

# Approaching an Upset Person

By Roland W. Ouellette, Director of Training and Co-Founder of SAM® Training, LLC

How many of you know officers who anger people as soon as they approach them, and anger them even more as soon as they open their mouth? On the other side of the coin, how many of you know officers who calm people as soon as they approach, and further calm them as soon as they open their mouth? We all do.

Non-verbal and verbal signals are the most widely used forms of communications. Yet, these are the most often neglected areas of training for campus officers. Some experts think physical presence and communications skills alone can handle up to 98 percent of the incidents potentially requiring force.

People are constantly communicating on a subconscious level. Ray Birdwhistell, who carried out extensive body language studies in the 1950s, says, "Ten percent of the message we deliver to people is verbal, ninety percent is non-verbal."

## Consider Body Language When Approaching an Upset Person

Body language or non-verbal communication signals can be divided into three areas: space and reactionary distance, eye contact, gestures and posture.

**(1) Space:** On average, personal space (proxemics) to the front is three feet, to the side, one and one half feet, and to the rear, five feet. This is the area surrounding us that others are expected not to intrude. Imagine approaching an upset person and seeing a three-foot, oval shadow to your front that surrounds your entire body from your feet to the top of your head. A similar shadow is also in front of them. As you

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approach your shadows interlock, which makes people uncomfortable. If you stop four feet from the person you are approaching and turn your body at a 45-degree angle, it takes the shadow away from them. This is supportive as you no longer violate their personal space. It also makes you safer as you are protecting your vital line (nose to groin).

Personal space is relative to cultural difference. In some cultures like the English, Northern Europeans, and most Anglo-Americans, body contact may not be appropriate, while in other cultures such as Arabs, Latin Americans, and Southern Mediterranean(s), making body contact is more common. We are a multi-cultural society and have to be aware of this difference.

Personal space also is relative to upbringing. A person's upbringing can sometimes cause problems with regard to personal space. On one hand, children who are raised in loving environments usually have small personal zones as adults. As adults, they may have a tendency to touch people as part of their communications process. On the other hand, research shows that children who were not given adequate love, were raised in an environment of abuse (physical, emotional, or sexual) or were left, "home

alone" too often tend to become physically hostile as adults and have larger personal zones. Aggression can be quickly triggered if they are touched or their zone is violated by a person who has a tendency to touch people.

Personal space is relative to gender as well. Generally, males are more territorial than females and have larger personal zones. When a male approaches another male, it is more threatening to both males than when a female approaches a male, or when a female approaches another female.

**Reactionary Distance:** This is the distance between ourselves and an individual within which our ability to react is greatly reduced. This distance is a minimum of four feet.

Therefore, when approaching an upset person we should stop at least four feet from that person.

**(2) Eye Contact:** Reading and using proper eye contact is an important non-verbal skill.

**Proper use of eye contact:** Maintaining constant eye contact while speaking to an upset person usually raises their anxiety level and is seen as an aggressive act. Making little eye contact when the upset person is complaining shows no supportiveness.

Therefore, maintain eye contact 60-70 percent of the time when you speak and 90 percent of the time when the individual speaks.

**Interpreting eye contact:** A direct uninterrupted stare shows that a person

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is trying to establish dominance. This stare is also used when a person is being verbally aggressive. **Eyes quickly jerking up or down or from side to side** may show that a person is hallucinating, hearing voices, or being spied upon by a nonexistent person. **Eyes that are glazed, or empty, or looking through you** may indicate a person who is drugged, intoxicated or emotionally disturbed. These eye signals may indicate a higher potential for aggressiveness. The person may become inflamed with little or no provocation. **The target glance** is one of the most important eye signals to recognize. We are visual animals and we use our eyes for over 80 percent of our information. We look at the pen before we pick it up. We look at the paper before we write on it. We look at the basket hoop before we shoot the ball. So, people will look at the target before they attack it. A person will look at the chin before punching it, look at our groin before kicking it, and look at our throat before cutting it. Knowing this gives us a tremendous advantage over the other person, especially since there is usually a pause of at least 4/10ths of a second between the glance (the time the person breaks direct eye contact, and then looks at the target) and the attack. This pause gives us sufficient time to create space or verbalize.

