

Managing a crowd

Would you like to start a border crossing business?

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In the past weeks I've been dealing with something I had almost no experience with until then: **managing a crowd**. During that I learned a few tricks and I'd like to share them with you, although I have no idea whether you'll use them at all.

Twice in the past weeks, I've spent a few days volunteering at the Serbo-Croatian border crossing Berkasovo/Bapska. About five to ten thousand refugees passed through the crossing every day. You can read more about my experience there in this (Czech) [article](#) (from the first visit) and this [photo album](#) (from the second visit).

My observations are obviously based on my experience at the border crossing, which is clearly quite specific; but I believe that some of this can be transferred to other fields. Use your own judgement.

Starting information:

- People **speak different languages** (in practice about 60 % speak Arabic, 30 % Persian, the rest some other language), **about one fifth of them speak English**.
- The **refugees travelled in families of various sizes**, from three to five members to big groups of twenty people. **Separation of family members was one of the big fears** which we tried hard to prevent.
- There were **elderly people, pregnant women, and very sick people**.
- Sometimes the situation would be very calm and people just passed through; at other times we'd have a crowd of several hundred people, which kept moving through; and sometimes we would get a huge crowd of up to several thousand people which would not move for several hours, causing tension.
- We had about 20-40 volunteers for crowd management.

Do not forget yourself and your own safety!

However much the volunteers can help to calm the crowd down and increase the safety of its members, they should not forget **their own comfort and safety** while doing that.

- Comfort means to take care of the basics: **drink and eat from time to time; dress warmly**.
- Safety means assessing if the situation is getting to the point that there is a danger that the crowd will get out of control and that the volunteers could get hurt. **In such a case, it**

is necessary to retreat and let the situation unfold on its own. Although it will certainly mean the situation will deteriorate, it will work out in the end.

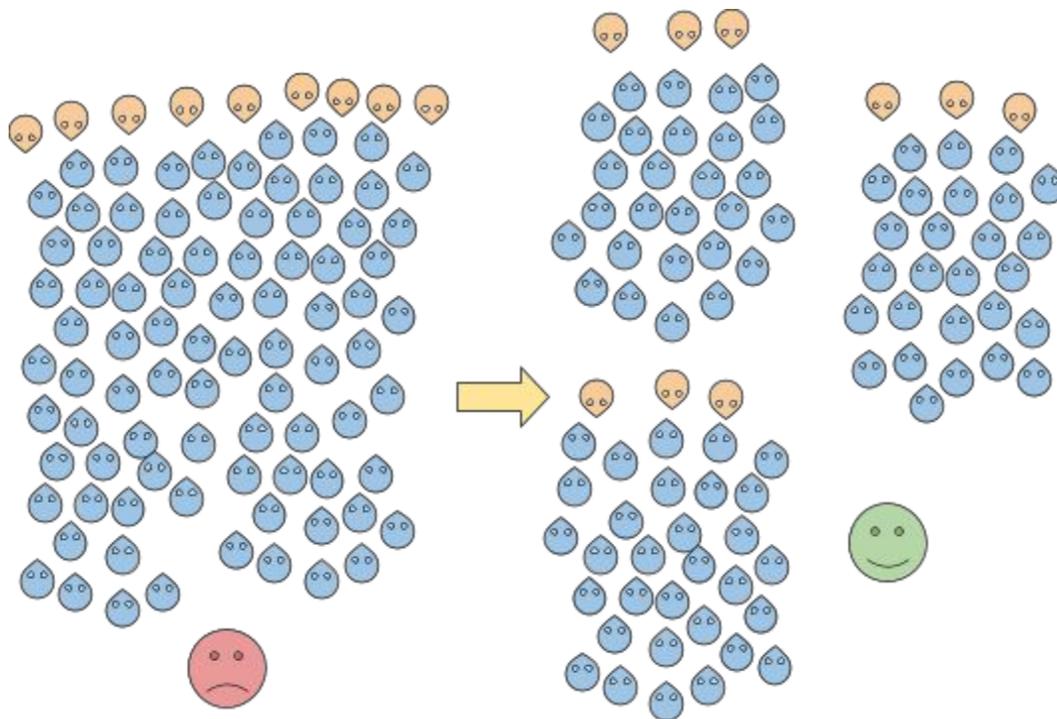
To start with: Key general statements about crowds

