

Levels of conflict

Conflict does not usually explode out of nowhere. It builds in layers, gradually shifting from small annoyances to serious breakdowns. Understanding the levels of conflict can help us recognise where we are in the journey and choose how to respond before things spiral. The earlier we spot the signs and self-reflect, the better our chances of keeping communication healthy and outcomes productive. Below are five progressive levels of conflict, with common signs and questions to help guide reflection.

1. Irritation

Minor issues arise, but they do not feel important enough to address. While slightly inconvenient, they are often easy to ignore or overlook. Emotional response is minimal, and most people stay focused on the task.

Typical signs:

- Eye-rolling or sighs
- Mild avoidance or disengagement
- Problems not voiced directly

How to de-escalate:

- Acknowledge the issue early with a light, non-threatening comment
- Ask clarifying questions to understand the behaviour before it becomes a pattern
- Use humour or warmth to reduce tension without avoiding the topic
- Make a polite request to address the source of irritation directly

Self-reflection questions:

- Am I brushing something off that might grow into a bigger issue?
- Have I avoided saying something because it felt too small to mention?
- Do I feel slightly off or disengaged around this person or situation?
- Is there a pattern of small frustrations I have not acknowledged?
- Could a brief, constructive conversation resolve this early?

2. Annoyance

Persistent or repeated issues lead to a rise in frustration. Stress begins to show, and objections are voiced in a calm and reasoned way. There is still openness to resolution.

Typical signs:

- Increased tension in tone or language
- Formal complaints or requests for clarification
- Focus remains on the issue, not the person

How to de-escalate:

- Name the issue calmly and directly to the other person
- Request a short conversation to clarify expectations
- Use "I" statements to express your concern without blame
- Focus on shared goals or outcomes to shift attention away from the friction

Self-reflection questions:

- What exactly is bothering me, and why?
- Have I clearly expressed my concern to the other person?
- Am I being heard, or do I need to restate my point?
- Do I believe a solution is possible?
- What assumptions might I be making about the other person's intent?

3. Anger

Emotions become more intense. Feelings of hurt, injustice, or betrayal rise to the surface. The conflict starts to feel personal. Communication becomes emotional rather than rational, and relationships may begin to suffer.

Typical signs:

- Raised voices, sarcasm, emotional tone
- Attribution of negative intent
- Desire to be heard or validated more than to solve

How to de-escalate:

- Take a short break or suggest a pause before continuing the conversation
- Acknowledge both your feelings and the other person's perspective
- Use calming techniques like deep breathing or writing down your thoughts first
- Invite a third party to facilitate if emotions are running high

Self-reflection questions:

- What emotion am I feeling most strongly right now?
- Is my reaction about this issue, or is it about something deeper?
- Have I made assumptions about the other person's motives?
- What do I want the other person to understand about how I feel?
- Is it time to pause before continuing the conversation?

4. Hostility

People become entrenched in their positions. The conflict moves beyond the issue to deeper concerns like trust, identity, or power. Communication often breaks down, and empathy gives way to blame and opposition.

Typical signs:

- Us versus them narratives
- Withholding or passive-aggressive behaviour
- Refusal to engage or shutting down dialogue

How to de-escalate:

- Shift from blame to curiosity by asking open-ended questions
- Reframe the conversation around long-term relationships or shared values
- Use a neutral third party or mediator to create a safe environment for dialogue
- Slow down the conversation and focus on listening without interrupting

Self-reflection questions:

- Am I more interested in being right than being effective?
- Have I begun to see the other person as the problem?
- What assumptions am I making about their intentions or character?
- What would it take for me to re-engage in this conversation constructively?
- Is there a trusted third party who could help us shift this dynamic?

5. Violence

Dialogue disappears and destructive behaviour takes over. The goal shifts from resolving the issue to punishing or overpowering the other party. Actions may become extreme or harmful, and consequences can be long-lasting.

Typical signs:

- Walkouts, sabotage, legal threats, physical confrontation
- Justification of harmful behaviour
- Deep sense of moral righteousness or betrayal

How to de-escalate:

- Create physical and emotional safety by removing yourself or others from the situation
- Seek help from HR, a senior leader, or formal conflict resolution services
- Interrupt harmful behaviour by setting clear, respectful boundaries
- Refocus attention on future repair rather than past harm

Self-reflection questions:

- Has this conflict become about revenge or proving a point?
- What damage has already occurred, and can it be repaired?
- Am I acting out of pain or principle?
- What are the long-term consequences of my actions or words?
- What would it take to de-escalate and rebuild some trust?

How to use this framework

- Check in early: Use the levels to spot where you are in a disagreement before it intensifies.
- Name it: Even quietly acknowledging “I think we’re in the annoyance stage” can create perspective.
- Reflect before reacting: Use the questions to think through your own feelings and choices.
- Share it with others: Help teams or colleagues understand that conflict has patterns, and patterns can be changed.
- Act sooner: The earlier you engage constructively, the easier it is to recover and resolve.

Conflict is part of life. But escalation is not inevitable. By recognising the signs and choosing our responses with care, we can move through conflict with clarity, courage and compassion.