



## Don't Get "Rope-A-Doped"!

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Boxing champion Muhammad Ali recently passed away and as I was growing up I admired him as a boxer. Besides being a talented athlete, Ali was a master at using psychology against his opponents. One of his most successful psychological tricks was what he called the "rope-a-dope." The rope-a-dope technique was primarily focused on getting his opponent to "lose his cool."

Ali would allow his opponent to get in close and pummel him for a while. Ali would use his arms to protect his face and torso, and lean back against the ropes, using the elasticity in the ropes to help absorb the impacts of his opponent's blows. While his opponent would swing at him, Ali would *verbally taunt* his opponent as he ducked, weaved, and absorbed some blows. The verbal taunts and insults would enrage his opponent—who would swing harder and faster, over and over again. Before long his opponent would become exhausted from the exertion of all of the swings, and would no longer be thinking clearly because of his anger over the verbal insults. It was at this point that Ali would strike, coming off the ropes full of energy and with a clear mind to fight his opponent. This strategy won him many fights. He called it the rope-a-dope because he was able to *rope* in his opponent and get him to act like a *dope*. Ali's goal, as he would later describe, was not to put fear in his opponent but to film them with anger.

**Far too often today, I believe, police officers are being rope-a-doped by manipulative people out on the street.** YouTube© is filled with videos of officers who have fallen prey to the rope-a-dope by a citizen who has taunted the officer into acting like a dope. Individuals and organized groups with anti-police agendas are actively trying to entice officers to act inappropriately so that they can catch the officer's reaction on video and become the next viral video sensation. We need to keep our guard up against the rope-a-dope.

### **How Do You Know When You Have Been Rope-A-Doped?**

There are several clear warning signs that you have been successfully rope-a-doped and are about to say or do something that will have a negative impact on your career. One is the "resume recital" which sounds something like, "Do you know how long I have been a police officer? I don't have to take this crap. I was a cop since before you were born!"

Another warning sign is the Robert De Niro impression from the movie *Taxi Driver*. You know what this sounds like – “You talkin’ to me? ARE YOU TALKIN’ TO ME? I know you aren’t talkin’ to ME like that.”

A third warning sign, as described by Sgt. Danny Nieters of the Raleigh Police Department, is the *insult see-saw*. For example, the citizen taunts you with an insult and you reply back with the same insult. This sound like, “F\*\*\* me? No, f\*\*\* you!”

A fourth warning sign is when you start to say things like, “You know, I don’t get paid to take this s\*\*\*” or “I don’t have time for this s\*\*\*.” Sorry folks, but those of us who voluntarily signed up to work in public safety signed up to take “this s\*\*\*.” As for having enough time for “this shit,” unless it is an emergency situation, you *do* have time for “this s\*\*\*.”

A fifth warning sign that you are off your game and have been successfully rope-a-doped by a manipulative person is when you disregard your officer safety tactics by puffing up your chest and moving in close, nose-to-nose with them, often with your hand raised and finger pointed at the person. You know better. You know that the safest position is the stance 45 degrees bladed away from the citizen, with your firearm side away from the citizen, and beyond easy punching or kicking range. If you give up this position of safety and move in close, you are off your game.

Finally, the ultimate warning sign that you have been rope-a-doped is when you threaten the person with arrest when the person has cleverly avoided doing anything that would give you probable cause to support an arrest. “Do you wanna go to jail?!” This angry rhetorical question looks ridiculous when the person responds with the question that cannot be intelligently answered in such a situation: “Go to jail for what?” Some painfully unwise responses to this last question have been uttered by officers in viral videos.

### **How Should You Handle the Rope-A-Dope?**

The first step in preparing to handle the rope-a-dope is to be aware that the tactic exists, to watch for it, and identify it for what it is. Just as you watch the driver’s hands on a traffic stop, scanning for a weapon or any furtive movements indicating an attack, you need to listen to the citizen’s words and scan for signs of a rope-a-dope. **Consider a rope-a-dope to be an attack on your career because *it is*. If you fall prey to it, you could easily do or say something that could ruin your career and deny you that pay, benefits package, and pension you have worked so hard to earn.**

When you spot the rope-a-dope, you should be able to say to yourself, “Aha, the rope-a-dope. Well this guy isn’t going to get me. I’m not bringing this miserable human being home for dinner with me.” You may ask what I mean by, “bringing him home for dinner?” This means you talk about this person at the dinner table with your family staying things like, “I don’t care if he complains” or “He was a jerk.” We know, however, that you do care about the complaint. Down deep you know he or she performed a solid rope-a-dope on you and you agonize inside, or with your significant other, about what might happen to your career because of what you said. So watch for, and spot, the rope-a-dope.

The next step is to use verbal deflectors to get past the verbal abuse. **A verbal deflector briefly acknowledges the insult, but then immediately follows with a conjunction that redirects the conversation back to the point at hand.** For example, a citizen might say, “This is profiling and you’re a racist.” Your response could be, “I hear what you’re saying, you think I’m a racist, however here is my reason for stopping you today.” A complainant at a call may yell, “What took you so long? I called a half an hour ago! Where were you, at a donut shop?” Your response could be, “I hear what you’re saying. You’re angry we weren’t here quicker, but we’re here now. What can we do to help you now?” Other common deflector statements include, “I appreciate that,” “nothing wrong with that,” “I understand that,” and “I might feel the same way if I was in your situation.” These deflectors have been used for decades by experienced officers on the street, and their effectiveness has been studied and advocated by authors like Dr. George Thompson, creator of *Verbal Judo*®. Always remember that the deflector is followed by “however” and a redirection back to the business at hand. “I hear you and I see you’re upset, HOWEVER, I need to see where the burglar entered the home”.

Another step to handling the rope-a-dope is when you realize that you have just been successfully sucked in and fallen for the ploy. When you catch yourself having been successfully rope-a-doped, call a time out. Some damage to your career may have already been done, but the situation still might be salvageable if you reverse course now. If you continue down the rope-a-dope path, it will only get worse for you. To call a time out, use the nonverbal “time-out” signal used in basketball and say, “Whoa, that didn’t come out right. Can I start over? We got off to a bad start there, so let’s start over.”

Finally, let’s watch out for one another on the street. Law enforcement officers across the country won’t hesitate to risk their lives to ensure one another’s physical safety, but we also need to be doing the same to protect one another’s *career safety*. You might start to see the warning signs that a colleague is about to make a career-altering statement or action, so step in to save that officer. You can step up and take over the interaction while allowing your fellow officer to take a break from dealing with the manipulative citizen.

### Conclusion

Too many officers are allowing themselves to be rope-a-doped by manipulative citizens and becoming YouTube® sensations that make all of us look bad. These officers, most of whom are excellent officers 99% of the time, were trapped into a rope-a-dope situation where they lost their tempers, embarrassed our entire profession, and did serious damage to their own careers. This doesn’t have to keep happening. Yes, there are manipulative people out there intentionally trying to push our buttons by insulting us and taunting us. But just as we must not let them win in a physical confrontation, we cannot let them achieve their goals of ruining our careers with mere words. Exercise the skills we teach in our *Surviving Verbal Conflict*® courses. Watch for the rope-a-dope and identify it when it comes. Defend against it with verbal deflectors and practice these verbal deflectors with your fellow officers when you have down time so you can hone your verbal skills. If you find yourself being rope-a-doped, call a time out and start over. Finally, watch your colleagues’ backs. Save them if you see them falling for the rope-a-dope.

Don’t get rope-a-doped!