

Featured Articles**From Crisis to Calm in Retail**

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Retail loss prevention professionals today are operating in an environment more volatile than ever before. With increased theft, including organized retail crime (ORC), and growing aggression toward staff, LP teams are under pressure to deter loss, protect employees, and avoid public relations disasters—often all at the same time. While many retailers have responded by locking merchandise, upgrading surveillance, or hiring more security, one essential piece is still frequently overlooked: the ability of frontline professionals to manage conflicts before they escalate.

As a former LP officer and LP manager who went on to a nearly three-decade career in law enforcement—including time as a senior investigator and crisis negotiator with the New York State Police—I've developed and tested the communication frameworks that help people navigate high-stress interactions safely. Through *From Crisis to Calm*, I teach LP

professionals to view de-escalation not as a set of phrases or techniques, but as an outcome to be pursued through situational awareness, emotional intelligence, and strategic communication.



Retail Is No Longer a Low Conflict Environment

In recent years, the stakes have risen. A 2023 National Retail Federation survey found that 81 percent of retailers reported increased aggression and violence in stores over the prior year, with LP officers frequently caught in the middle. Organized retail crime costs companies an average of \$700,000 per \$1 billion in sales. And the human cost—from burnout and turnover to injury and litigation—is harder to quantify but no less damaging.

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Too often, the assumption is that LP staff will “just handle it,” whether it’s an angry customer, a suspected shoplifter, or an emotionally unstable individual. Yet few are given the tools to do so safely. That’s where the modern LP mindset must evolve.

Why Traditional LP Training Falls Short

Most loss prevention training programs focus on surveillance, apprehension, and physical positioning—all important, but often missing the behavioral side of conflict:

- How to recognize signs of emotional escalation or intent to resist
- How to communicate under pressure without making things worse
- How to make judgment calls about whether to engage, redirect, or disengage

The result? LP staff are often left with two bad options: enforce a policy at all costs, or back off entirely. Neither reduces risk. Neither leads to professional outcomes. What’s needed is

a framework that helps staff influence behavior before it escalates—while keeping themselves and others safe.



De-Escalation Is an Outcome, Not an Action

One of the biggest misunderstandings in loss prevention today is the idea that de-escalation is something you “do” to a person. In reality, de-escalation is an outcome. It’s the result of choices made by both parties—a result heavily dependent on the actions of the individual encountered.

When we frame de-escalation as an outcome, it removes the unrealistic expectation that LP staff can always “talk someone down.” Instead, it teaches that:

- Your tone, body language, and words matter—but they don’t guarantee results

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- You are responsible for making influential decisions, not controlling others
- Even when de-escalation fails, your communication can still reduce liability and danger

This shift in mindset is essential for modern LP teams.

The Role of Situational Awareness and Hostile Intent Recognition

Before any words are spoken, LP professionals must be trained to read the room—literally. Situational awareness involves more than just watching merchandise or exits. It means:

- Scanning for behavioral red flags like pacing, object fixation, or sudden silence
- Reading emotional cues like fear, agitation, or avoidance
- Watching crowd dynamics and bystander reactions



Closely related is the ability to recognize hostile intent. Someone preparing to resist or lash out often telegraphs it through their body language, speech patterns, and movements. Training LP staff to spot these indicators early and fairly gives them a critical window to reposition, disengage, or communicate in a way that de-escalates the tension.

Professional Sincerity: Assertive, Empathetic, and Real

When it's time to engage, the goal is not to dominate or command compliance—it's to influence behavior through clear, respectful, and emotionally aware communication. That's where professional sincerity comes in.

Professional sincerity is a concept I developed—a style of communication that blends authority with empathy. It allows LP professionals to set boundaries without being aggressive, to validate feelings without condoning behavior, and to remain human even when things are tense.

Here are four detailed examples of how professional sincerity can be applied during a shoplifting detention to de-escalate conflict, maintain professionalism, and preserve the safety and dignity of all involved. Each example reflects verbal and nonverbal strategies to project calm authority, empathy, and clarity—essential elements of the method.

1. Respectfully Initiating the Stop

Scenario: A loss prevention officer approaches a suspected shoplifter as they pass all points of sale.

