

# Glasl's Nine-Stage Model Of Conflict Escalation



This conflict escalation model is presented in Friedrich Glasl's book *Konfliktmanagement. Ein Handbuch für Führungskräfte, Beraterinnen und Berater*, (Bern: Paul Haupt Verlag, 1997. See also the endnotes). Glasl's original analysis of the stages comprises over 70 pages, and my summary does not in any way make full justice to his model. However, this summary has been scrutinized and approved of (with some corrections) by Friedrich Glasl.

Glasl's escalation model is a very useful diagnostic tool for the conflict facilitator, but also valuable as a means for sensitizing people to the mechanisms of conflict escalation. Such sensitizing may lead to a greater awareness of the steps one should take care to avoid if one wants to prevent a conflict from escalating out of control. In a more academic perspective, the model also provides a theory of conflict escalation that emphasizes the situational pressures acting upon people involved in a conflict. Rather than seeking causes in the individuals, the model emphasizes how there is an internal logic to conflict relationships, stemming from the failure of "benign" ways of handling contradictory interests and standpoints. Conscious efforts are needed in order to resist the escalation mechanisms, which are seen as having a momentum of their own.

## **STAGE 1: HARDENING**

The first stage of conflict escalation develops when a difference over some issue or frustration in a relationship proves resilient to resolution efforts. The problem remains, and leads to irritation. Repeated efforts to overcome the difficulties fail, which means that the natural flow of shifting concerns is blocked. The parties are repeatedly reminded that in a particular

field, they are not getting forward. Interests and opinions crystallize into standpoints, i.e. fixed positions on how a certain issue ought to be handled. These standpoints tend to become mutually incompatible in the perception of the conflict parties.

The standpoints attract adherents, and groups start to form around certain positions, or for and against a certain standpoint. In the next stage these groups are increasingly consolidated into more and more well-delimited parties. Boundaries defining who belongs to the inside and the outside become more and more visible. The members of a party develop a shared interpretation of the situation, creating a common selective filter affecting the perception of all relevant information. Members of one party readily pick up negative information about the other party. These pieces of information are given great significance, whereas positive information is not registered. Differences between the parties appear more significant than similarities.

The frustrated efforts to overcome the differences lead to development of habitual behavioural patterns for acting in strained situations. When no progress is made, the parties become increasingly aware of the mutual dependencies they cannot evade. Interactions with the other side are disappointing, and are perceived as a waste of time and energy. Even though the other party is perceived as stubborn and unreasonable, the persons involved are still committed to try to resolve the differences. However, as the efforts prove fruitless, the parties start to doubt that the counterpart sincerely wants to solve the problems. They may also start suspecting that some ulterior motives may be involved.

The communication between the parties is still based on mutuality: the basic status of the involved persons as responsible human beings is recognized, and one tries to be fair in the interactions.

The threshold to stage 2 is taken when one or both parties lose(-s) faith in the possibility of solving the problems through straight and fair discussions. When straight argumentation is abandoned in favour of tactical and manipulative argumentative tricks, the conflict slips into stage 2.

## **STAGE 2: DEBATES AND POLEMICS**

Since the counterpart doesn't seem amenable to sensible arguments, discussions tend to develop into verbal confrontations. The parties look for more forceful ways of pushing through their standpoints. In order to gain strength, they tend to become increasingly locked into inflexible standpoints. The dispute is no longer restricted only to a well-defined issue, but the parties start to feel that their general position is at stake. This means that they divert more and more attention to how they appear: being successful, strong and skilful rather than compliant, insecure and incompetent. Debates are no longer only focussed on which

standpoint has more merits, but also on who is most successful in promoting the standpoints, and how the outcomes of the debates affect one's reputation. Accumulating tactical advantages over the counterpart becomes an important concern.

When rational and issue-relevant arguments don't suffice to ensure success, the parties resort to "quasi-rational" argumentation, such as:

- Bickering about the underlying causes of the present problems, in order to avoid blame;
- Strong exaggeration of the implications and consequences of the counterpart's position, in order to present it as absurd;
- Suggestive comments about the relation of the central issue with other concerns, linking the issue to larger value considerations.
- Reference to recognized authorities or tradition in order to gain legitimacy for a standpoint;
- Stating the alternatives as extremes, in order to get the opponent to accept a "reasonable compromise."

These tactical tricks aim at keeping the counterpart off balance emotionally or at gaining the upper hand in a skirmish. The centre of gravity of the verbal interactions therefore shift from rational arguments towards emotions and relative power issues. The parties can no longer assume that words mean what they seem to mean, but have to look for veiled meanings and consequences. This introduces a strong propensity of mistrust in the relationships. The parties expect each other to try to gain advantages at the other's expense. To the extent that one party succeeds in gaining such advantages, the other is increasingly vexed, and starts looking for ways of compensating for them. Every statement and action gets additional significance, namely in terms of how they affect the reputation and relative position of the actor. It is risky to do something that might look like yielding or weakness, therefore neither side shies away from hard confrontations. Discussions turn into debates, where inflexible standpoints collide with each other. However, at stage 2 the parties are still partly committed to common goals and interests, and tend to vacillate between cooperation and competition.

