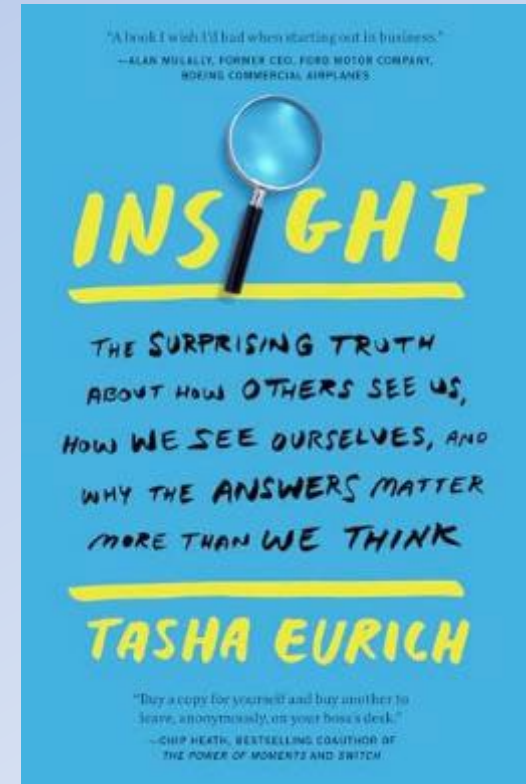
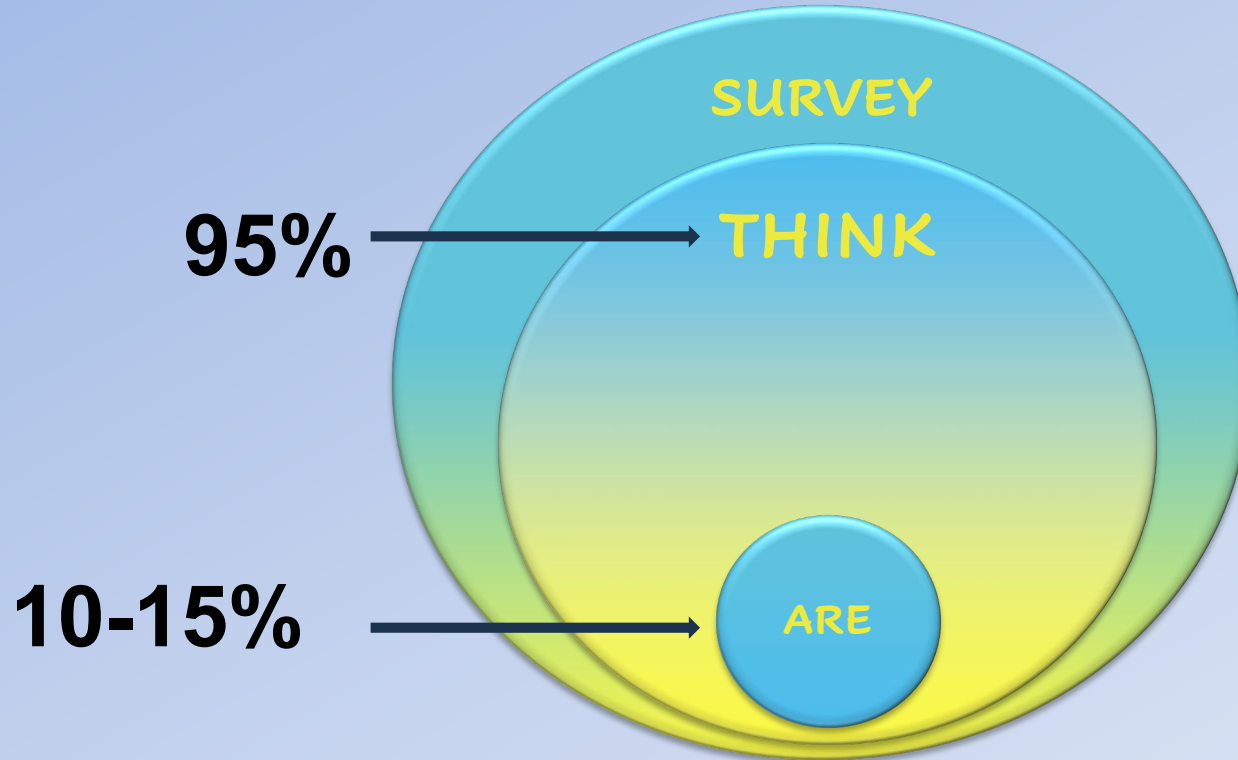