Professional sincerity in action:

- Calm, confident posture; hands visible; respectful distance maintained
- “Excuse me—I’m with store security. Can we step over here for a moment and talk?” (calm, non-accusatory)
- “You’re not under arrest, but I do need to speak with you about something I observed. I appreciate your cooperation.”

Why it works: It sets a tone of respectful authority and avoids humiliation or aggression, even before the situation escalates.



2. Acknowledging Stress, Not Just Behavior

Scenario: The individual becomes agitated or defensive (“I didn’t take anything!”).

Professional sincerity in action:

- “I hear that you’re upset. This can feel overwhelming. But I’m asking for your cooperation so we can sort this out without involving law enforcement.”
- Maintain calm eye contact, speak slowly, and avoid cornering or blocking exit points.

Why it works: Acknowledging emotions reduces perceived threat. It signals, “I see you as a person, not just a suspect,” which helps regain control.

3. Providing Options to Reduce Tension

Scenario: The suspect is unsure or panicking, possibly trying to flee or lash out.

Professional sincerity in action:

- “Here’s what’s going to happen. We can walk together to the office and have a conversation, or if you’d rather, I can call law enforcement to help resolve this.”
- “I’d much rather handle this privately and respectfully if you’re willing to talk with me.”

Why it works: Offering options (within policy) empowers the individual, helps preserve dignity, and signals a desire for cooperation over confrontation.

4. Maintaining Dignity After the Detention

Scenario: After recovering unpaid merchandise, the person is cooperative but ashamed or tearful.

Professional sincerity in action:

- “Look, I’m not here to judge you. Everyone makes mistakes. My job is to keep the store safe, and that includes how we treat people during situations like this.”
- “You were honest about what happened, and I respect that. Let’s take it one step at a time.”

Why it works: Humanizes the encounter. Helps prevent escalation due to shame, fear, or perceived disrespect. It's not just about preventing violence—it's about restoring calm and humanity.



The professional sincerity approach builds rapport quickly, reduces defensiveness, and sets the stage for voluntary cooperation. It allows us to communicate with calm, respectful authority while genuinely acknowledging the other person's perspective or emotions. It balances empathy with assertiveness to reduce defensiveness, build trust, and influence behavior without escalating tension—especially in high-stress or uncertain situations.

The Behavioral Change Stairway Model: Building Influence Step by Step

At the core of *From Crisis to Calm* is the Behavioral Change Stairway Model (BCSM), developed by the FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit. This framework outlines the path to influencing behavior through communication in five steps:

1. **Active Listening:** Demonstrating that you're paying attention without judgment
2. **Empathy:** Communicating understanding of the person's perspective
3. **Rapport:** Building trust through consistency, calmness, and clarity
4. **Influence:** Using that trust to introduce boundaries and solutions
5. **Behavioral Change:** The individual chooses to cooperate or disengage peacefully

The BCSM is not theoretical. It has been field tested in hostage negotiations, mental health crises, and volatile public encounters. In the LP world, it provides staff with a step-by-step guide to avoid confrontation and promote resolution.

Real World Results for LP Teams

Implementing the *From Crisis to Calm* framework leads to measurable improvements:

- **Fewer physical confrontations:** Staff are better able to redirect or disengage before things go hands-on
- **Reduced liability:** Communication strategies align with legal standards and reduce use-of-force claims
- **Improved morale and retention:** Staff feel more confident, capable, and supported in their roles
- **Stronger brand protection:** Negative public encounters are minimized, and customer complaints decrease

Influence Is the New Intervention

Retailers can no longer afford to rely on luck, instinct, or outdated confrontation models. As conflict in stores increases, so must our ability to manage it with professionalism and precision. Because in retail today, what gets stolen isn't always the biggest threat. Often, it's what gets broken—trust, safety, and reputation.



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Jeffrey G. Scholz is a retired New York State trooper with over 28 years in law enforcement, including time as senior investigator for BCI Training and crisis negotiation program coordinator. A nationally certified instructor and recipient of the NYSP George M. Searle Award, he has taught across the US on topics including de-escalation, crisis negotiation, and situational awareness. Now through 886 Consulting LLC, he continues to train law enforcement and civilians nationwide.