

2.14. Tips to resolve or avoid escalating conflict

2.14.1. Expectations

Manage expectations

Conflict often arises out of different expectations about how an issue /dispute will be dealt with or its outcome.

Manage expectations from the outset, if possible – both yours and the other person’s. Point out what you can do and cannot do, and will do and will not do. If later you discover that the other person’s expectations are unrealistic, attempt to explain why this is so.

Clarify limits on discretion

Sometimes a conflict is triggered by a decision made by a person or organisation in circumstances where they have either no control or very limited discretion. For example, there may be jurisdictional or power issues, or other fixed and immutable statutory requirements or practical realities. In such cases, the issue is actually with the law or lack of resources (that is, responsibilities of government), not the implementation (that is, responsibilities of the decision-maker).

Where possible, identify any causes of the conflict over which you and/or your organisation have no control or very limited discretion. If relevant, point this out to the other person – noting that this means you have no or very limited responsibility or ability to act.

Accept differences of opinion

Accept that people can have valid perspectives, perceptions or recollections that are different to yours – that there can be alternative valid interpretations and opinions.

Accept limitations on logical argument

Accept that it is unlikely you will be able to reason a person out of a view they did not arrive at through reason.

2.14.2. Approach

Show empathy

Show empathy for the other person’s feelings by showing sympathy if appropriate.

Be careful about saying ‘I understand’. Saying ‘I understand’ about the information conveyed by the complainant is ok. Saying ‘I understand’ about the complainant’s situation or experience is probably not ok.

Acknowledge or validate the other person’s feelings/emotions and point of view without necessarily agreeing with their perspective. For example, *‘I’ve got a sense how strongly you feel about this’, ‘I can hear that you are very upset about this’, ‘I can see that you’ve gone to a lot of trouble to get all this material together’, or ‘I hear how hard ... has been for you’*.

Show respect

No matter what is said or done, it is operationally imperative to treat the other person respectfully.

Admit mistakes and apologise

If a problem has been caused (in whole or part) by a mistake, omission or delay by you or your organisation, admit the mistake and apologise.

Allow space and time to think

Allow time for the other party to think through an issue – for example, people who are upset may not be thinking clearly.

If in doubt, it is better to slow down rather than speed up the discussion.

Create physical and thinking space, if necessary, by having breaks in discussion to allow people time to think/reflect.

Focus

Focus on the issue/problem/task not the person. Don't allow the focus to move from the issue to the person, from constructive responses to destructive responses.

Focus on the issue, not the emotions

Focus on the issue, not on your emotional response to the issue.

While showing empathy, try to influence the other person to focus on the issue, not their emotions – for example, by asking questions about the facts to move the person from a feeling state to a thinking state.

2.14.3. Communication

Use 'I' and 'We' messages, not 'You' messages

'I' messages are about communicating and sharing your concerns, about articulating worries. 'I' messages do not make demands or try to persuade somebody to change their views. The aim should not be to criticise or condemn the other person, or to get the other person to act in a particular way or change their behaviour. 'I' messages take responsibility.

'We' messages are about cooperation and inclusion – for example, 'We could look at it this way ...' or 'How can we resolve this?'

Avoid confrontational language when asking questions

Where possible, avoid 'Why ...?' questions in non-adversarial context in favour of 'What ...?', 'What happened ...?', 'When ...?', 'Where ...?' and 'How ...?', 'How come ...?' questions that are less likely to be seen as confrontational.

Find something to agree with

Find something to agree with, without necessarily agreeing with the other person's point of view. For example – 'I agree that \$2,000 is a lot of money to lose', 'I agree that not hearing back from [the organisation] would be very annoying', or 'I agree that having your pension reinstated would be a great help'.

Listen with interest

Engage. Paraphrase, or at least echo or repeat the other person's key words back to them. If face-to-face, make eye contact but do not stare.

Listen to what is being said, but also listen for what is not being said – for example, what is underlying what is being said, what is being avoided, etc.