Emotional Intelligence, Self-Reflection & De-Escalation

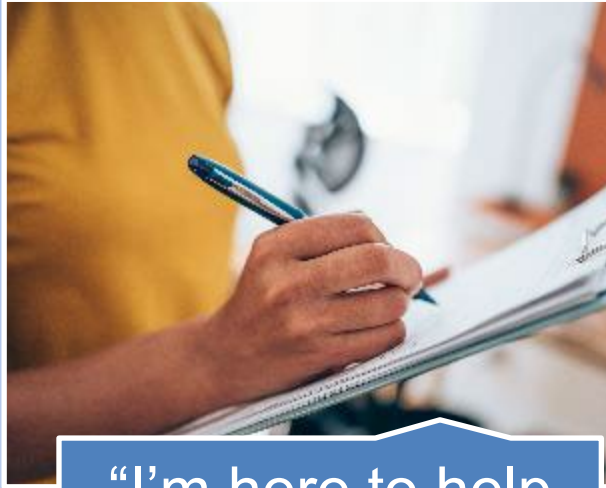


- Take the time to **examine** your own emotions and reactions in different situations.
- **Gain insight** into your behavioral patterns so you can improve.

How Self Aware Are We, Really?



Chat: Perspectives: Intent vs Impact



“I’m here to help you.”



“They are here to shut me down.”

Chat: Why Do You Think Perspectives Differ?

Perspective-Taking & De-Escalation

- Ability to comprehend & empathize with thoughts & emotions of others
- Step into the shoes of another person
- Find common ground for resolution.
- Transcend your own biases, fostering more constructive dialogue.



Empathy & Trust

What is Empathy?

- 1) A **concern** for other people's well-being.
- 2) Being able to **understand** and **predict** other people's emotions.
- 3) **Understanding** other people's situation and point of view.
- 4) **Showing appropriate emotional responses** arising from other people's emotional displays.



Lyshol et al (2025)

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2025.2482014>

What Empathy is NOT

- **Feeling sorry for someone** – it is giving support.
- **Getting swallowed up by another's feelings** – stay grounded.
- **Knowing what the person has gone through because you have gone through exactly the same thing.** Even if you have a similar experience, everyone's experience is different.
- **Decreasing our own discomfort by minimizing what the other person is going through.** “Well, Ellen is going through the same thing. You'll get over it.”

[Dr. Maika Steinborn, Empathy in 5 Easy Steps](#)

Empathy in 5 Easy Steps

- 1. Listen to understand.** Show with your body, gestures. Don't judge.
- 2. Ask for elaboration.** "What do you mean when you say...?" "Tell me more about..."
- 3. Paraphrase.** "I'm hearing you say...." "Tell me if I understood correctly?" "So, from your experience you would say...?"
- 4. Verbalize.** "It sounds like you're really upset about this." "You seem very disappointed."
- 5. Validate.** "That's understandable." "It's natural to feel that way."

[Dr. Maika Steinborn, Empathy in 5 Easy Steps](#)

Demo: How Does Empathy Sound?

