

GIVE CHOICES

Introduction

De-escalation is complete when the prisoner begins acting appropriately – or commits to doing so in future. Giving choices is a powerful way to ensure this happens. People want control over their lives (**look at strategy 8: least invasive intervention**). Giving them choices increases their sense of control. It has two further advantages too. First, prisoners are more likely to follow through with actions they've chosen than with actions we've chosen for them. Second, choosing may help them learn to make better decisions in future. So, where possible, we should help prisoners choose what to do next.

Giving prisoners choices doesn't mean giving up on prison rules or offering prisoners total control over what's happening. It's not a free choice, in which a prisoner might decide "I'm going to keep playing pool, instead of going back to my cell." Usually, we'll decide the options. For example, we might say, "We can settle this now, or I can call the SO and he can give his input." This is a genuine choice. But it's a choice between two acceptable options. Indeed, here we've rigged the scales: settling things now benefits everyone.

We're not suggesting bribing prisoners – nor are we suggesting lowering your expectations. If a prisoner's behaviour merits an adjudication or an intelligence report, we shouldn't offer a choice which avoids this. But there's always scope for choice about how things are done. "Are you going to stop shouting now, so we can sort things out, or do you want a few more minutes to calm down?" is a choice. It's not inspiring, but it gives the prisoner the chance to make a positive decision and move towards a resolution.

We can use choices to complete the de-escalation of an incident. We might ask, "Can I trust you to get to the shower now, or do I need to watch you all the way there?" Or, "Are you ready to go and get your meal, or do you want a minute more to calm down?" We're encouraging the prisoner to commit to a desired behaviour (or commit to avoiding an undesired behaviour). This sets them up to get on with the day without further problems.

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Give options:** As you de-escalate a situation, look for choices and trade-offs. For example, we can often offer prisoners the choice between doing something now or doing it later. Either way, the prisoner does it. But they can choose to get it over with – or to delay, giving them time to calm down and accept they need to act. When we look for trade-offs, we can work with what the prisoner wants. There's always something – even if it's just being

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left in peace. So, we might say, “The sooner we get this done, the sooner you can get back to watching TV.” Again, we’re offering them a simple choice which can feel like it’s working in their favour.

- B. **Offer genuine choices:** For this to work for prisoners, we must offer real choices. For example, “Do as I tell you, or I’ll nick you,” is a kind of choice, but it sounds more like a threat. We can reframe this into something which has the same effect, but offers more of a choice: “Would you rather do as you’ve been asked now, or do I need to make things a little bit more formal?” We must offer choices where we can live with either outcome. For example, if we offer a choice between doing as requested, or going to adjudication, we need to be equally happy taking either path.
- C. **Follow through:** Once a prisoner has made a choice, we need to ensure that it happens. For example, if we say, “You can either go to education or stay in your cell,” and they choose to stay in their cell, we can’t then let them out for a shower and a phone call. That’s not the choice they made. Equally, if the choice is, “Calm down or I’ll have to get you away from here,” and they don’t calm down, we need to get them away. Following through on their choices is essential for their control to feel real, and for our credibility and authority.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Bribing prisoners to be good:** It can be extremely tempting to bargain with prisoners to persuade them to do (or not do) something. That’s not what we’re suggesting. For example, imagine a prisoner repeatedly pressing the call button because another prisoner has forgotten to return something to them. We could get them to stop by passing the object between cells for them. But if we wouldn’t normally do that, we shouldn’t do it now. Doing so would encourage the prisoner to repeat the demand, encourage other prisoners to emulate them, and undermine normal practice. Offering prisoners choices shouldn’t stretch beyond anything we would normally do.
- **Not following through:** If a prisoner makes a choice and we don’t follow through on it, we risk making ourselves look unreliable. We also show that the choice the prisoner made wasn’t a valid one. When a prisoner makes a choice, we need to stick with it. This creates a consistent and predictable environment: the prisoner learns that the consequence of their action is the consequence they expected. This, in turn, allows them to be more confident in making choices in future.

Case Study

Think about this example when an officer is completing searches:

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Prison officer: I need to search you before you head back from your visit.
Prisoner: You're not searching me, I need to get back to my cell, what are you going to do?
Prison officer: You need to be searched first.
Prisoner: No way, leave me alone, let me get back to my cell.
Prison officer: You have to be searched, now.
Prisoner: No way.
Prison officer: Fine, but this could mean no visit next week.
Prisoner: You have to be kidding me. [Walks off, shouting.]

This is of course a **non-example** because the officer simply fails to give the prisoner choices. The officer starts by issuing an instruction then repeating their instruction before finally explaining what consequence there might be for their behaviour.

An example in this instance would involve giving the prisoner a genuine choice to make and articulating the consequences to each of those choices. The officer could say "Look, can we get this done quickly, so that you can get back and get on with your afternoon? Or are you going to mess around meaning it will take a lot longer to get back to your cell?"

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:

- Can you always give prisoners choices?
- Which situations would it be inappropriate to use the give choices technique?
- Could giving a prisoner choices ever escalate the situation?

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?