What Nonprofits Need to Know About Conflict De-Escalation

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Imagine you're the director of client services at a nonprofit that serves unhoused people. You hold an open house to educate the public about your work and the challenges unhoused people face.

A community member aggressively and repeatedly questions your executive director. She politely thanks the community member for his feedback and invites other attendees to share their thoughts. The man remains quiet for the rest of the meeting, but afterward, he walks up to you, saying he doesn't want his tax dollars going to services for unhoused people. He gets into your personal space. His voice is just below a shout.

What do you do?

There's no single right answer. But conflict de-escalation skills can help your nonprofit team evaluate challenging situations like this in the moment and make an informed decision on how to respond.

Nonprofit employees face many situations that hold the potential for conflict, from workplace tensions to confrontations with members of the public or people who receive services. Conflict de-escalation skills are more necessary than ever in a stressed society with hate crimes rising and acts of gun violence increasing. In this article, we'll explore what conflict de-escalation is, how to practice it, and how to know when to seek additional help.

Understanding Conflict

Conflict de-escalation seeks to defuse heated confrontations before they escalate into violence. If successful, de-escalation can eliminate or lessen the need for law enforcement to intervene in a situation, according to Right to Be, a nonprofit that works to end all forms of harassment.

Over a third of workers (36%) report dealing with conflict often, very often, or all the time, up from 29% in 2008, according to research firm Myers-Briggs' 2022 report on conflict at work.

Conflict, or disagreement, can arise among members of your team, or between members of your team and people they meet in their work.

Within teams, conflicts often arise in three areas, according to Myers-Briggs:

- Task conflict – People might disagree about work assignments, workplace policies, or how your nonprofit allocates resources.
- Relationship conflict – Team members could have disagreements rooted in personality differences or preferred work styles.
- Values conflict – People might disagree on ethics, social norms, diversity in the workplace, and more.

The same dynamics can also cause conflict between team members and members of the public. People your nonprofit serves might feel they are being treated unfairly, or that your nonprofit has allocated resources wrongly. People might be angry about not getting enough of something they need and express that anger to the person they are dealing with at your nonprofit.

Most of us experience some form of conflict almost every day, and many of those experiences don't result in violence.

What to Do When Conflict Surfaces

If you notice low-level conflict at work—for example, team members avoiding each other, complaining about each other, or frequently nitpicking each other—here are some things to try.

- Make sure you're fostering an environment that's open, collaborative, and communicative. Consider working with your team to come up with a short list of "rules of engagement." It could include things like "we don't interrupt each other unless absolutely necessary" and "we use language that is respectful of others."
- When you see conflict, the Society for Human Resource Management recommends determining if employees can resolve it on their own with some guidance from you; if you need to step in to resolve or mediate it; or if you need to involve HR. Seek HR or legal help from employment counsel licensed in your state for anything that involves a protected employment class like race or gender; allegations of retaliation; or extreme behaviors that reflect gross misconduct in your organization.

If you need to step in:

- Hear from all sides, ideally together. Listen actively to understand, rather than respond. Ask the people involved to use "I" rather than "You" statements. Invite them to check their assumptions—what are they assuming? How do they know it's true?
- Explore best and worst-case scenarios. What do they see as the best possible outcome? The worst? Where might room exist for compromise?
- Agree on next steps. Ask each party to make a verbal commitment to act—e.g., "I agree to keep you informed by inviting you to all meetings on this project."
- Document the conflict. Write a summary of the conflict, what caused it, the solution you agreed on, and the plan to implement it. This will give you a record of what happened if the conflict later escalates.

When A Conflict Escalates

How do you know when you need to intervene in a conflict immediately? First, observe the situation from a safe distance. Gauge the level of conflict, whether you have the emotional resources and any needed support to respond, and whether your intervention could increase the risk of harm. If the person's behavior or the situation is escalating and you believe violence may occur, leave the situation, go to a safe location, and seek help.

Here are some warning signs that a conflict is escalating, which increases the risk of violence.

