

Theories about conflict escalation are used to map conflict escalation and reduction. The following article starts with Michelle Maiese's theoretical description of Destructive Escalation**. The second part of the article illustrates how mediators avoid creating or increasing conflict to engage with the parties in a non-threatening way.



Michelle Maiese describes conflict escalation as a circular process where each party sees the other as the aggressor and themselves as the defender. Each action or event produces a stronger reaction, repercussion and/or retribution. The parties' lists of grievances and justifications increase. Retaliation for current and past events increases the blame, harm and/or desire for justice. The conflict widens and as it becomes more public it involves more people as players and witnesses. Perceived threats can be realised as the response provoked can cause threatening behaviour and acts of aggression which can even be life threatening in some situations.



A retaliatory spiral is fuelled by blame and anger and escalating counter threats and action against the initiating party rather than disengagement or pacifying actions.

In a defensive spiral each party sees the other as the aggressor. Allies are called on for support.

Issues move from the specific to general and the relationship between the parties deteriorates.

Divisions between the parties increase and motives are attributed to actions.

Escalation is fuelled by fear and a perceived need to protect against harm. When a conflict is escalating talks, treaties and peaceful settlements may break down and more militant leaders/leadership may emerge in response to a perceived threat or crisis.

Conversely, where one party has greater power than the other, escalation may be calculated to put the other under pressure or to involve other nations by creating a crisis e.g. in international conflicts.

When a real or perceived threat cannot be ignored, contained or reduced by discussion, negotiation and agreement, force or enforcement is often the next step to be discussed, considered or acted upon.

In many cases conflict escalation is not intentional, it can arise from a misunderstanding, misinformation or partial information or knowledge.

The implications and/or consequences of actions are not always considered beforehand and the escalation of conflict has unexpected, unforeseen consequences.

Mediators will recognise similar responses in a neighbourhood setting.

An example of conflict escalation in community mediation might be a 'reasonable request' to cut back the branches of a tree on a property boundary and/or clearing up cuttings from the tree that fall into a neighbour's garden where the request does not produce the desired or expected result.

Note : the term reasonable request is in inverted commas because that is how one party may describe an approach but it may not be how the other party would describe a particular approach.

A 'request' may give way to veiled threats about rights and enforcement, demands and threats if it is refused.

A 'reasonable request' and a 'justified' refusal becomes a personalised battle of wills.

A battle of wills becomes intractable when the parties see themselves as evenly matched but when one person sees the other as stronger than themselves or having an advantage that makes them stronger a power imbalance arises and the fear of 'losing' contributes to a conflict escalation and 'justified' defensive action.

When discussing the situation with friends, family, colleagues and anyone else who will listen, one party will talk about the other as if they know everything about them.

Motives are attached to actions and the speaker becomes the victim of others' actions.

More energy is put into creating and monitoring a case against the other person and justifying a response than in addressing the problem or the real issue which is likely to be a perceived threat or unmet need, desire or expectation.

De-escalating Conflict



Mediators are disinterested parties who nevertheless

1. Invite a re-telling of the story
2. Are interested in the story
3. Listen but do not share the emotions.
4. Do not interrupt the initial re-telling
5. Do not agree or disagree with the speaker(s)

The process of the re-telling the story in a calm manner allows the speaker to be heard. That in itself removes the 'justification' for escalation.

The focus is on the speaker's perception/version of what has happened and the effect on them, not the other(s) involved. The attention they are receiving also helps the speaker feel empowered i.e. that what they are saying is being heard and given the attention the speaker requires.

In the initial re-telling of the story perceptions and actions are acknowledged, clarified and perhaps for the first time, separated.

From the outset the pace, tone and delivery of the mediator is calming and respectful signalling that the speaker is 'no threat' to the listener, the mediator is not the aggressor and there is no need to be defensive.

The mediator does not assume a position of power, does not assume they know the speaker or attribute motives to actions.

By removing the perceived threat and the need to act or react to a real or perceived threat a calm space is created where people can take time to reflect on

- what happened
- how it is affecting them
- current (unmet) needs
- what they would like to happen

before making a considered choice about other ways to get their needs met.

In my experience practical issues are easier to address once unmet needs have been recognised and acknowledged.

The mediation process is an opportunity for the parties to decide what is important and what each is willing to do to get their needs met in a different

setting, recognising the need to achieve the co-operation of the other party/parties involved in the current difficulties.

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** Michelle Maiese's knowledge based essay on Destructive Escalation can be found on [Beyond Intractability.com](http://BeyondIntractability.com)'s website.