

CONFRONTING CONFLICT

A first-aid kit for handling conflict

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5. How conflicts can go downhill

If you recognize the most important characteristics of the different levels of intensity in a conflict, you can do something about it in time:

- you can either prevent further, unwanted escalation,
- or you can consciously escalate the conflict further (or allow this to happen),
- or you yourself can find a constructive solution for the differences that exist,
- or, knowing that at the current level of escalation you are unable to get to grips with the problems yourself, you can seek external help.

As shown in Chapter 1, it all depends whether 'I have a conflict' or whether 'the conflict has me'. Having differences is the most natural thing in the world in human interaction; having differences doesn't mean there is conflict. Everything depends on how people handle those differences. The tension becomes a conflict when the people involved can no longer deal with it constructively.

The following description only covers the key characteristics of the levels of conflict.¹ They are a great help as 'landmarks' that show you where you are, provided you don't just pay attention to a few individual features but look at the overall pattern of characteristics. Individual features from later levels can occasionally appear earlier, but on their own they don't represent a certain level:

- On level 3 (actions, not words), for example, people sometimes make certain 'threats', as we saw in the case study of the mechanics on strike in the factory: 'We will hand in our notice if you don't suspend the new maintenance system immediately!' However, these should not be mistaken for the consciously used strategies of threats on level 6, which dominate events completely and which threaten the opposing party with lasting damage.

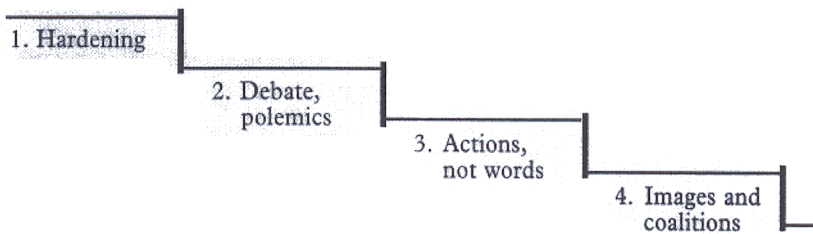
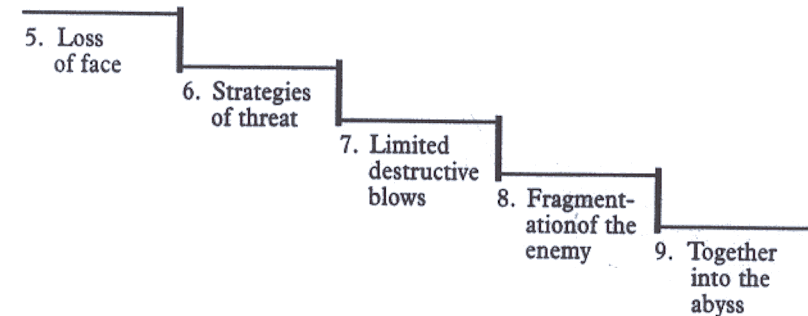


Figure 5.1: Overview of the nine levels of escalation

- Or: on level 4 (images and coalitions) the conflict parties allow themselves to be tempted into hurting each other with snide remarks. However, the relatively insignificant damage caused in this way bears no relation to the destructive blows of level 7, where the extent of the damage comes close to being an existential danger to the opponent.

Just as a red spot on the skin doesn't support a diagnosis of measles, an individual feature is not enough to correctly identify the escalation level. On every level of escalation the interplay of several mechanisms and characteristics contributes to an overall pattern which corresponds to the 'main formula' (e.g. 'actions, not words'). There must also be an element of 'chronification': the patterns repeat themselves and have a certain degree of permanence.

In contrast with other theories of escalation, I deliberately represent the gradual intensification of the conflict as a *downward* movement. The escalation goes 'deeper and deeper', not 'higher and higher', moving through nine levels. It progressively activates deeper and more subconscious levels, both in people and in groups, until these people or groups completely lose their self-control.



Therefore Figure 5.1 illustrates the escalation as steps leading downwards. At every step there is a threshold which can make people aware that they are about to cross over to the next lower level of escalation. The bold vertical lines symbolize these thresholds. The lower the level, the more intense and the more violent the fighting. The suction of the conflict mechanisms pulls the conflict further and further down, unless the conflict parties wake up and tackle this internal dynamic. However, this requires an understanding of the mechanisms, the ability to recognize what is happening, awareness and moral strength.

The following sections illustrate the main characteristics of the different levels of escalation, using the same two examples as the preceding chapter: the manufacturing company 'Boilerworks plc' and the alternative 'Erasmus School' in a large city. In order to protect the organizations whose conflicts are used as illustrative examples from being identified, the descriptions combine events from several similar cases. So the events are not fictional, they have actually happened.

5.1 Escalation level 1: hardening

The two scenarios show how this level is increasingly characterized by communication problems, followed by hardening and spasm.

In Plant 3 of 'Boilerworks' the daily team meetings of the maintenance section had been problematic for some time. Some mechanics had voiced objections to the new maintenance system, but these had been rejected by the team leader. The sessions became longer and longer because there was more and more to discuss. The discussions repeatedly went round in circles, and their outcomes were often vague. In subsequent sessions decisions already made were again put in question because there had been implementation problems.

