



A Time for De-escalation

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Whether in the public square, the workplace, or in our personal life, escalating conflict causes major disruptions to organizations, governing bodies, and personal relationships. By escalation, I mean specific situations that exhibit a sharp spike in hostility, tension, or competitive behavior – or that bring personalities into severe conflict. Not surprisingly, the demand for conflict de-escalation skills, strategies, and training has grown dramatically.¹

First, it is important to distinguish between the short-term goals of de-escalation in relation to longer-term goals of conflict resolution. De-escalation is primarily focused on removing us from the precipice of an acute conflict; if done effectively, it can lay the groundwork for a deeper conflict resolution process designed to rebuild trust, restore relationships, and prevent future conflict.

De-escalation: Short-Term	Conflict Resolution: Long-Term
1) Intervene/React	1) Prevent future conflict
2) Temporarily shift relationships	2) Build lasting relationships
3) Stop conflict	3) Resolve problems

Three Strategies of De-escalation

1) Maintain Control

An underlying myth of conflict management is often that we can stop bad behavior by controlling others. If we can shut them down (or up), help them see logic and truth, or win the argument, we can end the conflict. Paradoxically, it is the inverse: we can gain control of a situation only by modifying our own thoughts and behaviors.

When acute conflict emerges, our level of stress increases dramatically. Stressful situations cause our brains to release chemicals designed to favor freezing, flight, or fight – any of which can cause involuntary changes to our thoughts and perceptions. This often leads to cognitive distortion that cause us to misunderstand, react inappropriately, and escalate conflict.

We are familiar with the flight attendant's recitation before take-off: *Please place the mask over your own mouth and nose before assisting others.* To de-escalate conflict, we must similarly seek to manage ourselves before managing others. In an acute conflict situation, the first step is to calm ourselves. We cannot expect to reduce conflict if we enter a situation agitated or find ourselves

growing angry or upset. Below are some common tactics taught in de-escalation training:

Breathing: When we are anxious, agitated, angry, or upset, we breathe quickly and send our brain a signal that something is wrong. By breathing slowly, we tell the brain to relax. De-escalation training often begins by teaching deep breathing exercises. The 4-7-8 technique calls for breathing in through the nose for a count of 4, holding it for 7, and breathing out through the mouth for 8—repeated four times. Employing this breathing technique before responding literally changes our mindset.

Tone of Voice: Once we are calm, we can help calm others by adopting a steady, measured and assuring tone of voice. Speaking more slowly and in a slightly lower tone than normal is usually interpreted as soothing. Speaking rapidly or in an extremely low or high tone has the opposite effect. A calm, firm, low, and slow voice promotes confidence and respect.

Body Language: 80-90% of all communication is nonverbal. Training ourselves in effective body language is critical for effective de-escalating behavior. Examples include:

- Neutral facial expressions
- Keeping hands in front of body in an open and relaxed position
- Appropriate eye contact (avoid a piercing gaze)
- Avoid shoulder-shrugging, finger-pointing, eye-rolling, fidgeting, and excessive gesturing
- Safe social distance, ideally about 3-6 feet.²

2) Assess and Respond

Once calm, we can assess the situation to understand needs and make decisions. This step is iterative and we must pay attention to what is happening throughout a de-escalation process to see if our strategy is working or needs adjustment. When we stop assessing we give way to assuming and become less likely to achieve the right response. This doesn't mean our past experience cannot guide us, it just means that we cannot assume there is a one-size-fits-all solution. Helpful techniques include:

Active Listening: Active listening means giving our physical and mental attention to another person; making an honest effort to hear what they are saying, and trying to understand the emotions behind their words and body language.

Helping Language: Appropriate language can help validate concerns without forcing agreement while providing critical information to help us assess the situation.

- Open-ended questions: “You seem upset, how can I help?”
- Paraphrasing: “If I heard you correctly, you are saying....”
- Clarifying questions: “It sounds like a difficult situation; can you tell me more?”

Nonverbal Responses: Appropriate nonverbal communication signals a willingness to listen as well as an empathetic viewpoint.

- Make appropriate eye contact
- Be at the same eye level (if they sit, we sit; if they stand, we stand)
- Use unintrusive positive gestures such as head-nodding
- Avoid detrimental body language such as crossed arms, hands on hips, eye-rolling, eyebrow raising, emphatic gestures, etc.

3) Support Needs

Effective conflict de-escalation is premised on the idea of letting people know that their concerns matter and that an authentic effort is being made to address the problem. This does not mean we must take sides or go against core values or principles. Supporting needs means asking and answering three questions:

- Will my response make the situation more or less safe (emotionally or physically)? [Safety]
- Does my response show respect and dignity? [Respect]
- Will my response address the person’s needs? [Needs]

If we can answer “yes” to each of these questions, we are probably going down the right path. In any conflict situation, the health and safety of individuals involved is the first concern. Most likely to be left behind in the equation is emotional well-being. If conflict surfaces past or ongoing trauma, it is healthy to pause for further assessment and/or intervention by a trained professional.

It seems like a no-brainer that we must treat all persons with dignity and respect. As leaders attempting to engage in or oversee a process of de-escalation, we must first model respect, even if it is not reciprocated. If we are targets of disrespect, we have a choice to ignore it or to call it out. But if others are being disrespected, we have an obligation to quickly name this behavior and firmly insist that it cease. However, even in the face of disrespect, we must continue to maintain a sense of calm. Rather than being accusatory or aggressive by insisting people

refrain from disrespectful language, we can say things like: “I can see that you are upset, but I cannot continue to discuss this when you use disrespectful language.” Or, “Because of your use of inappropriate language I am having a hard time focusing on how I can help.” Or, “In order to have a helpful discussion, we need to make sure that we are all treated with dignity and respect. Is everyone willing to do that?”

The third question may be the most difficult: we may not be able to meet others’ needs. However, if we are making a good faith effort to understand those needs and address them, we are still on the right track. Here are some techniques that can help:

Seek Understanding³

- Where possible, express empathy, even if we do not agree with their position
- Try to understand what they are feeling and why
- Where possible, redirect challenge statements or questions
- Do not minimize others’ concerns or feelings, even if we don’t understand them
- A simple caring statement or question may be appropriate

Create a Path to Next Steps

- Shift the conversation to the future
- Ask for their ideas about solutions. What do they hope for and why?
- Ask “what” questions such as, “What are you willing to do?” and “What am I willing to do?”
- Use the “we” pronoun to make ideas inclusive
- Seek agreement through positive responses

If Necessary, Leave

Sometimes we get sucked into a disagreement and we or “they” are unable to maintain control over thoughts, feelings, and actions and despite our best efforts, someone refuses to calm down. There are basically three circumstances under which it is best to leave a situation rather than continue:

- If escalation continues
- If we feel unsafe (or are not accorded dignity and respect)
- If de-escalation is not possible⁴

Like the needle on a compass, the goals, strategies, and techniques presented herein cannot tell us where, when, and how we should journey toward effective de-escalation, but they can show us if we are going in the right direction.

1. This article is intended as an introduction to conflict de-escalation. To fully understand and practice de-escalation in professional settings, the author strongly recommends professional training/coaching.

2. Or more than six feet if under health-related social distancing guidelines.

3. I suggest using an ethical communication model or similar approach. See “It’s Time for Ethical Communication,” *The Municipality*, September 2020, pg. 14-16.

4. It is possible that we can de-escalate an acute conflict on a temporary basis and return to a state of more respectful disagreement. In other words, disagreement itself is not a reason to abandon a de-escalation.