

## **Verbal Judo: The Gentle Art of Persuasion**

*Verbal Judo, or tactical communication, is the gentle art of persuasion that redirects others' behavior with words and generates voluntary compliance. Referee sat down with Dr. George Thompson shortly before his presentation on Verbal Judo at the NASO Summit in Salt Lake City.*

**Referee:** You started Verbal Judo specifically for police officers?

**Thompson:** I did. I became a policeman when I was 35. I was an English professor for 10 years, teaching Shakespeare and Milton and directing a writing program. I got put on every committee because I was quite successful at persuading people to do things. Pretty soon I was hardly teaching. I got bored. I had a friend that I used to go to the gym with who happened to be a cop. He said, "You know, you ought to come on out and try police work as a reserve." I signed up as a reserve and got some training and went out on the streets. I loved it, kicking in doors, arresting the bad guys. But I had a quick temper and I didn't know how to really talk to people. That's when I discovered that the great cops had no language for what they do. I would ask them, "How come you didn't lose your temper?" "Well, I don't know." "How come you knew to handle it that way, because I'd have never thought of that." "Well, I don't know; I've been doing this for 20 years." I said, "Doing what?" They'd say, "Well, you know." I said, "No, I don't know." I would get complaints because I was too aggressive. I didn't know how to talk to people, so I started to watch. I started to shut up and to watch. I learned that these guys are very successful rhetoricians. I had the academic background and the rhetorical background – the art of persuasion. So I said, you know, I'd better turn that on and start looking at what these guys are doing. I went on sabbatical from my university to go full time as a policeman for a year and study how they talk. I didn't think I'd discover much; I really just wanted a year off. To make a long story short, I never went back.

**Referee:** Verbal Judo is the result of your yearlong study, right? So what did you learn?

**Thompson:** All I've done with Verbal Judo is put language to what great communicators have always done. I'm giving it a language so we can replicate it in others. I can take 20 years of an officer's experience, and I can give a lot of it to a rookie very quickly. It's teachable. Where before it was unconscious competence, it now

becomes conscious competence. My contribution is both major and very minimal. I invented nothing. What I did was give names to things that great communicators, far better than I ever was, have been doing for years.

**Referee:** What are the basics of the Verbal Judo model and how would they apply to sports officials?

**Thompson:** There are five steps to take when you're dealing with a difficult person. The first step is you can ask for someone's cooperation or tell them. Better to ask than tell. Step two, set the context. Tell them why. Say, "Would you come over here a minute? Let me tell you why I need to talk to you." When you set context, 70 percent or more of the people will do what you want them to do because you've explained yourself, showed them respect. Everybody thinks they deserve to know something. Don't tell people to do stuff without telling them why. A lot of people think telling people why is weak. It's actually extremely strong. Let me tell you why. Let me tell you why I made that call. Let me tell you why this man is being ejected from the game. I'll be glad to tell you. That gives you confidence if you know the rulebook. You've got to know what you're talking about. If you don't know the rules, you're done. So you ask, tell them why, then step three – you give them options. How do you present options? There are three tricks to it. One, the voice has to sound like you care that he takes a good option. Two, options put positives first, negatives second, which is not natural. It's natural for a referee to say, "You want to be thrown out of the game?" Never do that. Never put the negative first. Put the positive options, because if you put the negative first, the fight is on. Positive softens them up, calms them down. They like that because it's in their best interest. Always put their best interests first. Put the positives first, then the negative, then re-emphasize the positive. That's the second secret. The third secret of options, be specific. Don't say, "You'll be in trouble." It's too vague. Describe the trouble. "I want you to stay in this game, but let me tell you what's going to happen if you continue to yell. You will be ejected from the game. You know what that means? That means this guy that you don't think is very good who is your assistant coach is going to run this team in this crucial game. So why don't you just smile as if we both have agreed that both of us are right, and go sit down." That's the way I talk to them. So the voice has to be pleasant, you put the positive first, you're always specific, and finally use the greed principle, the selfish principle, Thompson's law. If a man has something to gain or lose, you've got something to use to persuade him. Everybody's selfish when it's pointed out. "Look, it's in your best

