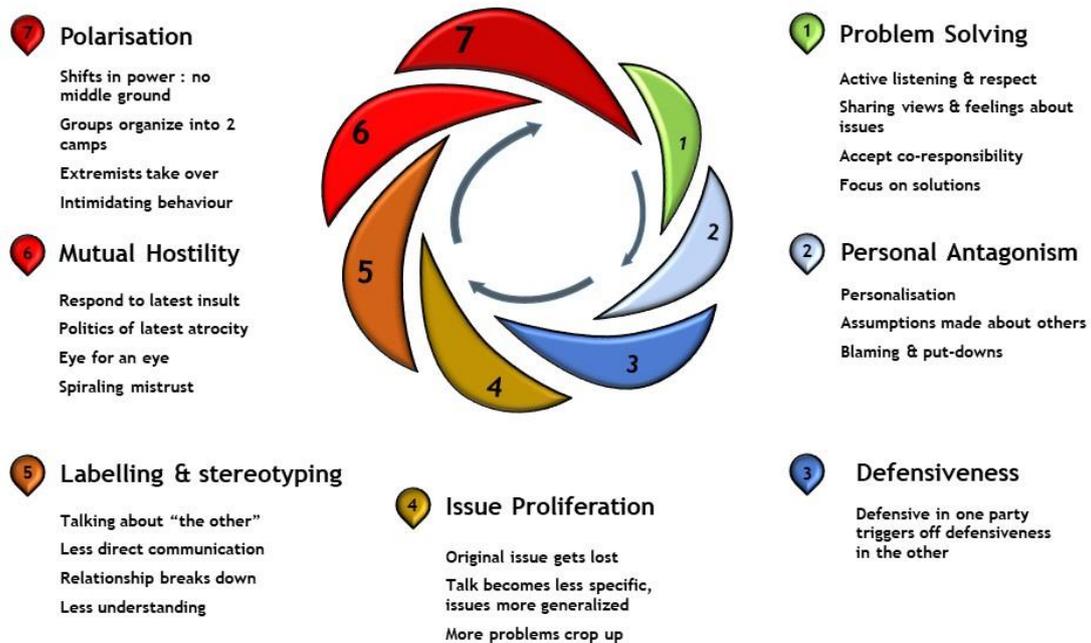# The Escalatory Spiral of Unmanaged Conflict

Left unmanaged, each conflict situation contains certain predictable elements and a set of dynamics. Conflicts seldom stay constant for long. Once a phase of emotional involvement and conflict intensity is reached and there is movement to the next phase, it is difficult go back. It is like descending the rapids in a canoe: it is easier to go down and over the rapids than to return.

The escalatory spiral is a dynamic of conflict that has each party responding to a hostile act from the other with an even more hostile one. Conflict theorists call it "reciprocal causation": the notion that each party tries to increase the hostility or damage to opponents in a corresponding way (Wehr 1979). The issue or form of the conflict has a tendency to become more intense and the relationship more conflictive at each round of a conflict episode or as it proceeds from one conflict episode to another (Walton 1987, p66). At each stage, it produces change in perceptions, issues and activities. Unmanaged conflicts progressively raise the slakes without fully knowing what the consequences will be. "Disputes become sinks for resources that the parties never meant to commit... progressively incurring risks and costs that would have seemed intolerable earlier in the struggle." (Carpenter & Kennedy 1988) Parties get locked into the conflict.

The Conflict Spiral

7 Polarisation
Shifts in power : no middle ground
Groups organize into 2 camps
Extremists take over
Intimidating behaviour

6 Mutual Hostility
Respond to latest insult
Politics of latest atrocity
Eye for an eye
Spiraling mistrust

5 Labelling & stereotyping
Talking about "the other"
Less direct communication
Relationship breaks down
Less understanding

4 Issue Proliferation
Original issue gets lost
Talk becomes less specific, issues more generalized
More problems crop up

1 Problem Solving
Active listening & respect
Sharing views & feelings about issues
Accept co-responsibility
Focus on solutions

2 Personal Antagonism
Personalisation
Assumptions made about others
Blaming & put-downs

3 Defensiveness
Defensive in one party triggers off defensiveness in the other

Stage 1: Problem solving: Tackling issues at source

Disputes start with a resolvable problem and grow beyond hope of resolution because they are not dealt with early at source. In a problem solving situation, parties share responsibility in a cooperative manner by active listening, respecting each other's point of view and exchanging substantive relevant information on the task in hand. The parties are at ease with each other or have sufficient goodwill to be able to storm positively without harming their relationship.

Stage 2: Personal antagonism and Provocation

Often what starts out as a simple disagreement over a practical problem gets transformed by a personal attack or through blaming the "other". This is called the trigger event that sets off the conflict episode between the parties. Party B pets annoyed, makes a charge against the other or

makes inferences (attribution or judgement) about their character, intentions or motives. An attribution is going beyond the information given.