The team leader thought he had to respond to this with stricter chairing. He introduced a fixed agenda, restricted the time he allowed others to speak and often declared objections irrelevant. The mechanics went along with this unwillingly.

From time to time the stances taken in the disagreement harden, 'crystallize' and clash. The opponents can no longer be completely open towards each other; they develop internal reservations. Communication suffers because each side increasingly sees events as through a filter, i.e. they do not recognize things around them or filter them out; they listen and see only selectively. Those involved repeatedly oscillate between co-operation and competitiveness.

The teaching staff of the 'Erasmus School' had a weekly staff meeting. When several pupils in the 6th form left, the teachers discussed curriculum matters. A group of young teachers argued that the young people should receive better tuition in the use of computers, but this was rejected by a group of older colleagues. The discussion was passionate and intense, though chaotic; arguments became extended and repetitive, but neither group was able to convince the other. Occasionally the tone became sharper, although this was immediately rectified by apologies and clarification. As the discussions had repeatedly been unsatisfactory, the staff decided to hold a special weekend session to discuss the subject.

Therefore the discussions come to a temporary halt. But even if people occasionally become paralysed in their competitive attitudes, they will still try to get things going again. But as this already requires a certain amount of effort, there are repeated glitches. A paradoxical effect becomes apparent: people are aware of the glitches and tensions, but this very knowledge increasingly causes new spasm.

5.2 Escalation level 2: debate and polemics

As they cross the threshold to level 2, the opponents cease to listen to each other's arguments. Being right and presenting one's own position in a positive light has already become as important as the discussion of facts.

After several disruptions in the production process, the maintenance team leader accused some of his mechanics of having failed to adhere to his instructions for the work. He said that this had led to substantial production downtime. The mechanics defended themselves against these accusations, contrasting the old maintenance system – sophisticated and proven – with the new, badly designed system. They demanded that management should finally listen to reason. The team leader strongly rejected this.

Shortly afterwards, in a meeting of an interdepartmental project team concerned with customer focus, one of the mechanics spoke cynically about the problems with the new system

Before the weekend session there were heated debates in the subject groups, and in other forums, about IT teaching, the importance of creative subjects, personal development. The young 'Progressives' distributed a discussion paper in which they extended their demands and provided supporting arguments. The opposing party also produced a pamphlet with the title 'ProArt' in which, drawing on renowned pedagogical authorities, they refuted the arguments of the 'Progressives'. This was followed by a new, stronger pamphlet from the 'Progressives' in which they demanded 'an open school for the future' instead of a 'school for the past'.

The weekend session saw very emotional debates, without any sign of a solution. Instead, further

and argued for a open, co-operative leadership style in the organization.

In the next team meeting the team leader angrily picked up on that discussion, pulled the old system to shreds and insisted that everybody had to adhere to the new system 100%. He criticized the unfair form of debate he felt the mechanics were using.

controversial subjects were identified, and these were to be discussed in the coming weeks:

- suitable forms of address
- discipline during lessons
- smoking, alcohol and drugs at school
- art lessons vs. vocational training
- financial situation etc.

At the beginning of the disagreement, different opinions and stances provided creativity, re-orientation, stimulation and life, because it seemed possible to resolve the differences in an objective, factual discussion. Now the opposing parties go to extremes in polarizing and cementing their stances. Through selective listening the weaknesses and mistakes in the opponents' arguments are quickly identified and refuted. Thinking, feeling and will slide into extremes, and the extreme positions appear mutually exclusive.

The disagreement is governed by pseudo-logical ways of thinking,² which can almost be equated with 'rational violence':

- The discussion is diverted to areas where people feel superior.
- Arguments are used in order to make the opposing party feel insecure on a psychological level.
- Causal connections are claimed to exist between facts merely because they followed one another chronologically, etc.

Each side is trapped in its own language and can no longer listen objectively to the concerns of the opposing side. An 'overtone' emerges in this language: this sounds correct and polite on the surface, but on closer listening includes hidden, aggressive 'undertones'. The different messages of 'overtone' and 'undertone' increasingly create contradictions and confusion.

The discussion is no longer alive and creative but becomes completely mechanistic: an argument is followed by a strong

counter-argument, which in turn is followed by another counter-argument. It is an intellectual game of ping-pong, in which every side wants to show its intellectual superiority through polemic. There are many types of behaviour designed to impress, which shift attention from the original factual issues to the personal level. Uninvolved people are turned into an admiring audience – their applause can become more important to the people involved in the argument than the extent to which they can convince the opposing party. Co-operation and competitiveness alternate continuously and contribute to the confusion of the people and groups involved. However, the people involved still attempt to bridge their differences through talking.

Explanatory models such as those used in transaction analysis³ make a valuable contribution towards an understanding of this level.

5.3 Actions, not words

Most of the many debates that have taken place ended in deadlock. Therefore the conflict parties no longer believe that they can reach and convince each other through words, nor that the differences that exist can be resolved through an exchange of views. On the contrary – they only irritate each other more by talking! Therefore they come to believe that 'Actions, not words, are the decisive factor'!