**(3) Gestures and Postures:** Signals coming from different parts of the body that reflect thoughts and feelings.

**Using gesture and posture to show supportiveness:** **Leaning** the body slightly **forward** shows concern. **Leaning** the body slightly **backwards** shows defensiveness and fear. Placing your **hands** at waist level with both **palms up** and open shows supportiveness. Leaning the head and shoulders slightly forward also sends a signal of supportiveness.

**Interpreting gestures and postures:** **Head and shoulders** tilted back indicate aggression or defiance. **Breathing** that gets faster or deeper indicates aggression. Arms crossed high on the chest indicates anger. When hands are opening and closing, that shows anxiety or aggression.

### Consider Verbal Communications When Approaching an Upset Person

The impact of words is as follows: words seven percent, tone/inflection (paralanguage) 38 percent, and facial expression 55 percent. Therefore, paralanguage is five times more effective than the words, and facial expression (breaking your face) is eight times more effective than the words.

Some verbal skills used to calm an upset person:

**Paralanguage** is the foundation of all verbal communication skills. Paralanguage, the way in which we say things, is the most important communication skill. Like body language, paralanguage expresses emotion. Tone, volume, and rate of speech reflect whether we treat individuals with respect or as inferiors, and whether we are supportive, assertive, or defensive. Keeping a low volume, tone, and speaking slowly has a calming effect on the upset person and helps control your own anxiety.

**Introducing yourself** gets their attention focused on you and establishes who you are. This takes the focus off of the problem and establishes an equal footing. Saying, "Excuse me, Mrs. Jones, I'm Roland from the security department. How may I help you?" versus "What's the problem here?"

**Starting a sentence with you** is usually followed by words like should, should not, always, and never. Evaluating, prescribing, and advising people usually comes naturally to us. Instead, use "I" to begin sentences, such as: "I sense...", "I feel...", "I would like to know...", does not imply a message but rather feelings.

**Using open-ended questions** allows people to reflect feelings and address the content. Open-ended questions cannot be answered with one word. Example of a closed question: "Are you upset?" The

answer probably is, "Yes!" An example of an open-ended question: "I sense some anger, can you tell me why you feel angry?"

Finally, recent research from Princeton University shows that when we meet someone for the first time, we make our initial judgments about a person's likability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness within 1/10th of a second of meeting them. Our body language is critical when approaching an upset person. What we say and how we say it is also very important.

### About the Author

**Roland W. Ouellette** is Director of Training and co-founder of SAM® Training, LLC ([www.samprograms.com](http://www.samprograms.com)). He is the author, trainer, and founder of the Management of Aggressive Behavior (MOAB®) program, implemented worldwide in a variety of workplace settings since 1983 ([www.moabtraining.com](http://www.moabtraining.com)). He is the author of the PATH (practical and tactical handcuffing) program, and co-author of the OCAT (oleoresin capsicum aerosol training) program.

With a passion for hard work, faith, and personal inner strength, Roland has amassed many years of research in avoiding violence and managing confrontation, beginning with martial arts training while stationed in Japan in the U.S. Army Security Agency. Roland instructed martial arts for many years while his career in public safety continued with the Connecticut State Police, retiring as a lieutenant in 1981. Additionally, he has served as a supervisor for the Connecticut Department of Corrections and as Adjunct Professor of Law Enforcement and Security at Naugatuck (CT) Valley Community Technical College. He was the Executive Officer of the Connecticut State Police Training Academy.

For nine years Roland also served as the New England Director of the American Society of Law Enforcement Trainers (ASLET) and is currently a member of the Advisory Board for International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA).

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