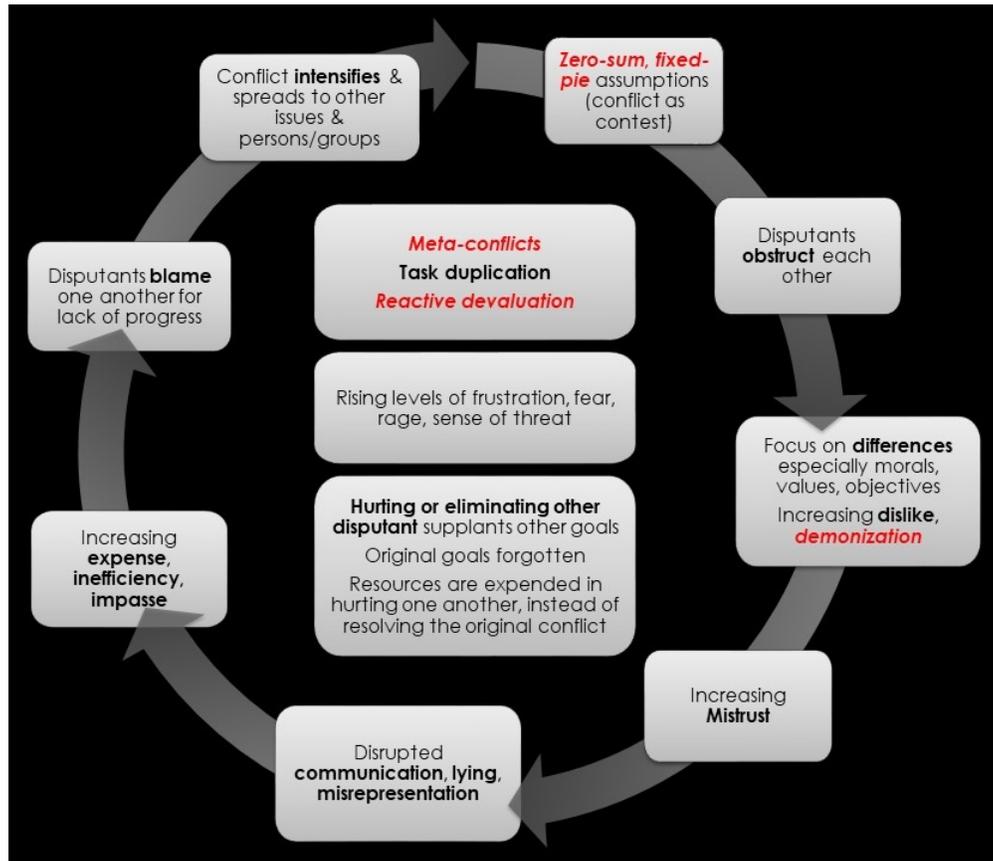


A Conflict-De-Escalation Toolkit

Laurie S. Coltri, prepared for TRC, 2021

An escalating conflict (diagram below) is a self-organizing, intensifying pattern of destructiveness that sometimes occurs when people have conflicts.



Escalating conflicts cause distortions of perception and judgment that rob people of the ability to deal strategically and constructively with the situation. By reversing one or more of the symptoms shown in the diagram, you can take part in halting the harm and making the situation more constructive.

Here are some stand-alone techniques anyone can use to de-escalate and transform conflict.

Symptom of Escalation	De-Escalation Tactics
Blaming “the other side”	Role-model blaming the situation, not the people, for problems & lack of progress. <i>Example: say “the conflict has caused us to undermine each other” rather than “you’re a malicious person.”</i>
Focus on differences	Foster group activities (<i>preferably low-stress</i>) that attract people from diverse “factions” & require working together. Make a list of common ground; review it frequently. Mine every situation for commonalities & mention them as you see them.
Negative emotions	Take care of yourself & look for ways to offer comfort to others, even those you might otherwise not wish to comfort. <i>Strong emotions & stress exacerbate biased thinking, worsening demonization, oversimplification, zero-sum thinking, & reactive devaluation.</i>

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Symptom of Escalation	De-Escalation Tactics
People mutually obstruct each other	Establish multiple, diverse, easy opportunities to help one another.
Oversimplification & “demonization” (<i>denigration and dehumanization of those seen as “on the other side” in a conflict</i>)	<p>Look for examples of oversimplification & demonization in your own beliefs and conduct. They are a form of implicit bias, so evaluate them critically. Listen especially for positive changes in others – these changes can be masked in escalated conflict.</p> <p>Create an event or program that reveals that “each of us is much more than the conflict.” <i>The podcast series is a good example.</i></p> <p>Take an interest in others, especially those with whom you are less comfortable. Ask about them & their lives, listening with an open and curious mind & heart.</p> <p>Visibly act in a positive way not typical for you (<i>act counter to negative stereotypes created by the escalating conflict</i>).</p> <p>Use active listening, not debate or argument, in conflictual situations.</p> <p>Explicitly state how much you value those you interact with.</p>
Low trust	<p>Look for ways to be accountable & scrupulously follow through on promises. If trust is very low, written promises can be needed.</p> <p>Apologize whenever appropriate, particularly when a promise has been broken.</p> <p>Be explicit & ask for steps that will help you to trust. If you feel unsafe doing this, confide in someone you do trust, & ask for their help.</p>
“Reactive devaluation” (<i>unwarranted suspiciousness of proposals made by “the other side”</i>)	<p>Look for reactive devaluation in your own judgments. This is a form of implicit bias, & can cause you to reject good ideas.</p> <p>Look for opportunities to sincerely praise others in the conflict.</p>
Vengeance replaces instrumental goals	List your personal interests, values & needs that underlie your demands & positions. Review & update the list often.
Belief that if one wins the other loses (<i>zero-sum thinking</i>)	Look for actions that benefit everyone; be explicit about how they are win-win.
Impaired communication	<p>Listen actively & follow through on communication.</p> <p>Apologize whenever your communication is sub-optimal. Tolerate imperfect communication in yourself & others.</p> <p>Formal, written communication can help prevent misunderstandings.</p>
“Meta-conflicts” (<i>conflicts about how the underlying conflict is being handled</i>)	<p>Acknowledge meta-conflicts & apologize whenever appropriate.</p> <p>Blame the conflict, not the other person (<i>“this situation is so heated that it’s caused us to have friction”</i>)</p>