The meetings of the maintenance team continued to go badly. The mechanics had agreed amongst themselves to use the new system in a 'work to rule' initiative. Where this led to production problems, they would immediately take recourse to the rules of the old system, thus proving its superiority. The production managers got used to this approach and enlisted the

Despite several weekend sessions and conferences lasting several days during the Christmas and Easter holidays, there was less and less consensus. Enjoyment of the debate quickly dwindled. The proponents of both parties declared that, until a binding agreement was reached, they would do what best fitted in with their own convictions. The 'Progressives' allowed the pupils to eat and drink during

help of the maintenance team according to the old system.

The team leader brought fewer and fewer agenda items to the meetings, instead giving the mechanics his orders in an abrupt manner, without providing further reasons. The most articulate mechanic increasingly acted as a spokesman for the team in disagreements with the boss, and he organized informal team meetings without the manager.

lessons, to join them in an occasional cigarette in the schoolyard, to address them by their first name etc. The 'ProArt' group, on the other hand, demanded disciplined behaviour from the children during lessons, participation in all creative lessons, no smoking during break time etc. The atmosphere between the two parties was tense, and informal conversations became increasingly rare.

Each conflict party is simply doing what it is convinced of, presenting the opposing party with a *fait accompli*: 'If you don't listen to me, I shan't listen to you either!' As soon as actions govern events, the opponents regard each other with suspicion. If they recognize discrepancies between words and actions, their suspicion increases – and with it their inability to understand the other side. Therefore the messages of body language, non-verbal communication, play a key role on this level.⁴

If people mistrust what has been said, they may find meaning in the following order:

1. In discrepancies between content and vocal expression, the negative message of the voice is given more credence than the content.
2. When the vocal expression does not give a clear indication of whether somebody has evil intentions, their facial expression is given more credence than their voice.
3. If there is doubt about the honesty of the facial expression, the messages conveyed by the hands are considered more credible than those of the facial features,
4. ... and those of the body more than those of the hands,
5. ... and finally those of the legs and feet more than those of the rest of the body.

It should be noted that this shift in focus occurs when somebody makes the assumption that the other party is trying to hide potentially hostile intentions. Scepticism then leads to the 'downward shift' from 1 to 5, as described, as the negative intentions 'leak downwards'.

It is only at this point that people form real parties that close themselves off against the outside world, as if they were forming a layer of skin around themselves. They exclude elements that don't fit in: 'Birds of a feather flock together!' They experience an indeterminate sense of 'us'. Increasing internal group pressure⁵ brings opinions and positions into line within the group (pressure to conform): 'Things are getting serious, so the interests of the group must take precedence over individual opinions!' Within the group tasks are now allocated less flexibly, as special roles emerge for certain people, who are repeatedly pushed into these roles, e.g. that of 'aggressor', 'foreign affairs secretary', 'guardian of goodwill' etc.

This is the key to all these changes: the conflict parties – whether they are individuals, groups, organizations or larger units – rapidly lose empathy. They become captives of their own emotions and can barely empathize with the feelings of others.

5.4 Escalation level 4: images and coalitions

With the next levels of escalation the psychological distance between the conflict parties increases dramatically. If so far they only objected to certain types of behaviour by the opponent, the different patterns perceived as typical now merge into an overall image of the conflict parties.

The team leader repeatedly challenged the mechanics about their 'work to rule' initiative, emphasizing that, as a manager, he was not prepared to put up with 'this kind of thing'. Moreover, he repeatedly said in conversations within the plant that he thought

The actions of the 'Progressives' and the 'ProArt' group were repeatedly discussed in the weekly staff meetings – but this achieved nothing. Whereas before the parties had consisted only of a few committed people (the majority of the other teachers had stayed on

the mechanics were professionally behind the times, incompetent, sloppy and generally unable to learn. The most authoritarian of the mechanics, he said, had appointed himself as a spokesman for the team and was continually fuelling the conflict. His motives were well known, he said: he had not been able to get over his severe disappointment at not being promoted to team leader. The team members, on the other hand, agreed that the only reason their team leader insisted on his superior position was that he lacked factual arguments. They felt that, as a young engineer, he lacked practical experience and could not tolerate older and more experienced colleagues. In informal conversations they described their boss as opinionated and unforgiving, not quite up to the demands of his job. They made a written complaint about their boss to the factory management, which was met with a harsh rebuke from the plant manager. Other managers in the plant also made no secret of the fact that they condemned 'such unfair attacks' against a line manager and that they supported the maintenance team leader. The mechanics went to the trade union for advice.

the sidelines), the groups were now enlisting supporters. The 'Progressives' publicized their view that the 'ProArt' people had very little experience of the real world, that they shied away from facing harsh realities and were trying to overprotect the young people. They said that the curriculum had become unbalanced, and that more and more parents had taken their children out of the school. This had created financial difficulties for the school. The key members of the 'ProArt' group were questioning the pedagogical knowledge of the key members of the 'Progressives': they had only superficial knowledge of the basics of alternative education, were too lenient towards the young people, going as far as pandering to them, were undermining recognized school rules etc. It was time, they said, for the head teacher to start disciplinary proceedings. Some pupils, as well as parents, took sides with one or the other party. Once the parents had found out about the conflict as well, some removed their children from the school. There were rumours within the school that some of the most popular young teachers wanted to leave the school.