- **A crowd is composed of individual human beings**
- **The individuals in a crowd are generally good** and they have natural basic needs; however, **a crowd as a whole can be evil** and go against an individual's needs (e.g. no individual in the crowd wants someone to be crushed, but a crowd can crush a person).
- **Problems are created by a lack of information** and insufficient dissemination of it throughout the members of the crowd. It is therefore essential to inform everyone regularly - not just informing those in front, but going through the crowd and informing everyone. If they do not speak our language, **we need to find someone who speaks English and ask them to interpret.**
- Crowds have **their own dynamics and mood** - sometimes the crowd is calm, people are sitting down or standing peacefully; other times people start pushing a bit and talking; in the worst case there are fights, people are shouting at each other and pushing forward
- **It is much easier to excite a crowd than to calm it down** - so we need to be very careful not to excite a calm crowd by accident, for example by saying "the buses are coming!" even though people will still need to wait for an hour before it's their turn.
- To draw a parallel with the point above - **it is much easier to get a crowd to walk than to stop it** - if the crowd is standing, let it stand for as long as possible.
- If we only want to make part of the crowd walk and leave the rest standing, **we first need to inform those who will be standing that they'll be standing and only then tell those who'll be walking that they can go.** If we do it the other way around, everyone will start walking and it won't be possible to stop them

So how to deal with a crowd then? Basic dance moves

A smaller group is easier to manage

The bigger a group of people is, the harder it is to manage them. The difficulty is not directly proportional to the number of people, but rather grows exponentially. **It is therefore key to keep the crowd divided into smaller groups which are much easier to manage.**



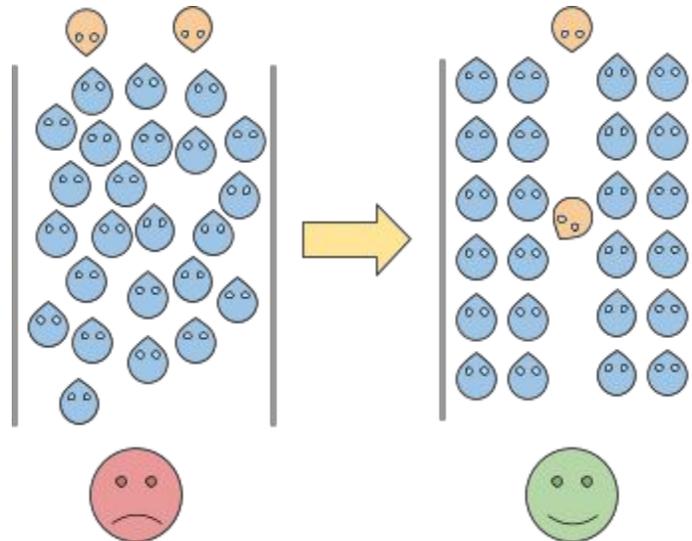
The best thing to do is to prevent a big crowd from forming and dividing the incoming people into groups right away. Once a big crowd forms, it is very difficult to divide it. We will show one of the possible ways to divide a crowd in the advanced section.

Order is better than chaos

Crowds have a natural tendency to form a mass of people, which makes the situation less transparent and makes it impossible to communicate with members of the crowd, thus preventing information from spreading. **It helps to structure the crowd in some way** - for example by placing people into a double file.

Advantages of this approach:

- The order is clear and nobody feels the need to skip ahead.
- It also gives the members of the group a feeling that the situation is under control and calm.
- It allows the volunteers to pass through the group, inform people, and hand out tea or blankets.