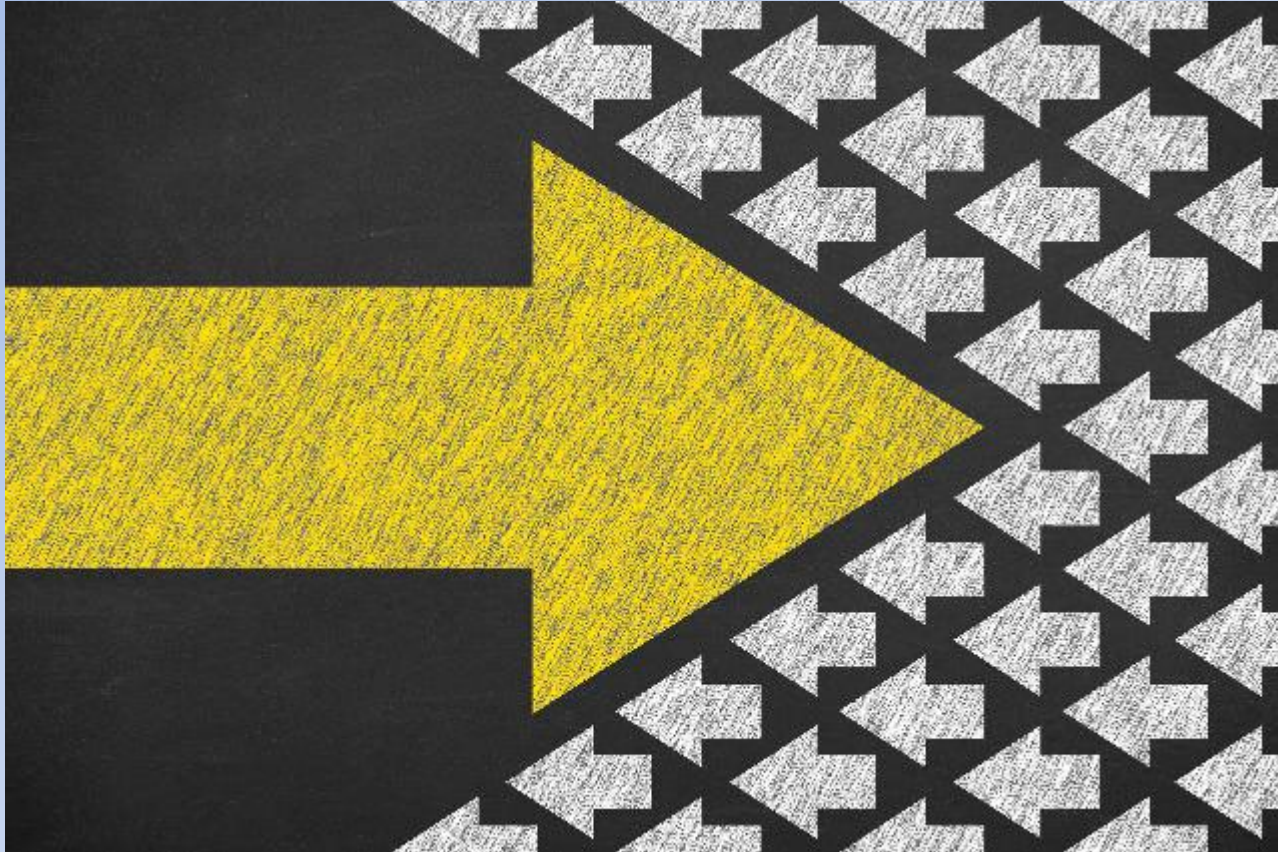


Scenario: You are at a deli and you observe several items out of temperature. Cold holding has been noted in the last two inspections.

“I’ve tried so hard to get my employees to check the temperatures. I just can’t keep anybody – it’s so hard to find and keep good people. I just don’t know what to do. I’ve tried everything. I’m so frustrated.”



How Can We Reduce Tension & Build Trust?



Develop TRUST



- **Transparency**: Clearly communicating about purpose of inspection and processes followed.
- **Respect**: Acknowledging the facility spokesperson's expertise
- **Understanding**: Actively listening to person's concerns
- **Support**: Positioning inspection as improvement opportunity
- **Timeliness**: Respecting time schedules

Projecting the “3 Cs” Competence, Confidence, and Credibility

Authority

Authority isn't about intimidation!