Each conflict party creates a positive image of its own side, a negative one of the other side, for example:⁶

- | | |
|---|--|
| • I know a lot but ... | • The other side knows little |
| • My knowledge is always up to date but ... | • The other side's knowledge is hopelessly out of date |
| • I am a good learner but ... | • The other side is unable to learn |
| • I am accurate but | • The other side is inaccurate |
| | ... |
| • etc | • etc |

One thing is important: on level 4 the enemy-image consists of judgements about the knowledge and abilities of the opposing party. Moral judgements are still consciously avoided. If they do creep in, they are quickly corrected.

Self-image and enemy image are firmly fixed in people's consciousness and are no longer corrected even if differing (objectively ascertainable) facts emerge in encounters with the opponent. On the contrary, the existing judgement about the enemy appears to be continuously reaffirmed by new experiences. This is because people's perceptiveness is already severely restricted. They only see what conforms to their own judgement. This is the psychological mechanism of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy', i.e. the conflict parties do not see that, through the fixed image they have of each other, they are manoeuvring each other into the extreme positions that they are in fact fighting against. In the school example this means that the more authoritarian the 'Progressives' perceive the head teacher's actions to be, the more their behaviour – mostly subconscious – challenges the head teacher to show her authoritarian side. And this is exactly what they are fighting against. They provoke each other through many small snide remarks in order to increase their contempt for the opposing party; but they try to do it in such a way that there is no proof that they are trying to be provocative.

This behaviour shows the mechanisms described⁷ as 'paradoxical relationships' and 'double binds': the team leader

wants the team spokesman to be the villain so that he can 'beat him up'; yet subconsciously he does everything he can to keep the spokesman in the organization because he still needs him as a lightning conductor to defuse his own stresses. Accusations are used to create guilt in the other party, and this guilt ties the parties to each other until the scores are finally settled.

Prejudice largely arises by means of the psychological mechanism of projection: one party mainly sees the annoying characteristics of the opposing party; they get annoyed about those characteristics because subconsciously they know that they themselves have them as well. They notice the mote in the eye of the opposing party, but not the beam that is in their own.

Key members of the group try to involve other people in the conflict and to enlist supporters. This is done by bringing up the stereotypical image of the enemy in conversation. When somebody agrees with this image, they are halfway to becoming a supporter.

5.5 Escalation level 5: loss of face

On level 4 accusations about shortcomings in the other side's knowledge and abilities, and their irritating behaviour, were at the core of the enemy image. Various circumstances suddenly lead a party to believe that they can see the real, reprehensible intentions of the enemy. Hurtful remarks and insults are no longer accidental but become intentional. The disagreement has abruptly become radical and brutal – verbally, and perhaps even physically.

The team leader began to suspect that the mechanics wanted to undermine his new managerial position within the company; he thought that this was why they were trying to bring about the failure of his new maintenance system. As a precautionary measure he began to draw up a so-called 'black book', i.e. he kept

During a parents' evening concerned parents wanted to know to what extent rumours were to be believed that some teachers were to be dismissed because of the school's financial difficulties. The head teacher had been evasive and had said that the school was in a period of transition and that pedagogical questions had to be

exact records about the jobs allocated and their implementation, as well as any machine breakdowns. In addition he asked production staff what they thought of the individual mechanics' professional abilities. Through this questioning his suspicions of the team spokesperson hardened: he thought that this person was sabotaging the new system as an act of revenge for the fact that he had not been promoted to team leader himself.

During a meeting of the 'customer focus' project team the team leader surprised the spokesman by presenting a number of figures and accused him of deliberately damaging the company. Completely taken by surprise, the spokesman could not come up with any convincing answers, got caught up in contradictions and in turn raised massive accusations against his boss. The team leader then accused the spokesman of lying and suspended him with immediate effect. Legal steps were to follow.

News of these events spread through the company like wildfire and led people to side passionately with one or the other party.

reconsidered. In fact, she said, urgently required savings were being explored, but redundancies were not on the agenda.

In the next staff meeting the spokesman of the 'Progressives' picked up on these remarks by the head teacher and accused her of manipulation. He said that during a conversation with well-informed parents he had been shown a highly confidential list of teachers whose dismissal the head teacher was proposing to the governors. When the head teacher responded with confusion, the spokesman of the 'Progressives' presented her with a copy of the 'redundancies' list which was signed by the head teacher. Seven of the eight people named belonged to the 'Progressives'. This revelation caused great consternation. The core group of the 'Progressives' declared that they 'were withdrawing their confidence from the manipulative head teacher' and demanded that she leave the meeting immediately. Some people joined the 'Progressives', others defended the head teacher. She left the room in tears, and her deputy closed the tumultuous meeting.