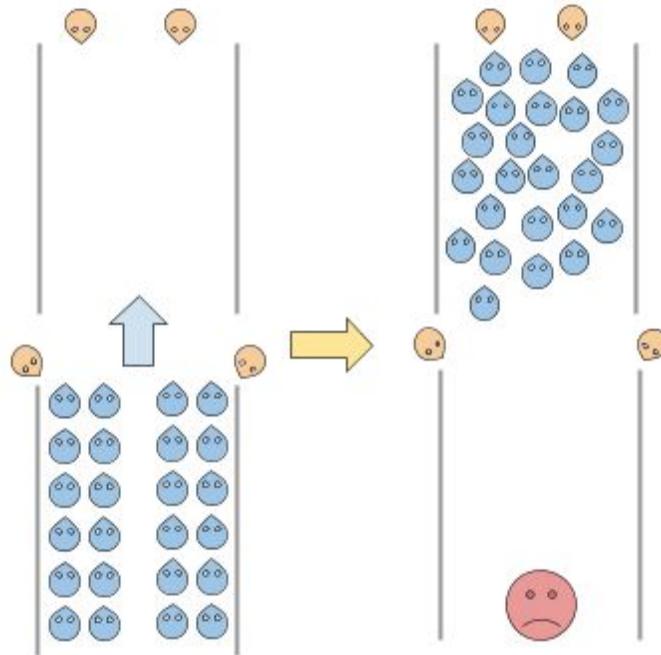
How to organize a crowd? **In an ideal case we organize people right away, as soon as they come to us.** If at any point they scatter and we need to get them back, a useful method is this:

- Find someone who speaks English.
- Explain to them that we'd like to make a double file and ask them to tell this to the group.
- Go through the group and divide it in half, while moving each side (even gently pushing them) into a double file.
- While doing that, keep repeating "two lines, two lines" and gesturing with your hands.

Move the lines one by one

We have our beautiful double files and we'd like to move them to the next hangar. How to do that?

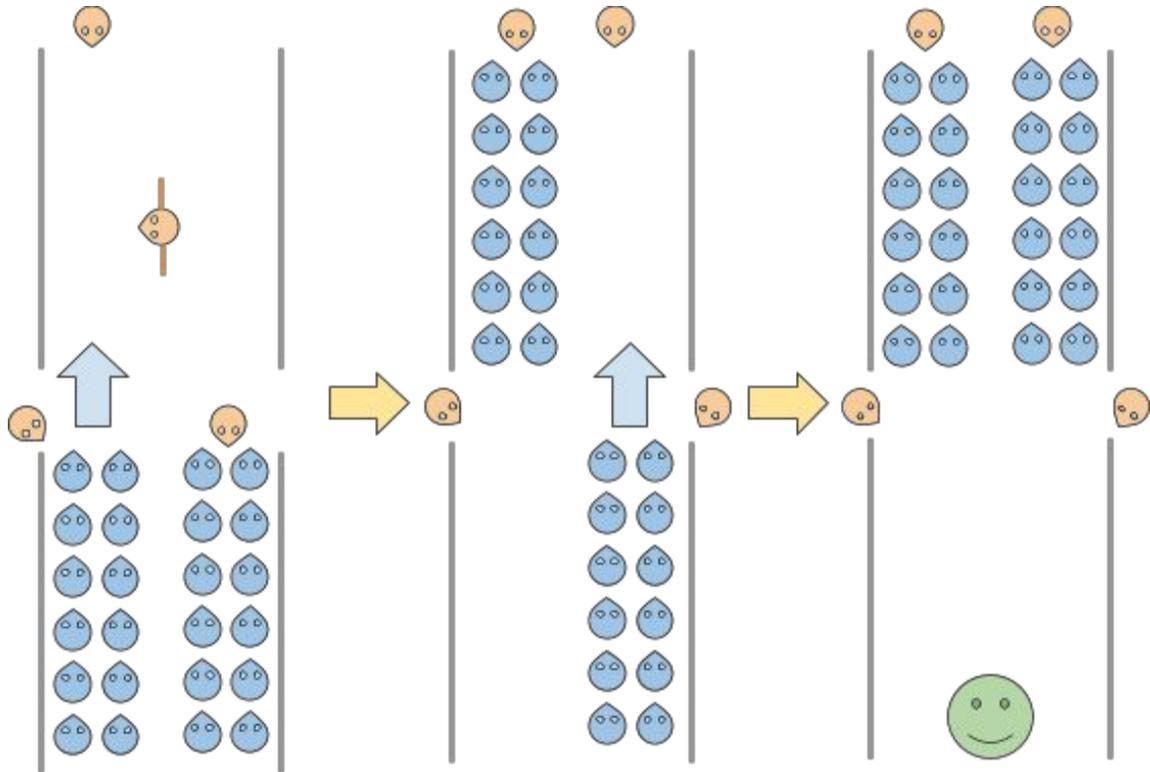
The naïve approach is obvious: let them go. And it unavoidably leads to a disorganized mass forming once again. It will take some of the group member some time to start walking, while the others will push, and the result will be a mixed group.



