



How to De-Escalate Conflict
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Introduction

It may seem that all of sudden, someone is really mad, but conflict doesn't build without warning. Before it was big, it was small. Teaching clients how to recognize and address the early warning signs of conflict is key to preventing escalation. After all, little problems are easier to solve than big ones. Small misunderstandings erupt into major drama for two main reasons: failing to recognize the early warning signs or seeing the signs and choosing to ignore them, hoping things will get better on their own. This course will help build awareness of conflict stages and how to respond at each level in order to de-escalate the situation.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Build awareness of conflict's early warning signs.
2. Recognize six stages of conflict.
3. De-escalate conflict using specific interventions.

Let's Get Started!

Early Warning Signs

How do you know when a conflict is about to erupt? It would be great if everyone was honest about their feelings and could clearly communicate them so there was no guessing. Unfortunately, that's not the case! Even when you ask some people directly if anything's wrong, they'll tell you all is well when it's not. You can't always rely on people's words for the truth, but you can find clues in their non-verbal language. Signs to look for are changes in tone of voice, volume, facial expressions, eye contact, body language, physical distance, and use of silence. When a person's words and actions are inconsistent, there may be a problem.

For example, if someone curtly says he's "fine" while glaring at you with narrowed eyes, his non-verbal messages are telling a different story than his words. Pay attention to this discrepancy and consider it a warning sign. This doesn't mean that you should make assumptions about how someone is feeling, but likewise, you shouldn't assume everything's fine either. No one is a mind reader, so you'll need to ask him about his mixed messages.

Perhaps the above example would seem pretty obvious to you that something's wrong, but you'd rather not ask because you're afraid of the answer. You're hoping the person will cool down or forget over time. That may work once or twice, but if it becomes a pattern and you continue to ignore it, be prepared for a blow up at some point. If you're thinking that if people are upset, it's their responsibility to say so, you're right! But, what good does it do you to be right if it means you suffer in the end? It will always be easier to manage a molehill than climb a mountain.

There are six stages of conflict: anger, multiple issues, generalization, shifted goals, taking sides, and impasse. The earlier a conflict is addressed and resolved the better, of course. But, clients don't always recognize the signs or they avoid saying anything. Below is a description of each

stage of conflict and specific interventions that will help de-escalate a potentially explosive situation.

Stage One: Anger and Accusations

Picture the escalation of conflict like a mountain. The goal is to stay on level ground. As conflict rises, you start climbing the mountain. The terrain gets more difficult and dangerous the higher you go. You can intervene at any point with resolution tactics, but as emotions increase, judgment decreases in equal proportion, so the sooner you address issues, the better.

Conflict can escalate quickly or slowly, depending on a number of factors. If you share a long history with one another and the triggering event happens often, tempers can easily flare. If you don't know the other person well, you might give him the benefit of the doubt and stay calm longer. Or, if one person flies off the handle quickly, but the other is slow to react, it can keep the conflict from advancing. No matter how fast or slow a conflict escalates, every argument goes through the same predictable stages.

If you missed the early warning signs of a brewing problem, the next development will be anger and accusations. Something has offended or hurt you and those feelings have turned into anger aimed at the other person. In your mind, you begin blaming the other person for what he did to you. The more you repeat the story to yourself, the angrier you become, convinced of his wrongdoing. At this point, you may share your accusations with him or keep them to yourself, letting your anger build. A sure sign that you've reached this point is that your dialogue starts with the finger-pointing word, "you." Whatever follows is basically telling the other person why he's a problem.

Stage One: De-escalation Strategies

If your conflict has reached this stage, here's how to prevent it from going further:

- *Make no assumptions.* Rather than jump to conclusions, stay curious about the circumstances. Pretend you're a detective gathering more information versus concluding your case based on the initial evidence.
- *Stay flexible.* Force yourself to come up with at least two explanations for what happened instead of locking into the most painful one.
- *Validate.* When faced with accusations and blame, validate the other person's feelings before clarifying the facts by saying, "If I thought someone had done all those things to me, I'd be mad too!"

Every conflict starts with anger and accusations. Becoming skilled at catching problems at this stage will save you a lot of grief later. Even if you weren't able to voice something in the moment, you can return to a previous conversation by saying, "Yesterday, I noticed there was a problem and I didn't speak up. Can we discuss it now?"