The threshold to level 5 is very dramatic. It is crossed when, in a blinding realization, one conflict party thinks that it finally sees the true, destructive intentions of the enemy: 'The head teacher is not a poor chair. She deliberately creates chaos so that she can manipulate people more easily!' Belief in the moral integrity of the enemy has been lost. This is a dis-illusioning experience because people are suddenly able to see through the 'illusion' of before. The previously perceived negative characteristics of the enemy turn out to be much worse. The enemy is seen as having only dangerous and morally corrupt characteristics of the Shadow personality, the *Negative Double*. The other side's Light personality, the ideals and Higher Self it might harbour, are no longer perceived.⁸ An angel confronts a devil: each side's self-image is heightened and appears more virtuous than it actually is; the enemy image takes on extreme proportions – even becoming animalistic and diabolical.

This disillusioning revelation also leads each side to see previous encounters with the diabolical enemy in a different light. In retrospect different experiences are interpreted in such a way that the enemy's corruption was seen to be at work even then.

When one conflict party experiences the other in this way, it ruthlessly goes on the offensive, passionately looking for ways and means and 'degrading rituals'⁹ in order to attack the opposing party's façade ruthlessly and directly, and to 'unmask' it, i.e. to expose its true nature. The attackers see it as their 'sacred duty' to open the eyes of others as well, and to prove how corrupt the basic nature of the opponent really is. People think that they cannot co-operate with the personification of evil, immorality, pathological and criminal behaviour! This step in the escalation of a conflict is always evidenced by radical, ruthless language,¹⁰ as if people were no longer dealing with other human beings: 'The enemy must be wiped out, kicked out, eliminated ...'

The party that is being attacked fights back, publicly loses face through being exposed and becomes an outcast. From now on it is isolated, avoided and boycotted – as are other people who continue to be sympathetic. This also means that the outcasts are cut off from an exchange of feedback which could allow them to modify their own behaviour in response.¹¹

Each outcast party usually sees itself as a scapegoat as well, blamed for various problems within the organization. It can't recognize itself in the diabolical image and feels completely misunderstood and treated unfairly. Therefore it is very likely to consider a counterattack, which in turn is intended to lead to a loss of face for the other party. The side bemoans its fate and only listens to the voices of those who confirm its outrage over the fate it has suffered. And it stubbornly seeks to rehabilitate its good reputation at any price! The search to reclaim its lost honour can be conducted with great passion, even obsessively.

All these events severely shake the self-image of the key people and of the group as a whole, leading to profound erosion of the group. The group that is pushing the other one out often harbours the illusion that, if only the villain disappears, normal life could be resumed. But a conflict which has escalated this far causes problems in many areas and changes the whole group: it will never go back to the way it was before ...

At this point I want to emphasize a difference in terminology: in general usage, 'loss of face' is sometimes used to refer to a person who, for example, has lost a directorship as part of a reorganization and is now only a departmental manager; or it is used to describe a loss of certain status symbols (company car, large office). In these cases, loss of face would only describe a loss of status, prestige or similar. This is not what is meant here. In the language of conflict psychology¹² loss of face is much more dramatic and always means that the moral identity of a person is destroyed. When somebody has 'lost face', they have lost their moral credibility.

5.6 Escalation level 6: strategies of threat

When, after all this, it has still not been possible to find a way out of the conflict, the escalation continues with particular intensity, as shown by the two practical examples.

The personnel department issued a warning to the team of mechanics and prepared to dismiss the team's spokesman. Meetings of the maintenance team were suspended until further notice. In the meantime the spokesman had been barred from entering the factory and he was therefore consulting a legal adviser from the union and secretly meeting with his team mates in order to discuss the way forward.

In order to put the company under moral pressure he telephoned to threaten that he would pass on concrete evidence to the press about severe criminal violations of environmental legislation on the part of the factory management. These violations had been covered up by the company at the time. As the management refuted these allegations, the local press ran some articles which blamed the company for smaller environmental violations and which demanded that environmental agencies and/or the courts should intervene.

Events snowballed from now on. The head teacher denied that she had seriously considered redundancies and went off sick for several days. During this time she had several confidential discussions with the governors, who had in fact been in charge of new appointments and dismissals previously. The governing body split into two factions, for and against the head teacher. In the next staff meeting the 'Progressives' presented additional incriminating evidence and intensified their demands for suspending the head teacher. When the governors rejected this, some parents threatened to inform the tax office about unlawful payments to the head teacher and to several teachers – and this would lead to criminal action by the tax authorities. In response the chair and treasurer of the governing body were deeply hurt and resigned. The remaining officers now threatened to dismiss the 'Progressives' after all because their behaviour had brought the school into serious disrepute.

The parties present their demands and want to force each other to give in. In order to get a demand (1) met, a punishment (2 – negative sanction), a damaging consequence, is announced; and in order to ensure that the opponent takes all this seriously, the party has to show that they are actually able to go through with the punishment (3 – sanction potential). These three factors are the corner points of the triangle of threats (Figure 5.2):

