11.6: How Conflict Escalates

**Note:** The information in this section has been adapted from Speed Leas’ *Levels of Conflict*, published by the Center for Congregational Health.

Many academics and conflict resolution practitioners have observed predictable patterns in the way conflict escalates. Conflict is often discussed as though it is a separate entity, and in fact it is true that an escalating dispute may seem to take on a life of its own. Conflict will often escalate beyond reason unless a conscious effort is made to end it.

The following is an example of an escalating conflict. Most people will recognize their own actions in the description.

A conflict begins . . .

- The parties become aware of the conflict but attempt to deal with it sensibly. Often, they will attribute the problem to “a misunderstanding” and indicate that “they can work it out.”

- The parties begin to slide from cooperation to competition. (“I’ll bend but only if they will first.”) They begin to view the conflict as resulting from deliberate action on the part of the other. (“They must have known this would happen.”) Positions begin to harden and defensiveness sets in, which creates adversarial encounters. Parties begin to take actions to strengthen their positions and look to others for support. (“Don’t you feel this is reasonable?” “Do you know what that idiot is doing to me?”)

- As communication deteriorates, parties rely more on assumptions about the other and attribute negative motives to them. (“I’ll bet they are going to . . .,” “Those sorts of people would . . .,” “Their thinking is so muddled, they must . . .”) Groupthink often takes over as each disputant seeks support from others. (“We have to appear strong and take a united front.”) Parties begin to look for more evidence of other problems—their beliefs feed their observations.

- Parties soon believe that cooperation cannot resolve the problem because of the actions of the other, and aggressive actions are planned. (“I’ve tried everything to get them to see reason.” “It’s time to get tough with them.” “I’m going to put a stop to this.”)

- Parties begin to feel righteous and blame the other for the whole problem. Generalizing and stereotyping begin. (“I know what those people are like. . . . We can’t let them get away with this.”) Parties begin to be judgemental and
moralistic, and believe they are defending what is right. (“It’s the principle of the matter.” “What will people say if we give in to this?”)

- The conflict becomes more complicated but also more generalized and personalized. Severe confrontation is anticipated and, in fact, planned for, thus making it inevitable. The parties view this as acceptable as the other has, in their mind, clearly shown they are lacking in human qualities. (“He’s just a jerk; we’ll have to really hit him hard.”)

- All parties appear now to believe that the objective of the conflict is to hurt others more than they are being hurt. (“I’ll make you pay even if we both go down over this.”) The dispute is beyond rational analysis; causing damage to the other, even at your own expense, is the main focus. (“Whatever it takes . . .” “There is no turning back now.” “They won’t make a fool out of me.”)

- Finally, destruction of the other, even if it means self-destruction as well, is the driving force. (“If it takes everything I have, for the rest of my life . . .”)

Figure 11.5.1 is called the conflict escalation tornado. It demonstrates how conflict can quickly escalate out of control. By observing and listening to individuals in dispute, it is often possible to determine where they are in the escalation process and anticipate what might occur next. In doing so, one can develop timely and appropriate approaches to halt the process.

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