So how to do it better? **Let the files through one by one.**

This is how you do that:

- Explain to one of the files (using an English-speaking member of the crowd as an interpreter) that they'll go second; that they'll be standing for a while but that they'll go right after the first double file.
- Tell the other file that they can go - and use one person to hold a divider in the middle of the second hangar, so that the first file doesn't spread.
- Once the first file is in the second hangar, let the other one go.



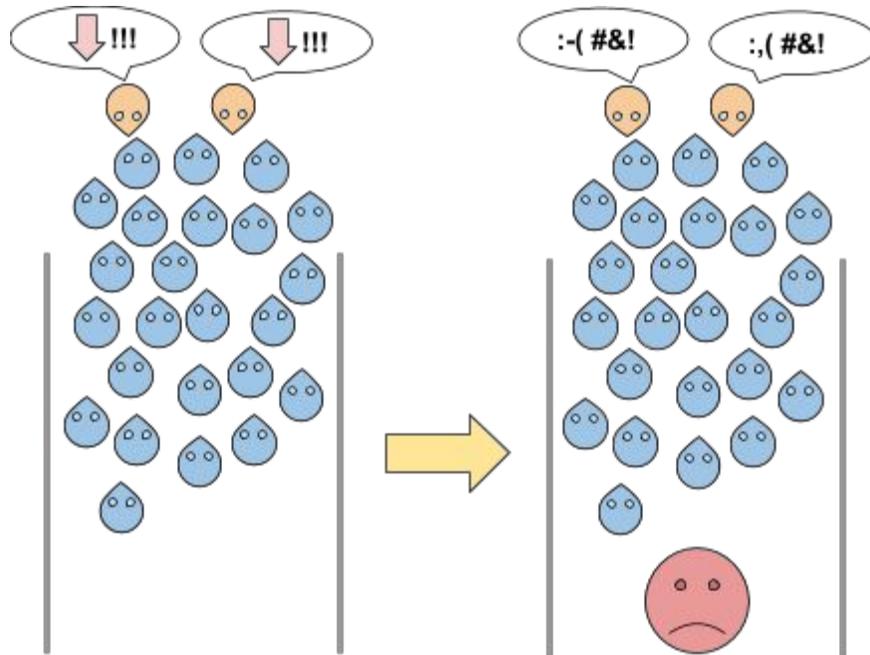
And now some advanced crowd moves!

We're now getting to something that requires a number of synchronized people and doesn't always work out - moving a crowd backwards and dividing it into smaller groups.

When moving backwards, start from the back

It sometimes happens, despite all our efforts, that the group manages to push the volunteers out of the covered space and threatens to merge with the previous group - and as we know, big groups are much harder to manage and so we definitely don't want to allow them to merge. So we need to move the group back.