interest to back it off, get off the field and let us continue this game, sir, because if you do not, remember the negative options here as well." People almost never go against their best interests when they're clearly, specifically, calmly pointed out. It also makes me look good because I'm trying to help you. I used to tell people, "Look, sir, I'm your friend. You don't want to go to jail tonight." Or, "Look, you are going to jail, but only for \$30 and overnight. You don't need to go for resisting arrest. That's a felony, buddy, and then you're talking \$500 and 90 days in jail. Why don't you just cooperate?" See, positive, negative, re-emphasize the positive. That's step three. Step four is the ultimate nicety. Let's say the coach says, "I'm not stepping off the field." You say, "Is there anything that I could say at this time or my colleagues could say at this time to get you to step back on the sidelines so we can proceed with this game as we both, I would like to think, would want to? Is there anything I could say, sir, to get you to do that? I'd like to think so." If the answer is no, he's gone.

**Referee:** That's one last chance.

**Thompson:** That's it. Then you have to act. That's step five. So ask, tell them why, give them options and then confirm. I'm confirming that the opposition I hear is absolutely true. You know, it's interesting. Everybody talks resistance. They have to pose, they have to puff up in front of their team so they look good. He's defending us, he's with us. I understand that. That's all smoke. Very few people really want to get thrown out of the game. Very few people want to be penalized another 15 yards. Find out, confirm. Now any official can go back to his or her boss or supervisor, whoever asks and completely defend the action. "Look, I asked if words would work and he said no." Notice how much stronger the position of the official is. "I didn't just toss him out because I got angry. I asked him would words work and he said no, so in the interest of the game and the interest of the fans, that man had to be taken off." I need to act in such a way that you can defend me. If I use profanity – "Get the F out of here!" – and that's complained about, I don't give my boss any grounds to defend me. How do you defend a guy who can't control his tongue? You can't.

**Referee:** Had you ever thought about applying Verbal Judo to sports officials before now?

**Thompson:** No, which is surprising because other than cops, no one takes more abuse and is potentially in more dangerous situations than sports officials. But I never have been asked to referee anything. I was an athlete, so I was always being refereed, if you will. I've never known really what they did, but since the article Referee did on Verbal

Judo a couple of years ago, I started to really think about that. Officials desperately need this. It's not about arguing. An argument is where two people square off, if you will. I don't argue. See, the rules are not arguable. The call may be arguable, but an official doesn't argue about the call. He made the call. Then the issue becomes, OK, you guys are the experts, you make the call. Now, how do you deliver that call and how do you handle the flak that comes from that delivery? In Verbal Judo I teach that 93 percent of your positive or negative impact on people is your delivery style. The content, the "call," is seven to 10 percent. People can get upset at that, but it's all about how you handle it, how you called it in the first place, and how you handle their objections. The fact that the referee is right is not going to pacify anybody. Nobody cares. In fact, they probably don't agree, so now we have disagreement. We know that your tone of voice and your whole verbal personality is 33 to 40 percent of your impact. But your other non-verbals, by which we mean your facial expressions, the way you walk, the way you stand around, is 60 percent. So there's 60 plus 33, there's your 93 percent. If I'm talking to you and you roll your eyes at me, that can go to 100 percent. Now I know you're not listening and you're negative, so then I immediately explode. Delivery is everything.

**Referee:** What else from Verbal Judo do you see exporting directly to sports officiating?

**Thompson:** First of all, you have to be a model of communication. Everything starts and ends with your ability to communicate. You have to be elite. You cannot ever lose your temper. The idea of an umpire or a referee losing his or her temper is unthinkable. You must model, number one. A lot of the younger guys are intimidated by conflict and verbal abuse. Conflict is an opportunity. When people get angry with me in the street, I become calmer, more pleasant. I become more tactically civil. Not softness, but tactical civility. Because it's good for me. See, we know that if you argue with somebody, or you insult somebody, or you react to somebody, you make them stronger. You strengthen their resistance. We know that civility weakens, it keeps people down, makes them calmer, makes them less aggressive. Nobody teaches that. We think being nice is backing off. If you remember the movie Roadhouse, do you remember what the lead character says to his bouncers? "Be nice. If you have to escort a man out, do it, and be nice. If it takes two of you to escort him, do it, and be nice." When you throw somebody down in police work, we teach them to talk nice, we teach them to use peace language. "Please don't struggle; we don't want to hurt you, sir," rather than "Hey, take that,"

