



Mediation Stewardship Project

Resource Catalog

Understanding Precedes Resolution

Understanding Escalation

Estimated Reading Time: 3–4 minutes

In This Article

By the end of this article, you will understand:

- what conflict escalation is,
- why disagreements sometimes become more intense over time,
- one practical way to recognize escalation before it becomes more difficult to manage.

Why This Matters

Many conflicts do not begin as major disagreements.

A simple misunderstanding, unmet expectation, or difference of opinion can gradually become more difficult as emotions increase, assumptions develop, communication breaks down, or people become more focused on defending themselves than understanding one another.

This process is known as **conflict escalation**.

Learning to recognize escalation early allows people to make more intentional decisions before the conflict becomes increasingly difficult to navigate.

The Core Idea

Conflict escalation is the process through which a disagreement becomes more intense over time.

As conflict escalates, people may become less willing to listen, more likely to interrupt, more certain that they are right, or more focused on winning than understanding.

Escalation can also lead to stronger emotional reactions, increased defensiveness, and reduced problem-solving.

Not every conflict follows the same path, and not every disagreement will escalate. However, recognizing the early signs can help people respond more thoughtfully before the conflict grows more complex.

Conflict literacy includes recognizing that escalation is often a process—not a single moment.

Everyday Example

Two friends disagree about plans for the weekend.

At first, the conversation is calm.

As they continue talking, one begins to feel unheard. The other feels criticized.

Voices become louder.

Interruptions become more frequent.

Past disagreements are brought into the conversation.

Instead of discussing the original issue, they begin criticizing one another personally.

The conflict has shifted from solving a problem to managing the effects of escalation.

Try This Today

The next time you notice a disagreement becoming more intense, pause and ask yourself:

"Has our conversation shifted from solving the problem to reacting to one another?"

Recognizing that shift may help you slow the conversation before escalation continues.

Reflection Question

Think about a conflict that became more difficult over time.

Looking back, when did you first notice the conversation beginning to escalate?

Continue Exploring

Next Articles

- **Emotional Triggers in Conflict**
- **Separating Intent from Impact**
- **What Mediation Is—and Isn't**

Looking for More Support?

If you are experiencing a conflict that feels increasingly difficult to manage, mediation or conflict coaching may provide a structured opportunity to slow the conversation, improve communication, and explore possible next steps. You can also explore additional resources within the **Mediation Stewardship Project Resource Catalog**.

Educational Use Notice

This resource is provided for educational and informational purposes only. It is not legal advice, mental-health treatment, crisis intervention, or a substitute for professional services. Every conflict is unique, and you remain responsible for determining the most appropriate course of action for your situation.