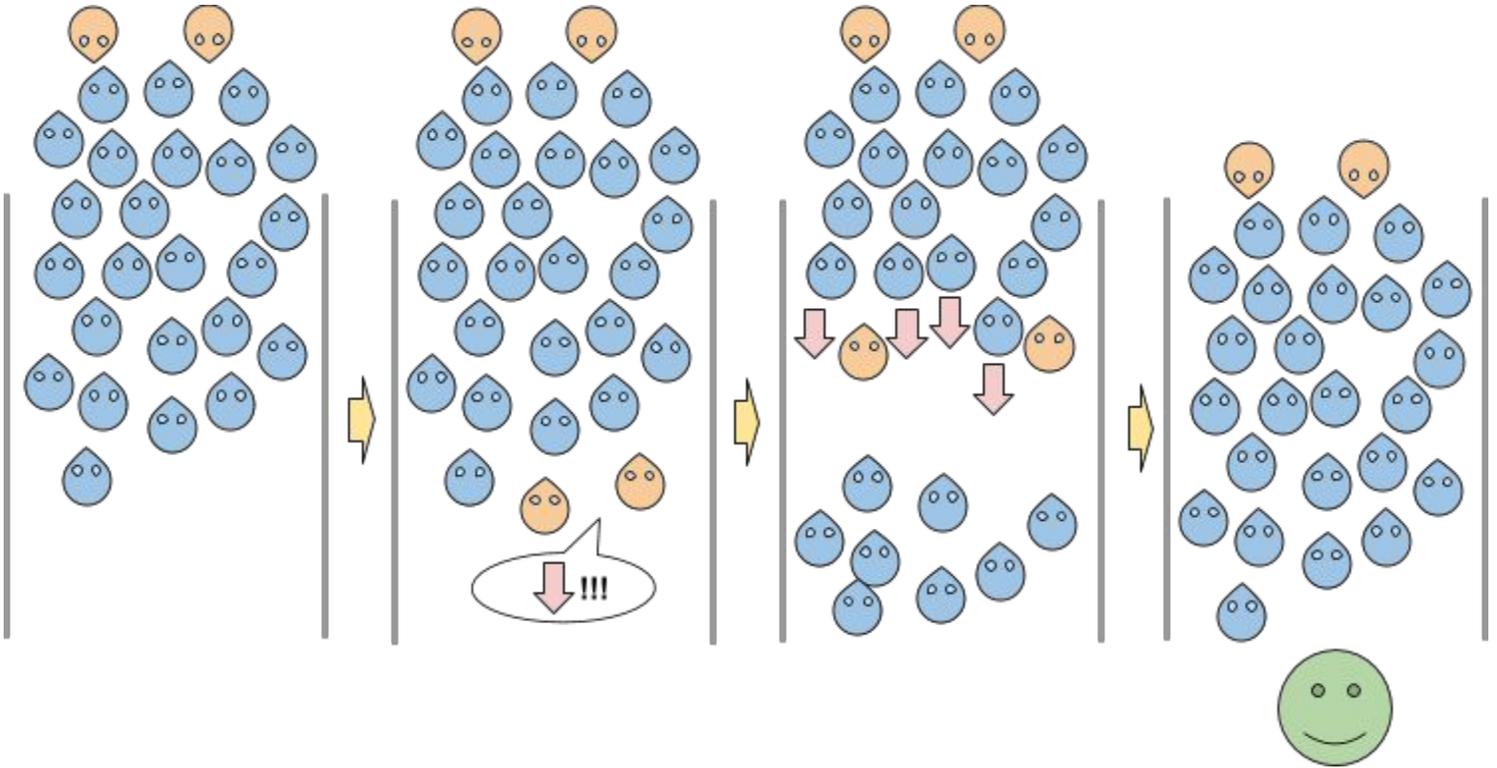
A trivial approach is obvious - shouting "Go back!" from the front of the crowd. **Nothing will happen.**



The reason is not that surprising. **People in the front rows, even if they wanted to go back, don't have anywhere to go to.** They're being pushed forward by people behind them.

