

7 things never to say to anyone, and why

By Dr. George Thompson, Founder of the [Verbal Judo Institute](#)

Safety lies in knowledge. If you deal with cagey street people, or indeed difficult people at all, anywhere, you need to watch your tongue! The "cocked tongue" can be more lethal than the 9 millimeter or the 45.

In part one of this special two-part series for [PoliceOne.com](#), I'll share the first four of a total of seven commonly used statements that can work against you.

1. "HEY YOU! COME HERE!"

Consider, you are on patrol and you see someone suspicious you want to talk with, so you most naturally say, "Hey you! Come here!" Verbal Judo teaches that "natural language is disastrous!" and this provides a wonderful example. You have just warned the subject that he is in trouble. "Come here" means to you, "Over here, you are under my authority." But to the subject it means, "Go away-quickly!" The words are not tactical for they have provided a warning and possibly precipitated a chase that would not have been necessary had you, instead, walked casually in his direction and once close said, "Excuse me. Could I chat with momentarily?" Notice this question is polite, professional, and calm.

Also notice, you have gotten in close, in his "space" though not his "face," and now you are too close for him to back off, giving you a ration of verbal trouble, as could have easily been the case with the "Hey you! Come here!" opening.

The ancient samurai knew never to let an opponent pick the place of battle for then the sun would always be in your eyes! "Come here" is loose, lazy, and ineffective language. Easy, but wrong. Tactically, "May I chat with you" is far better, for not only have you picked the place to talk, but anything the subject says, other than yes or no-the question you asked-provides you with intelligence regarding his emotional and/or mental state. Let him start any 'dance' of resistance.

Point: Polite civility can be a weapon of immense power!

2. "CALM DOWN!"

Consider this verbal blunder. You approach some angry folks and you most naturally say, "Hey, calm down!" This command never works, so why do we always use it? Because it flows naturally from our lips!

What's wrong with it? One, the phrase is a criticism of their behavior and suggests that they have no legitimate right to be upset! Hence, rather than reassuring them that things will improve, which should be your goal, you have created a new problem! Not only is there the matter they were upset about to begin with, but now they need to defend their reaction to you! Double the trouble!

Better, put on a calming face and demeanor-in Verbal Judo we say, 'Chameleon up'-look the person in the eye and say, gently, "It's going to be all right. Talk to me. What's the matter?" The phrase "What's the matter?" softens the person up to talk and calm down; where 'Calm down' hardens the resistance. The choice is yours!

3. "I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU AGAIN!"

We teach in Verbal Judo that 'repetition is weakness on the streets!' and you and I both know that this phrase is almost always a lie. You will say it again, and possibly again and again!

Parents do it all the time with their kids, and street cops do it with resistant subjects, all the time! The phrase is, of course, a threat, and voicing it leaves you only one viable option-action! If you are not prepared to act, or cannot at the time, you lose credibility, and with the loss of creditability comes the loss of power and safety!

Even if you are prepared to act, you have warned the subject that you are about to do so and forewarned is forearmed! Another tactical blunder! Like the rattlesnake you have made noise, and noise can get you hurt or killed. Better to be more like the cobra and strike when least suspected!

If you want to stress the seriousness of your words, say something like, 'Listen, it's important that you get this point, so pay close attention to what I'm about to tell you.'

If you have used Verbal Judo's Five Steps of Persuasion you know that we act after asking our "nicest, most polite question,"

"Sir, is there anything I could say that would get you to do A, B and C? I'd like to think so?"

If the answer is NO, we act while the subject is still talking! We do not telegraph our actions nor threaten people, but we do act when verbal persuasion fails.

4. "BE MORE REASONABLE!"

Telling people "be more reasonable" has many of the same problems as "Calm Down!" Everyone thinks h/she is plenty reasonable given the present circumstances! I never have had anyone run up to me and say, "Hey, I know I'm stupid and wrong, but here's what I think!" although I have been confronted by stupid and wrong people! You only invite conflict when you tell people to "be more reasonable!"

Instead, make people more reasonable by the way in which you handle them, tactically! Use the language of reassurance-"Let me see if I understand your position," and then paraphrase-another VJ tactic!-back to them their meaning, as you see it, in your words! Using your words will calm them and make them more reasonable because your words will (or better be!) more professional and less emotional.

This approach absorbs the other's tension and makes him feel your support. Now you can help them think more logically and less destructively, without making the insulting charge implied in your statement, "Be more reasonable!"

Again, tactics over natural reaction!

Next: 3 more statements to avoid!

Now, I'll share three more...

5. "BECAUSE THOSE ARE THE RULES" (or "THAT'S THE LAW!")

If ever there was a phrase that irritates people and makes you look weak, this is it!

If you are enforcing rules/laws that exist for good reason, don't be afraid to explain that! Your audience may not agree with or like it, but at least they have been honored with an explanation. Note, a true sign of REspect is to tell people why, and telling people why generates voluntary compliance. Indeed, we know that at least 70% of resistant or difficult people will do what you want them to do if you will just tell them why!

When you tell people why, you establish a ground to stand on, and one for them as well! Your declaration of why defines the limits of the issue at hand, defines your real authority, but also gives the other good reason for complying, not just because you said so! Tactically, telling people why gets your ego out of it and put in its place a solid, professional reason for action.

Even at home, if all you can do is repeat, "those are the rules," you sound and look weak because you apparently cannot support your order/request with logic or good reason. Indeed, if you can put rules or policies into context and explain how the rules or policies are good for everyone, you not only help people understand, you help them save face. Hence, you are much more likely to generate voluntary compliance, which is your goal!

6. "WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?"

This snotty, useless phrase turns the problem back on the person needing assistance. It signals this is a "you-versus-me" battle rather than an "us" discussion. The typical reaction is, "It's not my problem. You're the problem!"

The problem with the word problem is that it makes people feel deficient or even helpless. It can even transport people back to grade school where they felt misunderstood and underrated. Nobody likes to admit h/she has a problem. That's a weakness! When asked, "what's your problem?" the other already feels a failure. So the immediate natural reaction is, "I don't have one, you do!" which is a reaction that now hides a real need for help.

Substitute tactical phrases designed to soften and open someone up, like "What's the matter?", "How can I help?", or "I can see you're upset, let me suggest"

Remember, as an officer of peace, it is your business to find ways to gather good intel and to help those in need, not to pass judgments

7. "WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO ABOUT IT?"

A great cop-out (no pun...!) This pseudo-question, always accompanied by sarcasm, is clearly an evasion of responsibility and a clear sign of a lack of creativity! The phrase really reveals the speaker's exasperation and lack of knowledge. Often heard from untrained sales clerks and young officers tasked with figuring out how to help someone when the rules are not clear.

When you say, "What do you want me to do about it?" you can count on two problems: the one you started with and the one you just created by appearing to duck responsibility.

Instead, tactically offer to help sort out the problem and work toward a solution. If it truly is not in your area of responsibility, point the subject to the right department or persons that might be able to solve the problem.

If you are unable or unqualified to assist and you haven't a clue as to how to help the person, apologize. Such an apology almost always gains you an ally, one you may need at some later date. Beat cops need to remember it is important to "develop a pair of eyes" (contacts) every time they interact with the public. Had the officer said to the complainant, for example, "I'm sorry, I

really do not know what to recommend, but I wish I did, I'd like to help you," and coupled that statement with a concerned tone of voice and a face of concern, he would have gone a long way toward making that person more malleable and compliant for the police later down the road.

Remember, insult strengthens resistance and shuts the eyes. Civility weakens resistance and opens the eyes!

It's tactical to be nice!