



Verbal Contact and Cover

Protecting Your Colleagues and Your Profession

[Chief Harry P. Dolan \(Ret.\)](#)

March, 2017

Far too often today, I believe, police officers are being ‘rope-a-doped’ by manipulative people out on the street. Taken from the tactic famously employed by boxing legend Muhammad Ali, the ‘rope-a-dope’ is when a challenging or manipulative person says things that are intentionally crafted to get under your skin, make you angry, and get you to act unprofessionally. 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. We need to be aware that the tactic exists, watch for it, and identify it for what it is. Just as you watch the driver’s hands, scanning for weapons or any furtive movements indicating an attack, we 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. Falling prey to the rope-a-dope also tarnishes our entire profession as video of your unprofessional response is broadcast around the world on the internet.

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.” **Use verbal deflectors to step over the insults and keep the conversation on topic, avoid getting angry, and explain the options to the citizen to gain their compliance. You are a professional: you cannot let yourself be rope-a-doped.** However, what about letting your partner get rope-a-doped? In public safety we are very good about protecting each other and looking out for one another’s physical safety. Do we also look out for each other’s career safety? I believe we need to do a better job of helping each other on the street by protecting each other from the dangers posed by the citizen rope-a-dope.

Verbal Contact and Cover

Law enforcement officers, firefighters, and paramedics across the country would not 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. If so, it is imperative that you step in to save that officer from doing or saying something they will long regret. **Just as we use the contact and cover method to protect each other's physical safety, we also need to do the same for career safety.**

In the contact and cover method practiced for officer physical safety, the primary officer deals directly with the citizen, while the second officer stands back, remains quiet, watches the primary officer's back, and scans the area for danger. **In verbal contact and cover, the backup officer also listens to the primary officer's words and scans for signs that the primary officer is falling prey to the rope-a-dope. If the primary officer does fall prey to the rope-a-dope, the backup officer can step up and take over the interaction, allowing the rope-a-doped officer to take a break from dealing with the manipulative citizen.** The rope-a-doped officer moves back from the interaction and takes over the backup officer role, remaining silent as the other officer takes over interacting with the citizen. We teach this verbal contact and cover technique in our *Surviving Verbal Conflict*® course.

How do you know when your partner is becoming rope-a-doped? There are several warning signs. One warning sign is the resume recital, which sound something like, "Do you know how long I have been a police officer? I do not have to take this crap. I was a cop since before you were born!" Another is the Robert De Niro impression from the movie *Taxi Driver*, which sounds like "Are you talking to me? I know you aren't talking to ME like that." A third warning sign is the *insult seesaw*, such as "Screw me? Well, screw you!" A fourth warning sign is statements like "You know, I don't get paid to take this crap." A fifth warning sign is when your partner disregards his or her personal safety by moving in close, nose-to-nose with the citizen. A final warning sign is when your partner threatens to arrest the person when the person has cleverly avoided doing anything that would give you probable cause to support an arrest. When you are serving as the backup officer, seeing any of these warning signs should motivate you to step in and help your partner, because your partner can no longer help himself.

One discrete and tactful way to communicate to your partner that he or she is being rope-a-doped is to develop a code word. Develop a code word on your department, or in your squad, that will signal to your partners that they have been rope-a-doped, that they need to take a breather, that you are stepping in to take over, and that does so in a manner that still allows them to save face in front of the citizen. In a past conversation with Vistelar instructors Gary Klugiewicz and Tony Pinelle, we discussed that they often trained medical professionals dealing with irate patients to advise an emotionally compromised co-worker that "Supervisor Coffee" needs their help elsewhere. In the public safety context, I always use the "Sergeant Coffee" rescue.

Say your partner is being rope-a-doped and starts playing the insult seesaw with a manipulative citizen. Step forward and say, "Hey Kevin, Sergeant Coffee wants you to call him right away. I'll talk to this guy while you take care of that." This allows your partner time to back away from the conversation and calm down while he pretends to call "Sergeant Coffee" on his cell phone or radio.

You can then take over the interaction while allowing your partner to save face in front of the manipulative citizen.

Conclusion

Always remember that public safety professionals are, in the overwhelming majority of cases, following their life's calling to be of service to others. They will risk their life at one o'clock in the morning to save a perfect stranger. They run toward danger, all the while hoping they get there first to be of service. **Why do they stand by when a partner is suffering from the rope-a-dope? The answer is that they are human beings who can suffer from the "bystander" or "groupthink" effect like anyone else in any profession.** They tend to look around at others for social clues and see that no one else is doing anything to intervene either. **When we train public safety professionals in the verbal contact and cover principle, they learn to overcome the bystander effect and act.**

In the public safety profession, we trust one another with our lives. We should also protect one another's careers, and protect the image of our entire profession. Too often public safety officials on the street, in a moment of frustration or mental exhaustion, have said or done something that cost them their careers or even their freedom. **I bet these individuals would give anything to have had a partner there who truly had their back and was willing to step in and save them from themselves. Are you willing to be that kind of partner to your colleagues?**