which is natural. So one of the things officials need to know is natural language is disastrous, tactical language is necessary. How do you deflect an insult? "You know, that was a horrible call; you shouldn't be in refereeing." Well, how do you do that? Number one, you can take abuse. But you know what? You can only take it so long before you snap or it gets to you. Secondly, rather than do that, you can become aggressive: "Shut up! I don't have to take that from you! You're out of this game." Those are the two you have – ignore it or get drawn into it. But with Verbal Judo we teach there's a third option – deflect and move. Deflect, so it doesn't get to you, with a verbal phrase, such as, "Look, sir, I can see you're upset and I'm sorry you feel that way, but let me tell you exactly why I called it as I did. ..." Those are deflectors: "I can see you're upset and I hear what you're saying. I got that. Sorry you feel that way. I can appreciate that and I can understand where you're coming from."

**Referee:** How is Verbal Judo different from other similar courses, like an anger management program?

**Thompson:** All the anger management classes of which I know, and all the touchy-feely approaches to communication don't work. They do not work. First of all, people who teach them have not been there. Second, the moment that you hear words like, "Well, let me share something with you," people turn off. "So you really feel angry at me?" Yes, I do. That's the kind of thing there's too much of, and athletes aren't going to listen to that. They don't preach the right doctrine. Verbal Judo is the only course that has actually come from cops and hard-nosed people who deal with hard-nosed people. Here's what I preach to cops: You have to be a peace warrior. Much the same would be true for a referee or an umpire. What you're doing is you're running a ballgame and you are the cop there. You must be a peace warrior in the sense that nothing upsets you, everything you do brings peace and harmony to that game, and makes it move, beginning, middle and end. You don't become personally involved – ever. See, I teach tactical schizophrenia. Nobody had ever heard of that.

**Referee:** What is that?

**Thompson:** People say, "Leave things at the door when you go into the locker room." Let me tell you what tactical schizophrenia is. George Thompson stays at home. Officer Thompson works the streets. George Thompson doesn't have to like anybody or anything. Referee Thompson has to handle everybody and appreciate differences. You change when you go to work. You should never show any personal anything. It's a job out there, and you become whoever you have to

be to get the job done. If I have to look pleasant when I don't feel pleasant, that's what I do. If I have to look intimidating as if I'm about to eject you, that's what I do. And I'd better be able to put on a face and a tone of voice to carry the message.

**Referee:** You've developed Verbal Judo modules for business professionals, teachers and airline employees. Are you developing one for sports officials?

**Thompson:** I'm (at the NASO Summit) to get some information. What I can do is I can easily tailor a course. I'm here to learn, to get examples. I think probably eight hours or two days would be enough to teach it. What we really could do is do an instructor course for the best people to attend from around the country, and let me teach them. Nobody has either the money or the time for me to go teach every referee in the country. What we can do is do an instructor, as I do with police now and corporations. I go in and I teach a cadre of the best people, professional instructors, to go back to their high schools, their colleges, their leagues, and teach. So part of training to be a referee could involve so many hours in tactical communication. The real point is, rules are rules. Any fool can learn a rulebook. The real business is delivering that and keeping your cool, and we don't teach that. Police work is 98 percent verbal interaction with the public. They never taught it before Verbal Judo. They teach you how to shoot, how to drive, how to use a stick, how to use cuffs, how to use mace, they teach you the law. Nobody teaches you how to talk to people. I can do that.

For more information on Dr. Thompson's Verbal Judo program and his books, *Verbal Judo: The Gentle Art of Persuasion*, *Verbal Judo: Redirecting Behavior With Words* and *Verbal judo: Words as a Force Option*, please go to [www.verbaljudo.com](http://www.verbaljudo.com).