Stage Two: Issues Multiply

Unresolved anger quickly moves into stage two when issues multiply. This is when you justify your feelings by making a list of irritating things the other person does that you find annoying. To gather enough material, you move beyond the current offense and dig up some history to unearth all the other times the person made you mad. If personal examples aren't available, you borrow from times he has behaved poorly to *other* people – anything to build your case! When there's too much time to think (because you never talked with the other person) it's easy for issues to multiply. Soon, you forget the reason you were upset in the first place.

While history is helpful in recognizing patterns, conflict is best handled by discussing one issue at a time. Focus on the present topic until it's resolved. If you had clearly addressed each offense on your list as it arose, then it's fair to note that the same thing is happening. But, if you had never brought up any of those issues and choose the current one to unload your silently mounting frustration, it's unfair. You know you've hit this stage because the conversation goes off in multiple directions as each person attempts to defend the examples thrown at him. It's highly frustrating and unproductive.

Stage Two: De-escalation Strategies

If your conflict begins to grow with multiple issues, here's how to get it back on track:

- *Stay in the present.* Reference only current examples, not old ones.
- *Stick to one issue.* Focus on a single issue at a time. If the other person attacks you with a list of problems, respond by saying, "It sounds like a lot of things are bothering you. Which one would you like to discuss first?"
- *Separate history.* If you want to clear up something in the past that you never addressed, do so at a different time. Say, "I've been upset in the past but never said anything. That's my fault. I'd like to share my feelings now so the same thing doesn't happen again."

It's possible to resolve conflict at this level as long as you don't introduce history or react to someone's attempts to do it to you. Working through one issue at a time will help you build on success.

Stage Three: Generalization

The longer conflict is allowed to simmer unresolved, the more issues become clouded. Soon, the specifics of one incident blur into all-encompassing descriptions using words like "always," "never," "all the time," "everything," and "everyone." When you tell a person he's a problem "all the time" and is "never" reasonable, you present a hopeless scenario. There's really no need to change because he has "always" been this way. It's more accurate to describe behavior by saying, "often," "sometimes," or "occasionally." In the generalization stage, your perspective shifts from seeing shades of grey to black-and-white. Soon, everything the person does bugs you!

If you're at the point of feeling irritated just by the mention of the person's name, it's an indication that you've reached this stage. It's important to take a deep breath and clarify what

issues you want to address. If not, the tendency is to attack personality (unchangeable) versus address behavior (changeable). Once you start attacking the person, you've added to the conflict by creating more hurt feelings. If you're the one being attacked in a generalized way, you can re-direct the conversation by responding only to current, specific incidents rather than defending general claims.

Stage Three: De-escalation Strategies

When specific incidents have blurred into general dislike for the person, it's hard to resolve anything. Here's how to bet back to the real problem:

- *Refocus personality attacks.* It's unfair to ask anyone to change his personality, but you can ask for changes in behavior that would reduce conflict. So, rather than call someone, "stubborn," state what he's currently doing or saying (behavior) that needs changing.
- *Provide examples.* Offer and ask for specific examples of when this behavior has recently occurred.
- *Avoid all-or-nothing language.* No one demonstrates problem behavior 100 percent of the time. Accurately state occurrences versus stating they happen, "all the time."

Remember, you don't have to like a person in order to resolve conflict. If that were the case, few disagreements would ever be worked out! What you focus on expands, so stick to the specifics at hand instead of forming vague complaints.

Stage Four: Goals Shift

By the time a specific issue has developed into overall dislike for the other person, it's easy for goals to shift too. At first, the goal is to resolve the initial incident. But, eventually, you can't recall those details! All you know is that you have an enemy that you don't like, so now your goal is to get even. The focus moves from seeking understanding to causing pain and embarrassment.

In order to achieve the goal of getting even, tactics must shift as well. Rather than focus on a person's strengths, you look for ways to expose his weaknesses. You might make mean comments in front of a crowd causing humiliation. Or, you gain satisfaction from knowingly pushing his buttons to trigger an angry reaction. The communication changes from respectful to sarcastic. You may even find yourself daydreaming about scenes where you deliver a triumphant speech and put him in his place for good!

On the surface, this type of revengeful behavior may seem like it would make you feel better, particularly if you've been hurt by his past treatment. But, in the end, repeating the thing that hurt you only increases your pain. It requires a lot of energy to stay so mad at someone that you're continuously plotting ways to hurt him. If just thinking about him is upsetting to you, even when he's not present, it shows how much power you've given to him to control your feelings. That's why this stage of unresolved conflict is so dangerous.