Authority is about projecting
Competence, Confidence, and Credibility – the 3 Cs.

Chat: How Can You Demonstrate Your Credibility?



- Dress appropriately
- Communicate clearly and concisely and support
- Model desired behaviors (wash hands, hairnet)
- Reference regulations, guidance, industry standards, and best practices

Why Does Posture Matter?

Before you say anything,

- Poor posture signals uncertainty, fatigue, or defensiveness.
- Strong posture communicates
 - **Competence**
 - **Confidence**
 - **Credibility**



5-Seconds to Confidence, Competence, Credibility

- **Posture** - Spine straight, shoulders back
- **Breathing** – Deep, from diaphragm
- **Space claim** - Take up appropriate space
- **Hands positioned** - Open and purposeful
- **Eye contact ready** - 3-5 second rule



Avoiding Panic Avoids Escalation

Scenario: Panic-Inducing Inspection



A firm has had negative interactions with other inspectors and is experiencing food safety problems during an inspection. As you are asking questions of the operator, the operator's voice raises, their face turns red, and they slam cabinet doors and drawers shut. It is clear they are stressed. *How do you feel?*

Understanding Brain Functions & Stress



When you understand *why* your body reacts in certain ways and are *more self-aware*, you can begin to **interrupt those patterns** and **respond more intentionally**.

Amygdala Hijack Response

When the amygdala (your brain's alarm system) perceives a threat, it can override your prefrontal cortex (rational thinking center), triggering an immediate fight, flight, or freeze response.



Amygdala Hijack Response Process

1. **Trigger** → Tough question, criticism, or unexpected challenge.

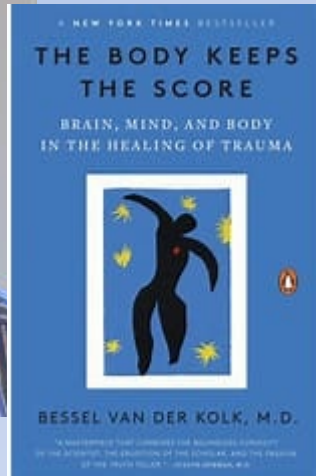
2. **Reaction** → Amygdala floods brain with stress hormones.

3. **Shutdown** → Rational thinking becomes limited or blocked.

The Body Keeps the Score



Dr. Bessel van der Kolk



- Our bodies store memories of stress
- Past stressful experiences create physical "memories" in our nervous system.
- When similar situations arise, our bodies may react before our mind recognizes the pattern.

High Pressure Regroup



- **Ground yourself** - Feel feet on floor
- **Return to center** - Reset posture if needed
- **Use purposeful pauses** - Control the rhythm
- **Slow your breathing** - Maintain voice control
- **Hold your space** - Don't shrink or retreat

3 Ways to Calm and Refocus in the Moment



Superman Pose



4-4-4-4 Breathing



Positive Self-Talk

Why Calming Techniques Work



These techniques *activate* the nervous system, *overriding* the stress response and *allowing rational thinking to return*.

1. The Superman Pose

Before you enter a firm or in the restroom,

- Stand with feet shoulder-width apart
- Place hands on hips
- Lift chest, shoulders back
- Chin slightly raised
- Hold for 20 seconds



2. The 4-4-4-4 Method

1. **Inhale** through your nose.
2. **Hold**.
3. **Exhale** through your mouth.
4. **Pause** before next breath.



