CONFLICT RESOLUTION TOOLS

Early Warning Signs of Escalating Conflict

NCRC NATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION CENTER™

Conflict rarely appears without warning. Before a disagreement turns into a full-blown confrontation, there are usually early signals—physical, verbal, and emotional—that tension is building. Recognizing these signs early gives you the chance to slow things down and respond with NCRC's ART approach: Active Awareness, Responding Respectfully, and Troubleshooting Together.

- [ ] **1. Rising physical tension**
  Clenched jaws or fists, a flushed face, faster breathing, or a raised voice. These are early physiological cues that someone is moving from calm into the anger arousal cycle.
- [ ] **2. A sudden shift in mood or energy**
  A noticeable change in someone's baseline demeanor—increased restlessness, irritability, or agitation—often signals that underlying needs aren't being met.
- [ ] **3. Escalatory language**
  Absolutes like "always" and "never," blame-focused statements, or accusatory phrasing tend to intensify conflict rather than resolve it.
- [ ] **4. Rehearsing instead of listening**
  Repeating the same grievance rather than absorbing what's being said—"rehearsal" rather than "confession"—signals someone is preparing their next point instead of engaging.
- [ ] **5. Defensive or closed body language**
  Crossed arms, pointed fingers, glaring, or stepping into someone's personal space are nonverbal signs that a conversation is losing its footing.
- [ ] **6. Breakdown of active listening**
  Interrupting, talking over others, or dismissive gestures such as eye-rolls and sighs indicate the conversation is shifting from dialogue to confrontation.
- [ ] **7. Signs of psychological reactance**
  Pushing back against even reasonable requests, or resisting simply because they feel told what to do, suggests a person feels their autonomy is threatened.
- [ ] **8. A narrowing focus on "winning"**
  Rigid, all-or-nothing positions and a drop in willingness to problem-solve together are signs the conversation has moved from collaboration to competition.
- [ ] **9. Movement along the anger arousal cycle**
  Watch for progression from mild irritation toward louder, faster, more intense reactions. The earlier this is noticed, the easier it is to de-escalate.
- [ ] **10. Erosion of respect and dignity**
  Sarcasm, dismissiveness, or a drop in courteous tone often precede more visible conflict and are worth addressing immediately.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS ABOUT EVERYDAY WORKPLACE CONFLICT*

4.3

HOURS A WEEK

Employees average 4.34 hours a week dealing with conflict at work—more than double the 2.1 hours reported in 2008.

56%

BLAME POOR COMMUNICATION

Poor communication is the number one named cause of workplace conflict among in-office employees.

1 in 4

SAY MANAGERS HANDLE IT POORLY

Nearly one in four people say their manager handles conflict poorly or very poorly; more time in conflict tracks with lower job satisfaction.

*All figures from The Myers-Briggs Company, *Conflict at Work*, 2022.

WORKPLACE DE-ESCALATION TRAINING

Communicate to De-escalate

Learn to recognize triggers, reduce tension, and communicate effectively.

CUSTOMIZE A TRAINING

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