Stage Four: De-escalation Strategies

If your goals have shifted from resolution to getting even, it's still possible to correct the situation. Here's how to stop hurtful behavior and start over:

- *Apologize.* Admit that you've said damaging things in the past and apologize (without expecting he will do the same). Commit to respectful communication in the future. Do this for your benefit, not his, as you will feel better about yourself.
- *Examine intent.* Before speaking, ask yourself if your comments are intended to hurt or help? If hurtful comments are directed at you, ask the same question by saying, "What is your intent?" Then, restate your goal for resolution.
- *Refuse to fire back.* Even if he still makes spiteful comments, stay respectful. You'll cut the tension in half by refusing to contribute to negativity.

It takes two people to get to this stage, so by changing your behavior, it can't help but positively influence the relationship. The bonus is that by returning to the goal of resolution, you'll respect yourself more.

Stage Five: Taking Sides

If you're at war with someone, you need to build an army and the only way to do that is to try and get other people involved. In this stage the energy focuses on cornering bystanders, telling them your side of the side of the story (details skewed in your favor), and asking for their sympathy vote. Tactics involve gossip, rumors, and convincing others that if they don't side with you, they're at risk of being the next victim of your nemesis. Time is of the essence at this stage as you rush to be the first one to plant the seed of doubt about the other person.

You know you've entered this stage when there's a sudden chill in the air with lots of whispering and closed-door conversations. It can be easy to get caught up in correcting misinformation and setting the record straight. The more people that get involved, the more the conversation strays from the original problem. Soon, others are offering their opinions and then there's always that one person who starts acting as the unsolicited peacemaker. Of course, the situation doesn't involve him in the slightest, but he takes it upon himself to pass messages back-and-forth like it was high school.

Acting in such a divisive way is very damaging in the long run. Chances are, you will still be interacting with all these people in the future and once sides have been taken on an issue, it's hard to forget the feelings of betrayal. Resist the temptation to involve others in a private dispute.

Stage Five: De-escalation Strategies

By the time conflicts have reached the taking sides stage, it's hard, but not impossible, to turn them around. As long as you don't fuel the fire by responding and adding new rumors, one-sided teams fizzle out eventually. Here's how to douse the flames:

- *Communicate face-to-face.* The only way to resolve a conflict is privately and in person. Refrain from using any online or texting communication other than to set an appointment to talk.
- *Speak for yourself.* Avoid using a third party as a go-between to deliver messages.
- *Be proactive.* Determine your message and deliver it consistently versus reactively defending rumors.
- *Refuse to respond.* If someone attempts to share what's being said about you, don't validate it by responding. Simply say, "I don't participate in gossip, but I'd be happy to talk privately to the individual who shared this to clear things up."

Starting rumors is the surest way to ruin your own reputation. When you bad-mouth others, you're showing that you have little self-control and a lack of resolution skills. You also demonstrate that you're not a team player by trying to convince others to take sides. On the flip side, the way you handle being a target of gossip can actually build your reputation in a positive way. By refusing to fire back, you're demonstrating a strong character and commitment to the truth.

Stage Six: Impasse

If the interventions discussed so far haven't been successful, the conflict reaches an impasse. Remember, you can get to this point in months or minutes, depending on how each person responded. Once you reach an impasse, one or both parties believe that resolution is hopeless. You've reached a dead-end and there's no turning back. The communication is cold, distant, non-existent, or just plain nasty.

Believe it or not, reaching this stage doesn't mean all hope is gone! Resolution is still possible, but it will take a major shift in thinking. Usually by this time, you're assuming the other person is the entire problem and because he refuses to change, it's time to throw in the towel. You give more thought about how to end the relationship than heal it. At the impasse stage, emotions are at their peak and cloud rational thinking. It's never wise to make a permanent decision at this level of frustration. If you're going to end all efforts at resolution, you want to have reached that conclusion in a calm and rational manner. If the decision was right when you were mad, it will still be right when you're calm.

Stage Six: De-escalation Strategies

If your head is filled with dialogue and thoughts of the person, you actually haven't ended anything! You're still emotionally engaged in the relationship. There's a good chance that once both sides calm down, you can restart efforts to move forward. Here's how to inch your way down the emotional mountain:

- *Take a break.* Agree to a certain amount of time in which both of you won't talk about the situation in order to cool off. Check back at the end of the designated break to see if more time away is needed.

- *Manage emotions.* Choose healthy coping strategies to manage your feelings like exercise, meditation, and journaling. Don't return to the conversation until your intense feelings have leveled off.
- *Revisit goals.* Examine your original resolution goals and the reasons why they were beneficial. Did you stick to them? Do the goals need to shift to be more reasonable?
- *Review escalation strategies.* Re-read the strategies to interrupt each stage of escalation and honestly assess how well you personally behaved. Find at least one area to improve your skills and practice.