Let's Practice 4-4-4-4 Together



- **Place one hand on your chest, one on your belly.**
- **Breathe so only the bottom hand moves.**
- **Count together: "In 1- 2-3-4, Hold 1-2-3-4, Out 1-2-3-4, Pause 1-2-3-4".**
- **Repeat 3 cycles.**

3. Positive Self-talk & Reflection

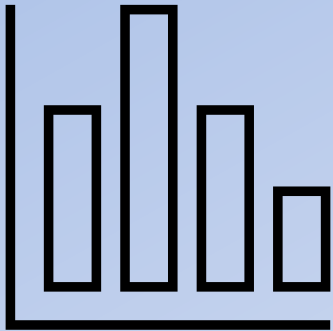
- *"I can handle this."*
- *"I will focus on one step at a time."*
- *"I have the knowledge and authority to respond."*
- *"This moment will pass."*
- *"No problem. I got this."*



Poll: Back on the Job

Q: Which affirmation will you use the next time you are in a high stress situation?

- A. *"I can handle this."*
- B. *"I will focus on one step at a time."*
- C. *"I have the knowledge and authority to respond."*
- D. *"This moment will pass."*
- E. *"No problem. I got this."*



Building Your Tool Kit



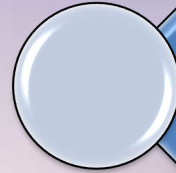
Write down:

- Your chosen affirmation
- When you'll practice these techniques this week

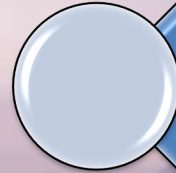
Practice using your tools BEFORE you need the tools!

The CALM Method to Defuse Situations

CALM Method to Defuse Situations



Control



Acknowledge



Listen



Move

Control Yourself

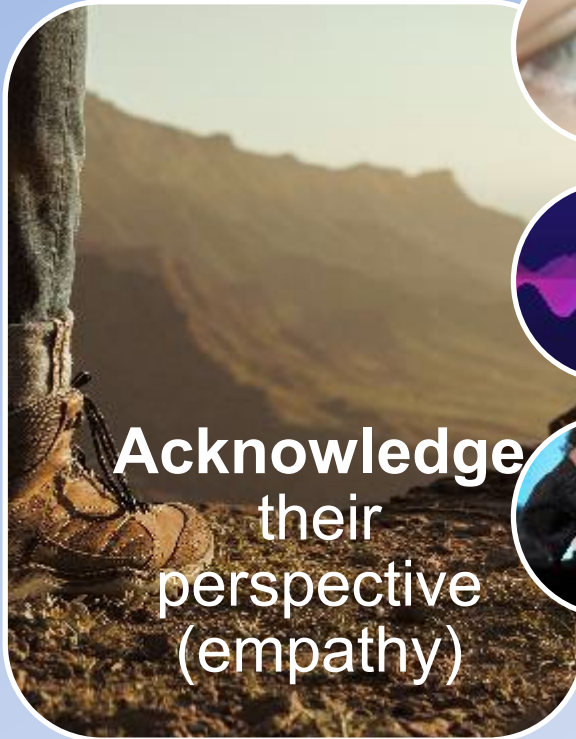


Monitor your body language

Take a breath

Stay solution focused

Acknowledge



Acknowledge
their
perspective
(empathy)



“ I can see that this is frustrating.”