AGITATION, the lowest level of conflict, can involve aggressive body language, sighing loudly, and eye-rolling. (Note: at times, some neurodivergent people may display gestures such as eye-rolling without aggressive intent.)

ESCALATION, the middle level of conflict, can include pacing, finger pointing, using an aggressive tone of voice, raising one's voice, or arguing.

PEAK CONFLICT, the highest level, includes verbal abuse (like shaming, humiliating, or harassing someone); spitting or inappropriate touching or gestures; physical aggression; or the display of weapons.

If you decide to take action to de-escalate conflict, here's what to do.

Take a few deep breaths to ground yourself before you act.

Change the setting. Remove people from the area if you can. This could mean asking some of the parties in a conflict and any onlookers to leave.

Respect personal space. Maintain a safe distance, and don't touch the person who's upset.

Listen. Give the person your full attention. Nod. Ask questions when you can. Don't change the subject or interrupt.

Empathize. Show genuine concern and do not judge the person.

Speak slowly and calmly. Monitor your volume and do not raise your voice. Avoid emphasizing words or syllables, which can escalate a situation. See the section below "Say This, Don't Say That," which gives examples of language and body language to use and avoid when de-escalating conflict.

Even if you don't feel safe actively intervening, you might be able to do bystander intervention, which interrupts a potentially harmful situation. If you feel safe to try it after assessing the situation, you could attempt one of Right to Be's 5 D's of Bystander Intervention.

Distract. Ignore the harasser and engage with the person who's being harassed. You could ask them for the time, or just spill or drop something to shift attention away from the harasser.

Delegate. Ask someone else to take a specific action to help you intervene. This could be a person better positioned to step in—a supervisor, or someone the person who's upset trusts.

Document. If someone else is already helping the person being harassed, you can record or take notes about what's happening. Ask the person who was harassed what they'd like you to do with the recording or notes and respect their wishes.

Delay. Check in with the person who was harassed after the incident ends. Ask them how you can support them.

Direct. If you and the person being harassed are physically safe, the situation seems unlikely to escalate, and you can tell the person being harassed wants somebody to speak up, you could do so. Keep it short and succinct: "That's inappropriate." "Leave them alone." "Please stop right now."

After Conflict: Learn, Process, Heal

When a situation of conflict ends, take some time to reflect. What worked well? What do you wish you had done differently? Acknowledge that whatever happened, you handled the situation as best you could in the moment, and you're committed to learning from it. Lean on your nonprofit's workplace violence prevention strategies (see our article in this issue) for help.

Take some time to calm and restore yourself, too. Find a quiet space, take a walk outside, talk to someone you trust, or do any other activities that ground you.

Conflict is a fact of life. With all the pressures on nonprofits, the people and communities they serve, and the team members who serve them, conflicts will surface. If you can quickly assess situations and use de-escalation or bystander intervention when it's safe, you'll be well prepared to meet those conflicts. In the best-case scenario, everyone involved will learn something about how to meet conflict next time. That's something we can all strive for.

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She will present a webinar about de-escalation for NRMC affiliate members in November. Reach her with questions or thoughts about this article at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or (505) 456-4045.

Continue Your Learning

Learn more about how to de-escalate conflict with these resources.

5 Ds of Bystander Intervention – Right to Be

How to De-Escalate Conflict – NRMC

How to Stay Calm in Tough Situations – NRMC

De-Escalation: How You Can Help Defuse Potentially Violent Situations – Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency

Say This, Don’t Say That

Here are some examples of language and body language that can help de-escalate conflict.

Avoid: “Calm down.”

Say: “I can see that you’re upset.”

Avoid: “I can’t help you.”

Say: “I want to help, what can I do?”

Avoid: “I know how you feel.”

Say: “I understand that you feel…”

Avoid: “Come with me.”

Say: “May I speak with you?”

Avoid: Standing rigid directly in front of the person

Try: Keeping a relaxed, alert stance at the person’s side

Avoid: Pointing your finger

Try: Keeping your hands down, open, and visible at all times

Avoid: Faking a smile

Try: Maintaining a neutral, attentive facial expression