The conflict didn't get to this stage without your help. Maybe you're not half the problem, but you're certainly a percentage. Focus on what you could have done differently because that could create the window of opportunity necessary to improve the situation.

Opening the Door

Just because a door has been slammed shut doesn't mean it can't be opened again. But, after reaching an impasse, you may have to try opening a different door first. One way to get the conversation going again is to sincerely apologize for anything you said or did that was disrespectful. This doesn't mean that you're accepting blame for everything that went wrong, but you are accountable for acting out of anger.

How to Sincerely Apologize

A sincere apology has three components with the first being to own your behavior. Second, acknowledge how your actions impacted others. Finally, state what you will do differently in the future. Here's why each step is critical:

- *Own your behavior.* Recognize what you did or said without defending, minimizing, or justifying your actions. There should be no, "but" in your sentence as in, "I'm sorry I called you names, but..." If you can't fully own your behavior, you're not ready to apologize.
- *Acknowledge the impact of your actions.* This step requires empathy. The only way to truly know how the other person was affected is to ask. If you assume how he felt, your apology could be way off the mark. There's a tendency to rush past this step, but without it, your words are meaningless. Saying sorry isn't enough. After asking you can say, "I understand now that my name calling caused you to feel ashamed and embarrassed."
- *Commit to future change.* You can't change the past, but you can behave differently in the future. If you acknowledge what you did was wrong, then don't repeat it. Say, "In the future, I plan to take a break when I'm angry instead of resorting to mean words."

Don't say you're sorry in hopes that the other person will reciprocate. To do so would be manipulative. Apologizing for your mistakes is actually for your own benefit because it shows that you won't allow a negative relationship turn you into a bitter person. It has nothing to do with giving the other person satisfaction that you were wrong. Rather, it gives you the satisfaction of knowing you've been honest with yourself.

Another alternative is to focus on areas of agreement. There may not be much, but at one time you both agreed it was worth working things out. You probably both agree you don't want to fight anymore. Think back to when you were able to communicate better with each other. What were you doing then that made it easier to talk? Repeat those successful behaviors now. Both sides probably share similar feelings: hurt, anger, drained, embarrassed, or distrust. Sharing feelings (without blaming the other person for causing them) can create common ground. You might say, "I know that I'm feeling hurt and I imagine you're feeling the same way."

Finally, reaching a stalemate on your previous goal may indicate that you need to change your expectations. Talk about establishing a different goal that's more reasonable and easier to accomplish. Start small and create a pattern of success. Once you've proven that you can solve minor issues, you can tackle larger ones.

In Conclusion

The sooner conflict is addressed, the easier it is to resolve. Teaching clients to address the early warning signs of changes in non-verbal communication can help. Subtle cues such as differences in tone of voice and body language are the first clues that something may be wrong, even if a person may not admit to being angry when asked directly. Conflict can escalate quickly or slowly through six stages: anger, multiple issues, generalization, shifted goals, taking sides, and impasse. It's possible to interrupt its destructive path at each stage with specific strategies although it gets harder the further a person advances into an emotional mindset of conflict. While it can be uncomfortable for some clients to speak up, teaching them the tools of de-escalation can help prevent future relationship and emotional stress.

TEST

How to De-Escalate Conflict

Complete the test below and follow the instructions provided on page 1 to receive your certificate. Remember to include the Payment Method form when you mail the test in. Please complete the information below to serve as the sign in form. Please PRINT clearly.

Name: _____

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Circle the correct answer:

1. The best response to conflict is to:
 - a) Defend yourself.
 - b) Avoid it so the other person will forget.
 - c) Address it sooner rather than later.

2. The six stages of conflict are:
 - a) Anger, multiple issues, generalization, shifted goals, taking sides, impasse.
 - b) Accusations, rumors, gossip, arguing, attacking, impasse.
 - c) Anger, big issues, drama, fighting, silent treatment, impasse.

3. Once an impasse has been reached:
 - a) There's no chance of reaching resolution.
 - b) Resolution is still possible, but it will be more difficult.
 - c) You should automatically end the relationship.

4. Early warning signs of conflict include:
 - a) Screaming.
 - b) Name calling.
 - c) Changes in voice tone and body language.

5. Every conflict escalates at the same rate.
 - a) T
 - b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

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