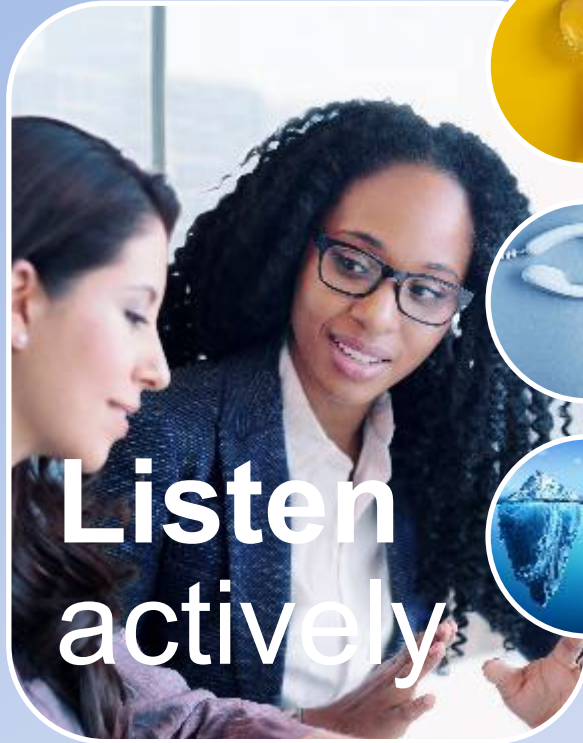


“It sounds like you are feeling that you’re under pressure.”



“Under the circumstances, I can see where your initial reaction could surprise or perhaps frustrate you.”

Listen



**Listen
actively**



Ask open ended questions



Paraphrase what you hear



Look at the real issue behind the reaction

Move



Focus on shared goals

Offer choices when possible

Break down problems into manageable pieces

Q & A: Control Your Emotion

You are inspecting a ready-to-eat salad processing facility. You request corrective action logs for a cooling deviation. The Plant Manager responds sharply: *“No other inspector has ever asked for all this. You’re holding us to standards that keep changing.”*

Q: Which internal strategy would MOST help you stay centered?

- A.** Remind yourself that the pushback is about the situation, not you personally, and give yourself a moment before responding.
- B.** Quickly review the regulatory requirement in your mind to prepare your counterargument.
- C.** Note that the manager is being disrespectful and mentally prepare to document their resistance.
- D.** Focus on your breathing while maintaining a neutral facial expression before engaging.

Q&A: Acknowledge Their Perspective

You are inspecting a busy restaurant kitchen during lunch rush. You cite improper date marking. The chef replies: *“We’re slammed and short-staffed. I don’t have time to chase down labels right now.”*

Q: Which response best acknowledges their perspective without reinforcing frustration?

- A.** “I can see you’re under a lot of time pressure, and it makes tasks like labeling harder during peak hours.”
- B.** “I hear you, but this rule isn’t optional.”
- C.** “Lots of restaurants feel overwhelmed by date marking—it’s a common issue in the industry.”
- D.** “I understand you’re frustrated, but this does need to be fixed today.”

Q&A: Listen Actively

At a restaurant that serves sushi, you request parasite-destruction records. The chef says: *"Suppliers never send certificates in the same format. It's chaos keeping these forms straight."*

Q: Which response best demonstrates active listening?

A." I hear that inconsistent paperwork is causing annoyance."

B." So what I'm hearing is that varying supplier forms make it difficult to keep the required documentation — is that right?"

C. "Let me explain why the format matters."

D. "So you're saying the suppliers aren't doing their part?"

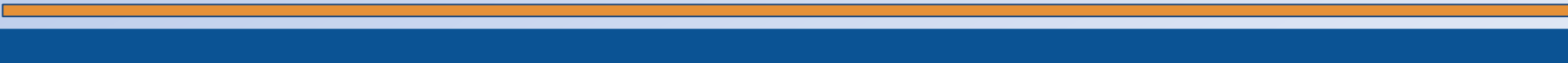
Q&A: Move Toward a Solution

In a deli, you observe several workers not washing their hands before moving to a new task after emptying the trash. The owner says, *“I tell them every day. I don’t know what else to do.”*

Q: Which option best moves toward a workable solution?

- A. “Maybe we can look at your current reminders and training together and identify simple ways to reinforce the behavior during busy periods.”
- B. “We can deal with training later — let’s stick to the immediate violation.”
- C. “I can give you a list of everything they’re required to do.”
- D. “Perhaps if you discipline them more firmly, the problem might decrease.”

De-Escalation Through Collaboration



Expand Your Thinking: Be Open to the Possibilities



YES

- Appears Secure
- Rewarded by New Concepts & Ideas

NO

- Appears Insecure
- Rewarded by Predictability & Safety



Chat: Class Reunion: “Yes, but...”

