

CREATE SPACE TO DE-ESCALATE

Introduction

We face an incident. Perhaps we have an upset prisoner, a fight between prisoners, or a confrontation between a prisoner and an officer. We need to calm things down, understand what's happened, and find a solution preventing future problems. The first step is creating the space to de-escalate.

We can separate or restrain angry prisoners straight away. But understanding and solving the underlying issue is harder. The wing may be busy, noisy, and full of other prisoners. We may be working with a prisoner who is upset, angry or worried. We need to create the space to calm them down and allow a proper conversation.

We can create space by:

- Moving away from a tense situation to somewhere more private.
- Giving the prisoner time to reflect, allowing them to calm down and think about their goals.
- Reminding the prisoner that our Body-Worn camera is running and encouraging them to calm down accordingly.
- Choosing a neutral space to talk, preferably away from the wing.

These may not all be possible: there may not be enough staff on duty to get off the wing and talk. But anything we can do to detach the prisoner from the scene of the incident should help them calm down and respond more positively. We want to create an environment in which we can take the subsequent de-escalation steps, like finding out what the prisoner wants and giving them choices. Creating space makes this conversation possible.

How can you pursue this strategy?

- Create Space:** At its simplest, we create space by moving away from a tense situation. When a prisoner can still see or hear the person they're in conflict with, the conflict can continue. We need space between us and the prisoner, and space between the prisoner and others. In creating this space, we need to choose body language which keeps us safe but shows that we're calm. This defuses the situation, and makes it easier to start talking carefully, rather than reacting emotionally.
- Give time:** Before a prisoner is ready to talk honestly about what's happened, they might need time and space to reflect. They may just need time to calm down and become a little less emotional. They may need time away from prison officers. They may need to rethink what's happened,

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what's been said, and what they've done. We want them to think beyond right now and consider what they're working towards. Giving them time also gives us time to calm down, review what happened, and plan what we'll say and ask. We might also check in with colleagues, other prisoners or intelligence reports.

- C. **Choose distance:** If we have more time, or need a longer conversation, we might see if we can find a neutral venue away from other prisoners. This might mean a meeting room, an office away from the wing, or a dedicated room in the Care and Separation Unit. If we are able to get away from cells and landings, we can create privacy, allowing the prisoner to talk more freely.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Delaying action or response:** If we need to respond quickly to a situation – for example, if we think a prisoner is at risk – we may need to modify our approach. For example, we might not want to leave a prisoner alone in their cell before talking. We can still apply the underlying principle, however. For example, we may not be able to give them half an hour to calm down – but we could instead say, “I’m coming back in two minutes and we’ll talk then – use that time to think about what you want to tell me and what we can do to solve this.” Similarly, we may not be able to get them off the wing, but we could at least move them to the other end of the landing.

Case Study

Officer Blake is on duty on the 1st floor landing. You notice a prisoner who is getting very aggressive with another officer on the ground floor. The officer seeks further assistance, and alongside the other officer you walk the prisoner back to their cell on the 1st floor. You decide to not speak to them following the incident to give them some space to calm down. In the afternoon when the prisoner is unlocked, they decide to jump onto the netting in protest that “no one is taking their problems seriously”.

This is a **non-example** because creating space is not just about giving prisoners time to calm down. It is also about finding an appropriate time and place for a prisoner to talk where they are likely to feel safe to open up.

An example in this situation would be if the officer upon locking the prisoner up initially told them: “I will come and speak to you in about 5 minutes. I want to hear what is going on with you.” Then the officer upon their return could ask the prisoner if they feel comfortable speaking to them at the door of the cell. Some

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prisoners may be comfortable opening up to officers while locked in their cell while others won't.

Mitigations to using this technique

Consider the following questions to think about the circumstances when you would and wouldn't choose to use this technique:

- Are there situations when you would actively choose not to give prisoners space? Would it be sometimes disrespectful or perhaps unsafe?
- Would you use this technique the same with all prisoners in your care?
- What spaces would you use in your establishment to have a more private conversation with a prisoner?

Final Reflection Questions

Answer these final questions to help to consolidate your learning and consider how you will use this technique in your day-to-day practice in your current working context.

- What is the goal? What are prison officers looking to achieve by using this technique?
- Why should this technique work? How should prisoners behave differently?
- What do you need to do? Outline the key success checks you need to meet to apply this technique?
- What are the pitfalls? When shouldn't we use this technique? What barriers do you foresee to using this technique? How could you overcome them?