It is therefore necessary to start from the back in order to make a crowd retreat. A good way to do it is this:

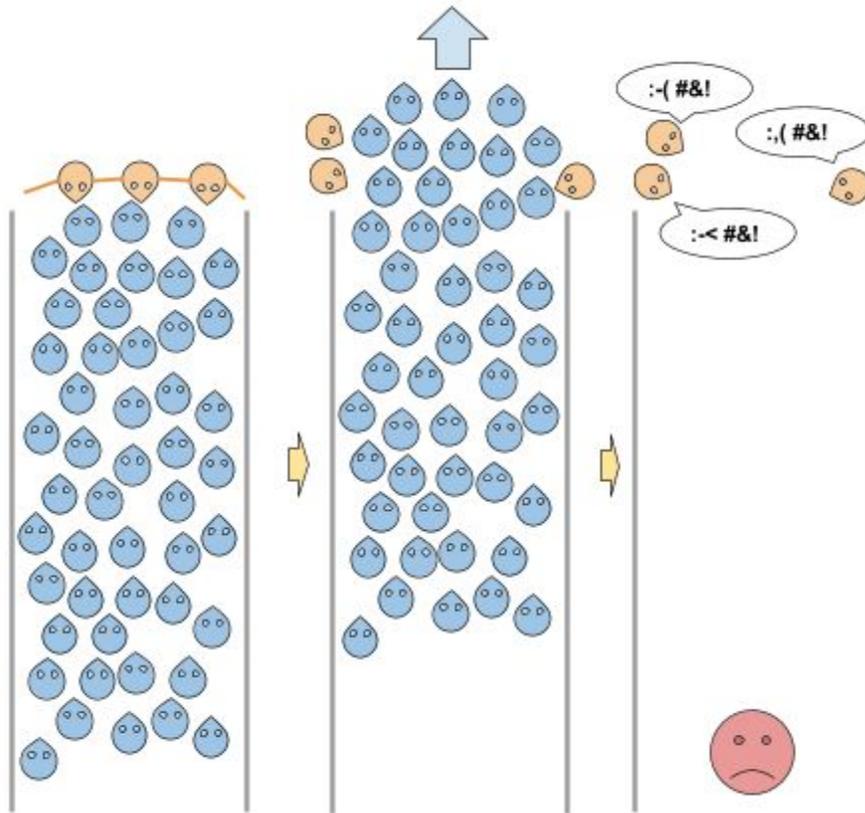
- Send a person to the back of the crowd, find someone who can interpret, explain that we need everyone to move back and ask them to tell that to the others.
- After they say this, while constantly repeating "Please, go back", we take specific people and physically show them that there is space behind them and help them go back.
- We gradually move forwards, and move more and more people backwards.
- If needed, we let our interpreter say again that people need to move back, and we keep moving people.
- Repeat until everyone has moved back.



Cutting a crowd into smaller parts

Did we get a big crowd? Well, that's unpleasant. It is hard to control a big crowd. How to get only a section of the crowd to go forward?