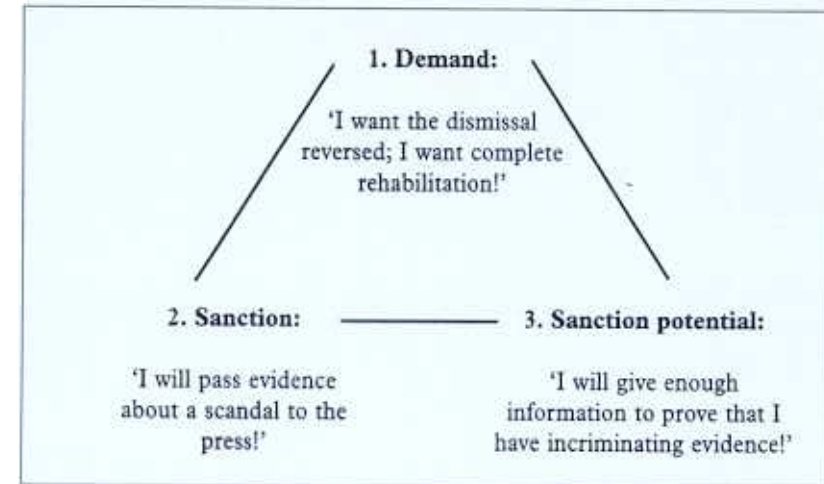


Figure 5.2: The triangle of threats

Only the party that is threatened can decide whether to take the threat seriously, or whether to dismiss it as mere sabre-rattling. The threatening side therefore tries to ensure that the demand bears a credible correlation to the damage that is threatened: a substantial demand ([1] e.g. '10 million pounds ransom, ...') in conjunction with great potential damage ([2] e.g. '... otherwise a building will be blown up!') is credible; if one is too serious and the other too weak, or vice versa, there is a lack of credibility. The party must also be able to show that it has the required detonators and that it is truly prepared to go as far as it claims. This works best when implementation of the sanction can begin in small doses.

Threats are generally met with counter-threats. Decisions are governed by 'pessimistic anticipation' (Chapter 3). Ultimatum and counter-ultimatum also increase the pressure of time: decisions

have to be made quickly, actions need to be incisive! By increasing the pressure on the enemy, each side becomes publicly associated with the threat and its consequences, locking itself into a compulsion to act and losing the initiative: it has to react rather than act. Thus neither party can retreat without losing its credibility at this juncture.¹³

The threat and the potential danger arising from it have ever greater consequences, and more parties are drawn into the conflict. Things can become critical for the people and groups around the conflict parties. As the conflict causes ever greater ripples, it becomes more difficult to contain it. As the threatener and the threatened increasingly act under stress, they tend to overreact, and this causes more unintended side effects than intended main effects.

5.7 Escalation level 7: limited destructive blows

At this point it should be said that the case studies used so far are, as has already been stated, a mixture of several similar cases from my professional experience. In reality I was called in as an external adviser at around the beginning of level 6 and I was able to work towards a constructive solution to the conflict. The conflict did not escalate further from this point. In the following sections I therefore present events which, within the dynamics of the conflict, might have been possible. I am doing this so that the reader can get a clear idea of the next steps in the escalation in the same organizational context of the factory and the school. Therefore I have fictitiously shifted actual events from conflict escalation in other organizations into these two organizations, as if they had actually happened in the case studies described so far. So for levels 7, 8 and 9 I should say:

This is how – considering everything that happened before – the conflict might have continued to escalate:

The team spokesman is dismissed with immediate effect and instigates proceedings against his dismissal. The environmental

The events lead to the formation of factions in various different forums. The head teacher insists she is innocent and demands harsh measures

agencies, political parties and interest groups become involved in the matter. One night a cupboard in the office of the company's director is forced open and many documents disappear. Investigations bring to light further evidence for environmental offences that had been covered up. The authorities receive copies of incriminating documents from an anonymous informer. This leads to criminal proceedings against the company management. One production unit has to be temporarily suspended. The dismissed team spokesman is publicly accused of having organized the break-in. An anonymous letter is sent to other companies in the area, warning them against employing the obstinate mechanic.

against the 'destructive elements'. People are looking everywhere to find traitors and apportion blame for the situation. The governing body has to take over the day-to-day running of the school and is overstretched because they have to deal with many personnel matters and financial salvage actions. The tax office is tipped off and carries out a detailed examination of the school's financial affairs. Mistakes are uncovered, and these are prosecuted as tax evasion. Evidence is found that the head teacher misinformed the governing body and teachers. A key member of the 'Progressives' is accused and prosecuted for passing on drugs to children, another is accused of attempted sexual abuse of young people.

Threats are implemented. The conflict parties only treat each other as 'inanimate objects'. They have lost their belief in the opponent's humanity. First they destroy only objects which might have been used to bring about the sanctions attached to the threat; later people are included in the destruction.

The fighting parties are quite clear that there are no longer any victories to be won. The decisive factor is whether the loss to the opposing side is greater than its own damage – this is then (re)defined as a 'benefit'. Damage becomes joy, becomes gloating. The enemy is forced to make involuntary sacrifices – extracted through destruction.

Deceit and lies become the greatest virtues in war, finally turning central moral values into their opposites.

5.8 Escalation level 8: fragmentation of the enemy

If the damage on level 7 remained fairly limited, the stakes are now raised with each blow and counterblow. Once the threshold to level 8 is crossed, the conflict becomes an 'all or nothing' fight: the enemy is to be destroyed – materially and/or psychologically and/or spiritually.