How would this interaction feel?



Chat: Class Reunion - “Yes, and...”



How would you feel if you were part of this interaction?

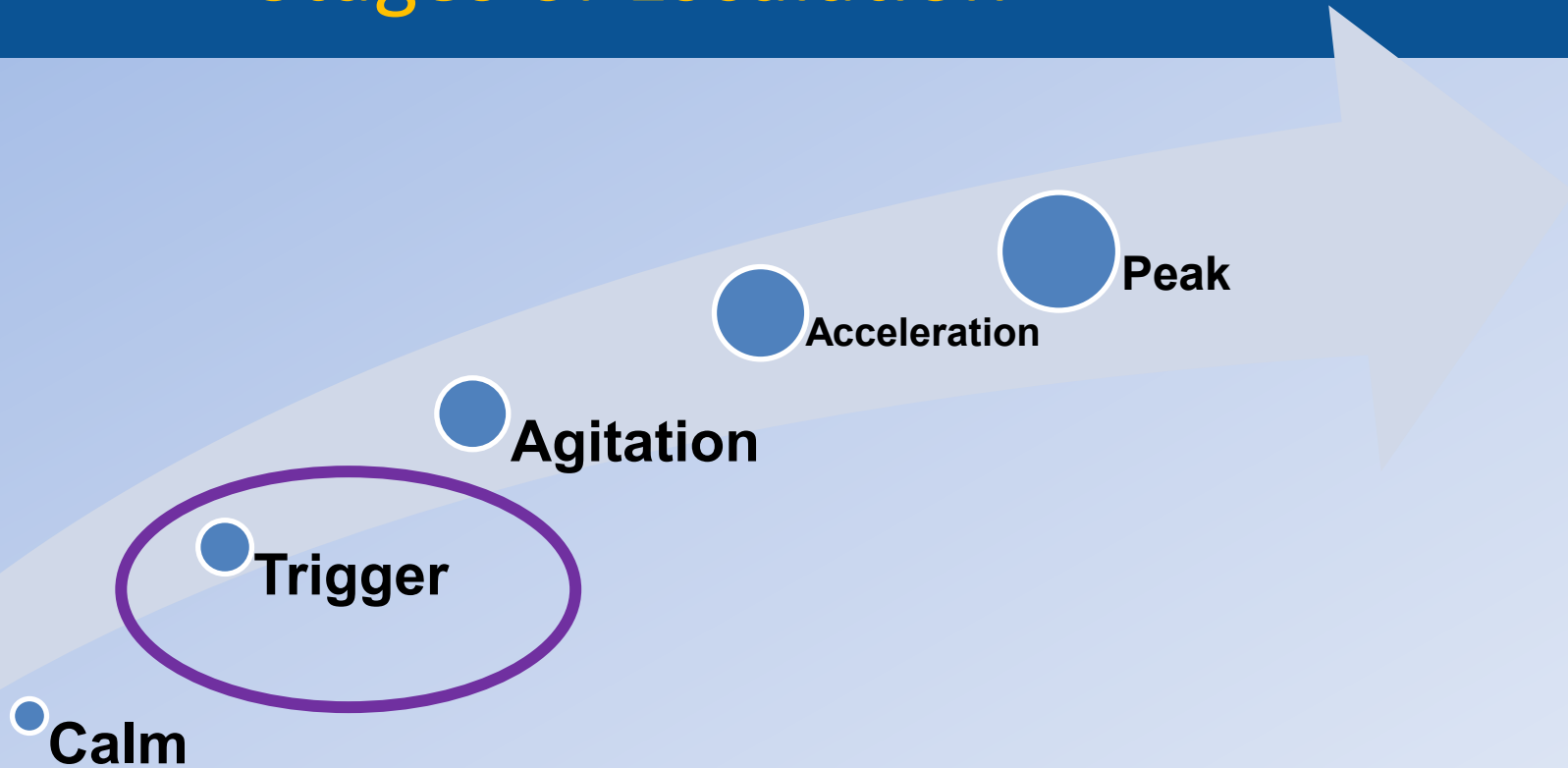
Collaborative Phrases



- **“Let’s walk through this together.”**
- **“Show me how this usually works.”**
- **“Tell me more about what happened.”**
- **“Help me understand your process.”**
- **“Let’s look at how this fits the requirement.”**