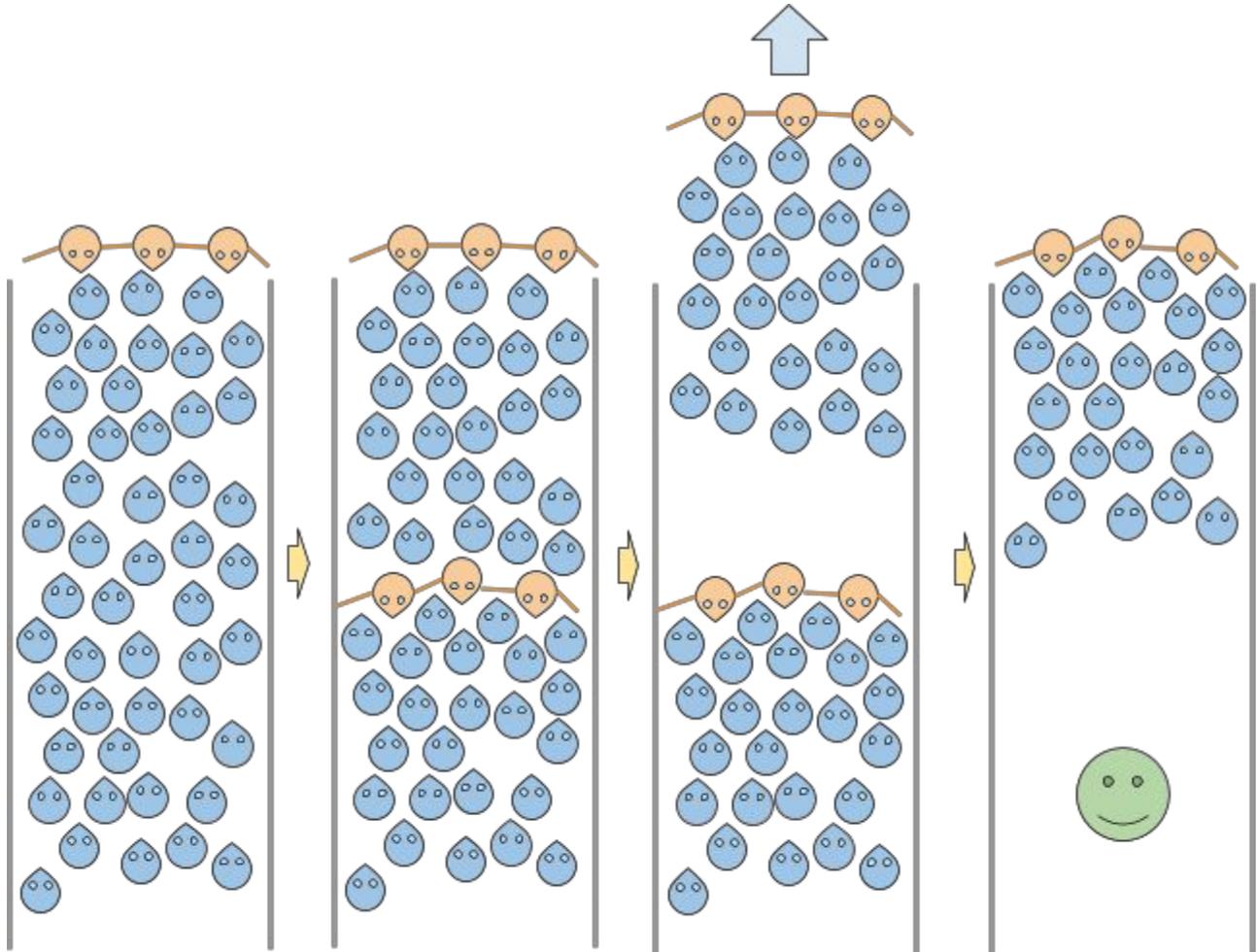
Trivial approach: we let people go and hope we can stop the rest at a suitable moment. **No chance.**



Once a crowd gets going, it is very hard to stop it. That's why we have to ensure that only the part we want to go forward starts walking and the rest stays standing.

How to do that:

- **Several volunteers go into the crowd from the side**, they hold hands and form a human chain to part the crowd - we need to check **the chain is not separating families**.
- The chain explains to people in front of them (using interpreters) that **they will not be going anywhere**, that they'll stay where they are.
- **The front group leaves** - optionally slowed down by volunteers at the front; the back group stays in place.
- **The volunteers in the chain slowly go backwards** and allow the group to move forwards.



What to do when the crowd gets tense?

Let's start with a review: it's much easier to excite a crowd than to calm it down. **It is therefore much better to prevent tension in the crowd than to solve it.**

But what can we do when there is tension after all? A few theories:

- **Pressure causes resistance** - meaning that using force on a crowd, shouting at it, or trying to move it using violence, only **escalates tension** (by the way, force is often used by the police, who also have various tools - throwing tear gas or using water cannons - and I am fairly sure that eyes full of tear gas don't calm anyone down)
- **The more restless the crowd gets, the firmer and clearer we need to be** - in a calm crowd we can easily let the especially needy go forward and we can deal with individual requests, but when the crowd is tense we need to be very firm and clear about the rules: if there's a line that shouldn't be overstepped, we need to deal with any, even minor overstepping, or we will lose control over the situation and a small infraction becomes a mass charge.

