



Calm, Cool, and Collected: Communication in Conflict

How do you remain calm, cool, and collected when conflicts escalate?

We've all been there: encountering someone in a fit of road rage; a neighbor upset about another neighbor's transgression; dealing with a beloved toddler in the middle of a melt-down. Typically, we ignore such bad behavior, waiting for it to resolve itself. But, these may be prime opportunities to practice de-escalation techniques and communication skills.

Generally speaking, we trust that our co-workers are capable of resolving conflicts and able to avoid crisis in the workplace. If a situation does escalate, equipped and available managers step in. But consider this: according to the most recent report by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), over 20,000 workers experienced trauma from workplace violence in 2018.

How does this happen?

Conflict Escalation

Multiple factors can escalate a situation, including:

- **Physical:** Pain/illness, sleep deprivation, low blood sugar/dehydration, prescription changes
- **Mental or cognitive:** Unhelpful thoughts/thinking patterns, negative perceptions, critical inner voice
- **Emotional:** Pre-existing mood disorders, past trauma, etc.
- **Social:** Lack of healthy support network, isolation
- **Environmental:** Visual or auditory triggers, audience

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that *"what got you here may not get you there."*

At **Proffitt Management Solutions** we are fully committed to providing a unique blend of team and individual development and executive coaching sessions where participants achieve more focus, a sense of purpose, and better results in their leadership roles.

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- **Spiritual:** Sense of connection to higher power or that which offers hope, faith, purpose

While a crisis is not typically caused by one event, there is often a tipping point. Most common is the death of a significant other, loss of a relationship, loss of work, homelessness, or cabin fever. A crisis occurs when people perceive that they have encountered insurmountable obstacles to their goals, their life cycle or routine is significantly disrupted, and they have no appropriate method to manage their situation. In other words, they believe they have no way through, around, or out of their perceived situation.

Shift Your Goals

Whenever emotions are involved, communication can get tricky. It happens often: at home, in public, and at work. When people disagree, feel unheard, or feel invalidated, a conversation can go off track.

The goals of the communication shift to de-escalation can be summarized into three objectives:

1. Gain equilibrium/stabilization

- This may involve identifying and removing anything that reinforces aggressive behavior.
- Help the other party(s) identify reasons to calm down.

2. Cognitive

- Help the other party gain control of their thoughts (and behavior).
- Help the other party gain a sense of control.

3. Psychosocial

- Assess internal and external exacerbating and mitigating factors.
- Identify and choose workable alternatives.

It's important to remember that not everyone responds the same way to threats or a crisis. For example, they might be in a flight, fight, or freeze mode, or a combination in a wide variety of degrees. There is no one "normal" range of behaviors.

8 De-escalation Techniques

De-escalation requires self-awareness of our own perceptions and assumptions, and a curious, non-judgmental mindset. Here are a few techniques that

can help:

1. **Be professional, and respect personal space.** This can vary from person-to-person, so be sensitive to physical, confidential, and social-distance space.
2. **Use non-threatening body language:** stand-to-side, rather than square to other. Speak in a calm, quiet, and low(er) tone.
3. **Focus on feelings.** Listen, watch, and reflect. "It sounds like you are feeling..."
4. **Set limits.** Help identify options, choices, and consequences.
5. **Ignore challenging questions.** Avoid taking the bait.
6. **Choose wisely in stretching rules, boundaries, and battles.**
7. **Allow for time.**
8. **Be empathetic and non-judgmental.**

Trust the Process

While there are no quick fixes when communicating during conflict, you can trust a proven process.

In [*Walking Through Anger: A New Design for Confronting Conflict in an Emotionally Charged World*](#) (Sounds True, October 2019), Christian Conte, PhD, shares his philosophy and evidence-based model for change called Yield Theory. This framework is designed to help anyone see the world from the perspective of another with empathy, compassion, and non-attachment, replacing any ego-driven perception of a situation (or person in a heightened emotional state).

As Conte describes it, Yield Theory Compassion is the "cornerstone of communication." It allows leaders, managers, and colleagues to de-escalate and work through conflict without aggression or submission.

According to Conte, practicing Yield Theory involves a "constant navigation toward the position of the other" through three steps:

1. **Listen:** hear what is being said, verbally and non-verbally.
2. **Validate:** validate the feelings of the person in a heightened emotional state. Validation is only effective (and has occurred) if the subject feels validated.
3. **Explore Options:** explore all options and

consequences of each option. Persons in a heightened emotional state often have a narrow focus, a type of tunnel vision. This is the time to introduce a macro-vision, a wider range of options, and allow for choice in behavior or actions. In essence, you are creating a safe-space that de-escalates a situation.

7 Essential Communication Skills for Leaders

This process relies on seven key communication skills to build trust:

1. **Acceptance:** be accepting of others and yourself (strengths, limits, and emotional/cognitive states).
2. **Authenticity:** be true to yourself in order to be truly available to others.
3. **Compassion:** be aware and understand how others are feeling.
4. **Conscious education:** check-in and monitor your physical being to prevent transferring internal stress into external accusation.
5. **Creativity:** be open, curious, and of a growth mindset.
6. **Mindfulness:** be mindfully and totally present. Avoid the five errors of communication:
 - Approach: be self-aware of tone, non-verbal cues, space, etc.
 - Interpretation: be aware of cultural differences, opportunities to project, blind-spots/bias, etc.
 - Judgment
 - Language
 - Omnipotence
7. **Nonattachment:** let go of any pre-determined outcomes to achieve the de-escalation goals. Be responsible and accountable for self and don't take statements personally.

Communication in Conflict: If, When, and How

Attempting to intervene in a situation of road rage is never a good idea. It's best to contact the

authorities when it is safe to do so. Any situation involving a weapon (be it a car or any deadly object) should be managed by a trained specialist.

Then there are the situations when our emotions have exceeded our rationality. It happens with people we don't know and people we know well: colleagues, friends, neighbors, and family. This is when a conflict can quickly escalate; we get hooked by our natural mimic reflex making it more difficult to disengage. In that case, walking away or postponing the conversation may be the best option.

Do's

Here are a few tips to use this method of de-escalation and strengthen the relationship:

- Take a physical step aside. Visualize insults passing by, missing you.
- Talk about the process, not about the message. It might sound something like:

"I hear you are angry. I feel angry. I don't want to raise my voice with you as it won't be productive. I need to take a break. Can we talk about this at ___ (time)."

If you need more time to gain your equilibrium, ask for it.

- Meet as agreed. Focus on common goals or interests.

Don'ts

- Don't ignore anger (yours or others), rather acknowledge it.
- Don't take someone else's anger personally. Even if it is about you, recognize your own feelings about the issue, and remain calm (non-attached.)
- Don't feed someone's anger by trying to stop it, rather, create a safe place to properly voice feelings.

Workplace Conflicts and Crisis

Every employer should have a Workplace Violence Prevention Plan tailored for their organization. A robust plan reflects their type of business/service and the clients they serve, resources, physical layout, organizational culture, and communication and training expectations. While it may be uncomfortable or unpleasant, all employees should participate in periodic violence prevention training to strengthen their knowledge and confidence.



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