De-escalation in Action

Stages of Escalation



Inspector Mistakes to Avoid



- Taking tone personally
- Correcting too quickly
- Reacting emotionally
- Over-explaining
- Ignoring early signs of escalation

Chat: Trigger Phrases to Avoid



- “Calm down.”
- “Why didn’t you...?”
- “This makes no sense.”
- “You should know better.”
- “That’s unacceptable.”

Interventions to De-escalate



- Open-ended questions to explore root cause
- Offer quiet space to reflect
- Deep breathing
- Offer support without pressure
- Non-judgment discussion
- Avoid blame
- Short, clear instructions
- Active listening

Q&A - Hostile Restaurant Owner During Lunch Rush

The owner rushes by carrying plates and snaps, “You always show up at the worst time. If you tank my rating today, I’m calling your supervisor.” Staff are running in all directions, and the kitchen looks chaotic.

Q: Which approach would let the operator know you are listening to keep this situation from escalating?

- A. Acknowledge the stress of the lunch rush and explain that you will work efficiently to minimize disruption.
- B. Focus first on the highest-risk violations while using a calm, neutral tone.
- C. Suggest delaying certain components of the inspection until after peak hours.
- D. Explain the agency’s unannounced inspection policy and continue the inspection.

Q&A - Language Barrier & Manager Minimizing Worker

The manager waves dismissively at a prep worker and says, “He doesn’t speak English, so you’re wasting your time.” The worker looks down and steps back from the table.

Q: Which approach would best allow you to gather important information without elevating tensions?

- A. Stay calm and indicate you’ll work with whatever communication tools are available to ensure understanding.
- B. Ask the manager to clarify the process while remaining respectful to the worker.
- C. Direct the conversation to how training is delivered to multilingual staff.
- D. Request another staff member who can explain the process clearly.

Q&A - Repeat Violations

The manager shakes her head and says, “Your expectations are unrealistic.” She mentions staff turnover and equipment issues that “make it impossible” to meet standards consistently.

Q: Which reply would move the situation forward in a way that would bring the tension down?

- A. Ask what barriers prevent the facility from maintaining compliance consistently.
- B. Review the specific violations calmly and connect them to risk.
- C. Ask the manager to walk you through their sanitation process.
- D. Clarify expectations and reinforce that consistency is part of compliance.

De-Escalation Points to Remember

- **Be Self-Aware (Intent v Impact)**
- **Seek to Understand**
- **Collaborate**
- **Be CALM**
 - **Control Yourself**
 - **Acknowledge**
 - **Listen**
 - **Move**

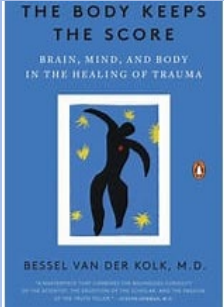


De-Escalation Techniques

- Display Empathy in 5 Easy Steps
- Developing TRUST
- 5 Seconds to Competence, Confidence, Credibility
- 3 Ways to Avoid Panic
 - Superman Pose
 - 4-4-4-4 Breathing
 - Positive Self-talk



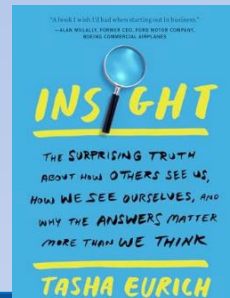
Resources



<https://www.besselvanderkolk.com/resources/the-body-keeps-the-score>



<https://www.youtube.com/c/DrMaikaSteinborn>



<https://www.insight-book.com/>

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