- **A stirred up crowd can be dangerous** - we need to be mindful of the **safety of vulnerable people**; children, women, older people; and not hesitate in taking them out of the crowd and sending them to wait aside. And most importantly, don't forget **your own safety** - if you feel the situation is getting too dangerous for you, withdraw.

Several things that work:

- **Explain** - tension often stems from a lack of information; the more information about the current and future situation we manage to get into the crowd, the more we can calm it down - find an interpreter in the crowd, tell them what to say, and even give them a megaphone so they can be heard.
- **Listen** - if there is still any space for it, it really helps to express understanding: "I understand you're tired and impatient and you'd like to leave..."
- **Find allies in the crowd** - start talking to a couple of people in the crowd, explain the situation to them, and ask them for help. This is an incredibly powerful tool. As I wrote above: although a crowd can behave irrationally, it is composed of rational people. Individuals can often help not only with keeping information flowing, but also with holding the line or making sure that nobody is skipping the queue. When things started getting very tense, we even started giving out hi-vis jackets to selected refugees, and that basically made them into one of us - and they really helped us a lot.
- **Appear calm and confident** - your heart can be in your mouth, but try to appear confident on the outside. What makes people restless is often fear and uncertainty and you can bring some order and clarity into the situation. A related thing: speak in a calm, slow, simple manner, but also be loud and resolute.
- **Pick out the troublemakers** - the tension is often escalated by one person or a small group. It can help to go to them, introduce yourself to them, shake hands, and explain that you need them not to push or fight. If that doesn't help, you can take the troublemakers out of the crowd.
- **Have "pressure absorbers" in the crowd** - again, nobody in the crowd wants to crush anyone; everyone is just taking tiny steps forward - but when those steps add up, it means that the people in the front cannot move at all and the pressure is terrible. It helps to have several "pillars" in the crowd: volunteers who are standing facing the crowd - and they just keep standing. They don't take even one step back - which can sometimes mean **slightly pushing against the crowd's movement**. It helps to "air the crowd". People right in the crowd also help spread information, protect women and children, and, if need be, quickly intervene in case of local unrest. Or sing - that lightens the mood both for the volunteers and the crowd.

And something for truly critical situations:

- **Shout loudly and appear very unyielding** - success depends on loudness and how fierce you look; it mostly works as an element of surprise and cannot be used too often.
- **Sit the crowd down** - this is a partly forceful measure; if the crowd keeps pushing forward and we're afraid we'll completely lose control over it, we can start making the

crowd sit down. You can even try to help the front row physically a bit. Sitting people cannot push and it also stops the people in the back moving; it makes a physical barrier.

Never start an active physical confrontation. An escalated situation might make violence seem like an option, but as I mentioned above - pressure creates resistance and it just makes the whole situation worse. You cannot win any fight when critically outnumbered. The power of volunteers is in calmness and composure.

Volunteer coordination

When there's a higher number of volunteers, it's good to have at least roughly **divided roles**. What's proven successful is to have a general structure of who's helping where or have at least a few specific people for a specific hangar.

It's also important to maintain good **communication between close volunteers** - if you're sending part of your crowd into another hangar, it's better to shout and check they're ready to accept them. Similarly, more advanced moves - like moving the crowd back or parting it - require collaboration between more people.

A very useful thing is to have **several people completely free**, not tied to any specific place: they can walk around, spread information (about what's happening in another part of the crowd), help in more difficult situations, see the whole picture a bit, and communicate with the police or other organizations. They can also bring food and drink to other volunteers who often can't leave their station.

Although there is no clear hierarchy amongst the volunteers and there are often many possible solutions to a situation, **it is very important to not start conflicts between yourselves** and once you choose an approach, try to stick to it together.

Final thoughts

Don't forget the crowd is composed of individual human beings. Treat them as human beings. Once you start treating people like a crowd, they will start behaving like a crowd.

Don't forget your personal safety - if you think the situation is too dangerous for you, don't be in it.

Good luck!