

CONFLICT ESCALATION AND DE-ESCALATION

All conflicts have differing stages:

Onset & Early Warning Signs

- tensions
- avoidance
- gossip
- rationalising
- resentment

Escalation

- increased tension
- outbursts
- threats
- withdrawal
- enlisting others and collateral damage
- revenge
- adoption of fixed positions

De-escalation

- tolerance
- increased understanding
- collaboration
- respect
- problem solving

It is typical to think of these stages when reflecting over the 'life' of a conflict. However each interaction can have these stages.

THE CONFLICT THERMOSTAT

Conflict Escalation and De-escalation is akin to a conflict heating up and cooling down.



Exercise:

Try this exercise to develop your ability to notice triggers to and signs of escalation and de-escalation.

Consider a conflict you have experienced. Remember a particular interaction or meeting.

1. Recall any indicators of escalation. *Note: They may have been fleeting or momentary, such as raised eyebrows.*
2. What other signs of escalation might you pay attention to in future?
3. Recall any indicators of de-escalation. *Note: They may have been fleeting or momentary, such as lowered voice tone.*
4. What other signs of de-escalation might you pay attention to in future?

TRIGGERS TO ESCALATION

You have already identified some triggers to conflict escalation. Consider these:

Abuse of Information and Resources may include using privileges that come from your position, networks and connections against the other party. Withholding information or divulging information provided in goodwill are also conflict triggers.

Stonewalling is the consistent refusal by one party to acknowledge that there is a problem. It is an escalation signal – a refusal to acknowledge feedback.

e.g. "I don't know what you're talking about, you're imagining things."

Stonewalling can have a disorienting effect, causing one to doubt oneself. It is useful to recognise it as a strategy to avoid engagement and cast doubt on the other party. It can be challenged as such.

Use of third parties can be a way of introducing feelings or accusations, while avoiding the potential consequences of raising them.

e.g. "Everyone else in the team says you are lazy..."

Use of third parties escalate conflicts because we are unable to defend ourselves or respond to the supposed accusers. The person introducing the statement, needs to be supported or encouraged to stand behind the criticism themselves and be accountable for introducing it or retract it because they are unable to support it.

Double messages occur when our tone and body language do not match our words or intended communication. Other people are often in a better position to pick up our incongruence than we are.