Customers, suppliers, banks etc. receive anonymous letters with information about the scandals within the company; as a result they increasingly pull away from 'Boilerworks'. Good managers and specialist staff leave the company. The production quality drops dramatically, costs rise. The company management feels forced to close down operations. The dismissed team spokesman is totally boycotted within the area, his wife treated like an outcast within the town. Even his grown-up children increasingly have difficulties at their workplaces and are eventually left with only one option: to move to a different part of the country and seek alternative employment.

The schools inspector, having waited for a considerable period, finally intervenes and forces the governing body to resign. The head teacher and a substantial number of teachers are removed from the school; some are barred from continuing in their profession. A large number of pupils move to another school. The parents of the pupils in the top form who had failed to pass their final examinations sue the school for damages. Many parents who had given the school interest-free loans for improvement works withdraw their funds, triggering financial catastrophe. The school has to declare bankruptcy.

The vital organs of the opponents' system are attacked and paralysed. Today it is enough to focus destructive efforts on a company's computer systems to bring about a breakdown of the system. All that is required to break down an organization through its own centrifugal tendency would be to disrupt, for example, some of its management systems: quality control, financial control, sales ledger, time records, attendance control etc.

The opposing party is broken up by deliberately and purposefully weakening its internal cohesion and paralysing important functions. Eventually it disintegrates – psychologically, spiritually or physically – to such an extent that it cannot rebuild itself.

5.9 Escalation level 9: together into the abyss

The opposing parties can see no way back. Total confrontation is aimed at complete destruction of the opponent. It is enough for one party to be prepared to go to extremes, without restraint, and not to shy away from totally destructive measures, even if this leads to self-destruction. When the conflict has crossed the threshold to escalation level 9, even self-destruction can be experienced as a triumph insofar as the opponent is also pulled down into the abyss.

This is what the bitter end in the factory and the school might have looked like:

The former team spokesman wages a bitter legal battle against 'Boilerworks', going through all the courts. He loses the rest of his money and gets into horrendous debts. The highest court also finds against him, and his house has to be auctioned off ...

The key players take each other to court, and there is physical violence between the people involved. This leads to criminal proceedings. In one case the violence even leads to a suicide.

However, life can write even crueller tragedies than fiction.

5.10 What powers are at work in the escalation of conflict?

Figure 5.3 shows the main characteristics of the nine levels of escalation that can occur in conflicts between two people, in groups, or between groups and organizations.