Do not argue

- Don't argue, defend or deny – keep your ego out of it.
- Acknowledge the other person's position or understanding and state that you or your organisation's position or understanding is different (for example, 'I can see that you believe ..., however we have come to a different conclusion', or 'I do understand that your position is ..., however our position is a little different').
- Where a problem has been caused by a mistake, omission or delay on your part or on the part of your organisation, while explanations are acceptable, excuses are generally counterproductive.

Anticipate and address counterarguments

- Anticipate the likely counterarguments/valid objections and address them up front – for example, 'at this point you may well say that ...'. Counterarguments should be presented fairly and seriously, showing respect for different viewpoints and that they are valid.

2.14.4. Clarification

Admit ignorance/seek clarification

- When in doubt, ask questions seeking explanation/clarification (for example, 'As I understand it, the situation is Is this correct?' or 'From what you tell me it seems Is this the case?'). Asking questions prevents hasty and polarised responses, and involves both parties using the 'thinking' parts of their brains.
- Do not interpret and do not assume. In particular, in the absence of clear evidence, do not attribute adverse motives or assume adverse intent.

Clarify boundaries – what you do not want to happen

- Communicate your boundaries to the conflict (sometimes referred to as 'non-values') – that is, the course of events that you do not want to occur or the boundaries or limits that you set on yourself to limit or minimise damaging effects that might flow from the dispute. For example, 'I don't want ...' followed by an explanation of what you do not want to occur/achieve.
- Communicating boundaries also shows that you are taking responsibility for your actions or omissions or those of your organisation.
- It is important to seek consensus on the boundaries of the dispute as a preliminary to seeking consensus on 'positive' values.

Clarify the issues in dispute

Identify the issues in dispute:

- clarify what each party sees as the issues in dispute
- clarify the points the parties agree on, for example, by listing and comparing the contentious issues of each party and acknowledging common points and differences.

Once the core issues are agreed on:

- break down these issues into their different aspects and then into the various components/dimensions of those aspects – this helps to clarify and define the core questions
- at this stage no statements should be made for or against the different positions, that is, do not discuss content at this point
- begin by agreeing to discuss the less emotive issues/questions in order to achieve a few quick successes.

Clarify the impact of the problem

- Clarify what impact the problem has had on the other person – this may be necessary to be able to show appropriate sympathy/empathy, and will be necessary to identify the needs (and therefore the objectives) of the other person.

Clarify the process to be followed

- Clarify and get agreement about the process to be followed to address the conflict/resolve the problem.

2.14.5. Behaviour

Manage anger

- Be assertive, not aggressive or passive.
- Anger in itself is a natural emotion and can be positive if it signals that personal boundaries have been violated or rights infringed. However, everyone is responsible for how they act on their anger. Anger only becomes unacceptable if it becomes rage that is expressed through abuse, hostility or threats or violence.

Avoid overreaction

- Remain calm, no matter how the other person behaves.
- Set limits when it appears that rudeness, anger, threats or aggression may transgress your personal boundaries.
- In setting limits, offer choices (not ultimatums) which have consequences.
- Explain what behaviour is inappropriate and why.
- Adopt a zero tolerance response to threats and violence.

Show respect

- Show respect and courtesy in all your dealings, no matter what the provocation.

Respect personal space

- Do not invade the other person's personal space.

Be aware of your non-verbal communication

- Keep your non-verbal cues non-threatening – be aware of your tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures.
- If standing, adopt a non-threatening stance – including not standing eye-to-eye and toe-to-toe (for example, by turning your body partially sideways, showing palms and wrists with hands pointing down, etc).

2.14.6. Outcomes

Be clear about your objective

- Be clear about whether your objective is to avoid or resolve conflict, or to attribute blame.

Be creative

- Recognise there is generally no single 'right' solution.

Seek finality

- Aim to resolve conflict in constructive, conciliatory and mutually acceptable ways that are sustainable and likely to provide finality to the dispute.
- The best outcome is a 'win-win' situation that both parties can live with. This may be because both parties have achieved their objectives, or one or both parties have changed their expectations as to what is an acceptable outcome – possibly through a better understanding of the process or limitations that apply.