Stage 3: Defensiveness and Reaction

Instead of acknowledging the anger and focusing on the problem [going back down to stage 1], Party A retaliates by making a counter-charge or replying abusively. Each now sees the other as the problem and the issue has become personalised. Within seconds, the person at the receiving end of the verbal attack or misunderstood statement is apt to become defensive and counter with further inflammatory remarks. This is called the "push-pushback phenomenon" (Bolton 1979, p160). It triggers an upward spiral of blaming and punishment that can become aggressive and destructive. Typically, the mini-conflict episode ends with one party walking away or storming out of the meeting. Unfortunately, some incidents can quickly spill over into pushing or shoving or a physical attack on the other.

By understanding and examining the links between Provocation, Reaction and Response, it becomes easier to control your own behaviour.

Stage 4: Issue proliferation

After the initial conflict episode over a single issue, new problems crop up and different issues get added in subsequent episodes. Previously suppressed issues with that person are allowed to appear as the negativity sets in. The pattern is one or issue expansion, proliferation and generalisation, leaving a sense of confusion and unmanageability (Lederach 1986). The talk about the issues becomes increasingly less specific and more general.

Stage 5: Stereotyping

Because the parties have less contact and dialogue with each other, we see the onset of less direct communication and increased misunderstanding of the real concerns of the other party. Listening dies, only to be replaced by the dialogue of the deaf. Consequently, stereotypes get built on ignorance, distorted views and over-generalisations. This feeds their mutual hostility. Unable to engage in direct talk, each party seeks support for their views and concerns from their friends or work colleagues who are seen as allies against the other.

One of the strategies leaders use to demonize and vilify enemies is to label them with derogatory terms. Use of racial slurs and epithets are examples. Labelling is an act of bullying, humiliating, ridiculing, or mocking other group members in show of their power. Its goal is to assert their superiority and dominance and exercise power over the presumed to be "inferior" group members.

Stage 6: Reciprocal hostility

The conflict now seems to be getting out of control. There is strong projection and growing distortion of images. The other is seen as devil, totally bad, while their self-image is one of hero. The parties come to hate each other; yet they paradoxically need each other. The existence of a clear, unambiguous, "all bad" enemy can play an important stabilising function for a party or group who wish to externalise or displace hostility and maintain their own cohesion (Volkan 1985). Each side needs an enemy to increase their power.

The self-fulfilling prophecy of "I told you so" reinforces the vicious spiral of hostility when your worst suspicions are confirmed. The other party's negative behaviour turns out according to your prediction and justifies your continued hostile action against them. It strengthens your resolve to keep going and supports your self-righteousness. There is little reason to revise or even question one's beliefs when such ample evidence of your "'accuracy" is so abundantly available.

The Escalatory Spiral of Unmanaged Conflict

Stage 7: Polarisation

By this time all direct communication and contact has stopped. making it impossible to resolve the issue. The parties have reached a point of no return. The confirmed images of each other become rigid and impervious to change. Polarisation rapidly sets in and power shifts to the extremists. One party seeks to drive the other out by destroying their case or demanding their resignation. For those people on the fringe of the conflict, it becomes difficult to stay neutral.

They come under suspicion from each of the antagonists and are obliged to take sides. They have to move into one camp or the other unless they are strong enough to maintain a middle ground.

Politics of Fear

Fear is one of the most effective tools of generating loyalty, solidarity, and patriotism. People when they are fearful, they lose rational thinking ability, become susceptible to propagandas and ideologies; and they seek strong, authoritarian leaders who they think can protect them from the perceived threat. Intentionally invoking fear by exaggerating external threat, therefore, has been practiced by many political leaders in an effort to invoke sense of solidarity and loyalty among their people.

Spilling over into violence

Left unrestrained, conflict may be catapulted into vicious cycles of violence that create a state of siege, Lit-for-tat killings and the dynamics of an "eye for an eye". Parties respond to the politics of the latest atrocity rather than addressing the substantive issues. When conflict reaches this protracted stage, it can mobilise the emotions and capabilities of whole groups and social communities. On the other hand, it can be an exhausting experience, sucking other parties into the conflict and wasting valuable resources. Such conflicts become stubborn, debilitating and seemingly intractable (Azar 1990).

How much hurting do you have to have in order to get stalemate?

The mutually hurting stalemate is that point when the parties perceive the costs and prospects of continuing the conflict to be more burdensome than the costs and prospects of settlement. This is also called the ripe moment when it becomes possible to seize the moment to get out of the grip of the spiral and open up a discussion around future focused solutions (Zartman, 2000).

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This notes were presented by Geoffrey Corry, Athena Mediation as course material on a course run by Mediation Northside for members of Scouting Ireland