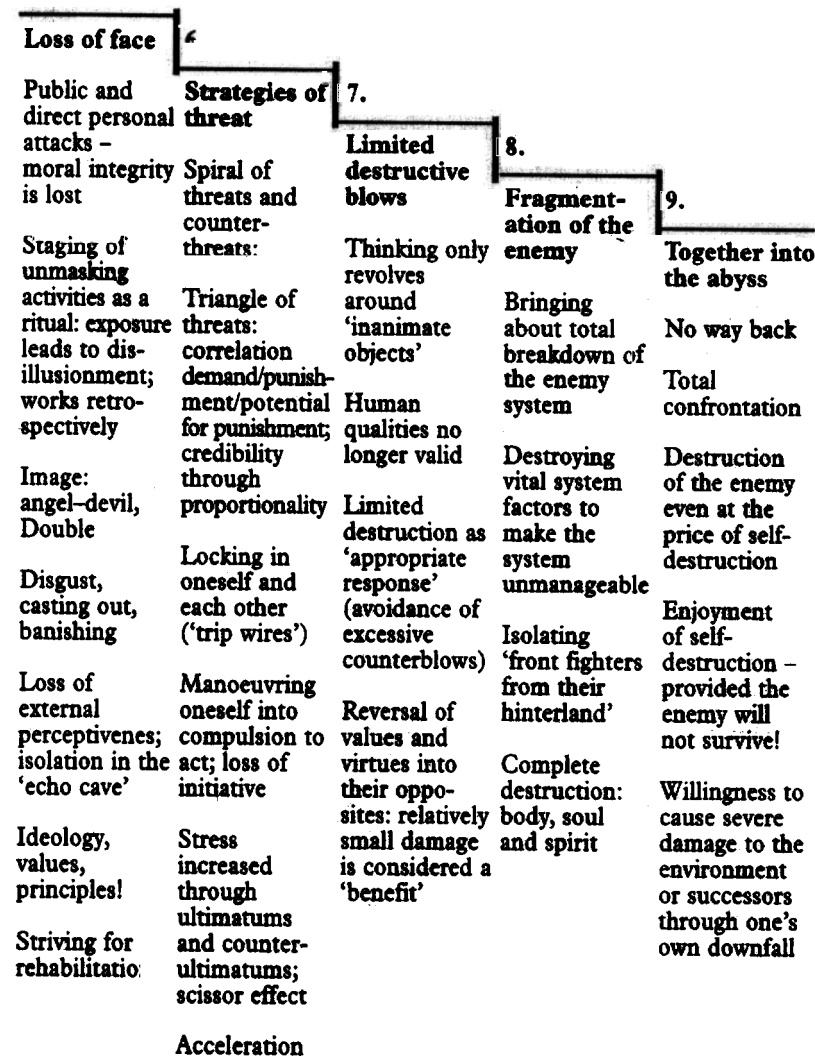
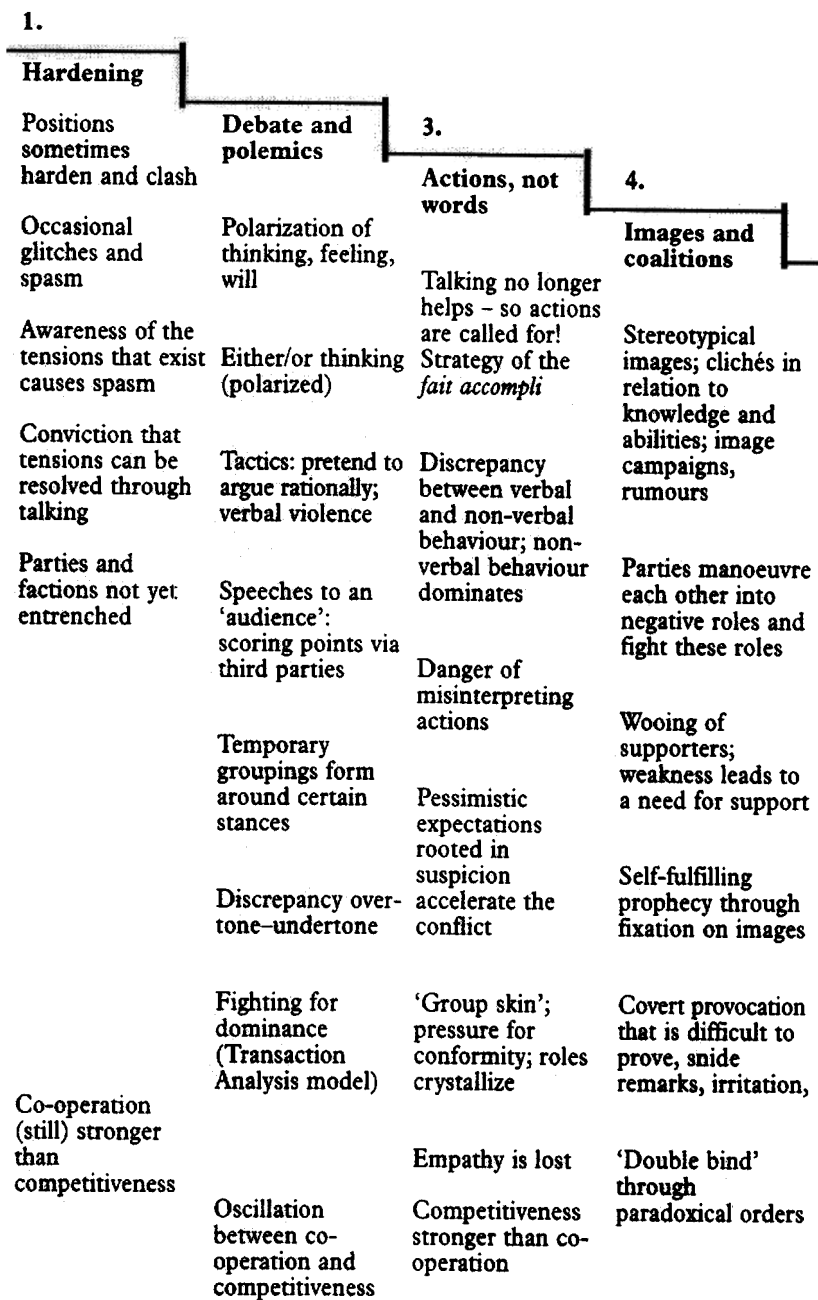


Figure 5.3: Overview of the nine levels of escalation.

This description of the dynamics of escalation could give the impression that, as human beings, we are powerless and at the mercy of superior powers which inevitably draw us from level 1 to the abyss of level 9. And mighty powers are, in fact, at work as the conflict escalates. But we are not at their mercy without any powers of our own. At each threshold we are basically able to 'wake up', become aware of what is happening and put an end to our actions. Conflicts only continue to escalate if we allow this to happen. The destruction only takes on ever-greater dimensions if we ignore the signals of our awareness at the different thresholds and if we allow ourselves to be pulled along on the tide of our powerful drives and passions.

In our subconscious we have a negative potential which enables us to carry out terrible and inhuman actions. The history books are full of evidence of those fatal basic instincts. Through carelessness and clouding of our awareness – initially only minor – we allow certain powers of our subconscious to surface. We provoke and mobilize them in each other, unleash them, and later it becomes very hard to keep them under control. Once we have allowed them to enter the arena of the conflict, they have the potential to pull us down with them. In conflict situations people descend to the deepest regions of the inferno, of the underworld, as often described in epics such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* or in myths and fables.

Against the background of this archetypal image I always describe the escalation as a downward movement, into the underworld and baser nature of individual people and groups. As the escalation progresses, the link with the Light personality (Chapter 2) is increasingly lost. Each action provokes negative powers in the subconscious of the opposing party. Reactions occur which are no longer controlled by the Ego or the Higher Self. Therefore the way out of escalation is always a confrontation with one's own alien, darker sides. The following chapters are designed to provide help with this.