The growing mistrust creates a sense of insecurity and loss of control. The parties try to compensate for this by an increased emphasis on a self-image as righteous and strong. Aggressive actions serve at this stage mostly to boost self-esteem, and to make an impression on the counterpart. Sincere efforts to control the counterpart belong to later escalation stages.

The frustrating experiences lead to the build-up of tensions, which are often discharged in outbursts. Such acts serve as valves for letting out pressure, but do not involve any real problem-solving. Repeated experiences of the counterpart lead to the formation of images of

typical behaviour patterns. However, these images are not yet as global and as stereotypical as the enemy images of stage 4.

The threshold to stage 3 is related to the basic right of each party to be heard in matters of mutual interest. When one party feels that further talking is useless, and start acting without consulting the other side, the conflict slips into stage 3.

### **STAGE 3: ACTIONS, NOT WORDS**

At stage 3, the parties no longer believe that further talk will resolve anything, and they shift their attention to actions. Common interests and the prospect of resuming cooperation recede into the background, and the parties see each other as competitors. The sense of being blocked by the counterpart is paramount, and the dependencies linking oneself to the other part are felt as extremely vexing. The antagonists therefore seek to replace the mutual dependencies with unilateral dependency, in order to be able to dominate the counterpart. The most important goal at this stage is to block the counterpart from reaching his goal, and to push through one's own interests.

By unilateral action, the parties hope to force the counterpart to yield, but they would themselves under no circumstances want to be seen yielding for the pressure from the counterpart. Since one can no longer trust what is stated verbally, action and non-verbal communication dominate the course of events. This tends to speed up the escalation process.

Within each party the pressure to conform to a common attitude and a common interpretation increases. Images, attitudes and interpretations tend to be reduced to the simplest common denominator, which leads to a far-reaching loss of differentiation. The feeling of unity and shared predicament is strong, further reducing the capacity to relate to the concerns and perspective of the other side. Since verbal communication is reduced and untrustworthy, there are few opportunities to get genuine feed-back on the stereotypical images and interpretations the parties make up about each other's patterns of behaviour and presumed intentions. Fantasies about possible motives and hidden strategies can develop unchecked.

The feeling of being blocked is further increased by the limited possibility genuine verbal communication. The parties start to see themselves as being held captives by external circumstances they cannot control. They therefore tend to deny responsibility for the course of events. An increasing part of their own actions are regarded as necessary responses to the behaviour of the other side.

The threshold to stage 4 is veiled attacks on the counterpart's social reputation, general attitude, position and relationship to others. "Deniable punishment behaviour" (see below) is a characteristic sign of slipping into stage 4.

### **STAGE 4: IMAGES AND COALITIONS**

At stage 4 the conflict is no longer about concrete issues, but about victory or defeat. Defending one's reputation is a major concern.

The "typicals" that evolved at stage 2 and 3 are now consolidated and complemented into full-blown general and consistent images of the counterpart. These images are stereotypical, highly fixed and are very resilient to change through new information. Such images serve an important role in providing a sense of orientation: one has the feeling of knowing what to expect from the environment. Conflict parties start to attribute collective characteristics both to members of the other side and to ingroup members. Individuals are perceived to have certain characteristics (such as unreliability, incompetence, bossiness, etc.) only by virtue of belonging to a specific group.

The negative other-image comprises prejudices and attributions of motives and intentions, but does not yet, as in stage 5, deny the basic moral integrity of the counterpart as someone deserving to be treated justly (see below). The negative images are now screens that occupy the field of vision whenever the parties meet each other. These screens prevent the parties from seeing each other's true complexity and individuality. No side accepts the image presented of them by the other side. The other side's image is vehemently rejected, but at the same time each party tries to get the other side to recognize their own other-image. A salient symptom of stage 4 dynamics is the difficulty of the parties to mention positive qualities of the counterpart when asked by a facilitator. The other side is thought of as uneducable: "Such people are unable to change."

The power of the stereotypes also leads to a subtle pressure on each party to conform to roles assigned to them. It can be very difficult to escape such behaviour expectations. Both parties now feel that their behaviour is a reaction to the counterpart's actions and intentions, and don't feel responsible for the further escalation of the conflict.

The interactions are permeated with efforts to find gaps in the behavioural norms in order to inflict harm on the counterpart. The rules are adhered to formally, but any opportunity to get away with unfriendly acts are used. A typical form of interactions at this stage is "deniable punishment behaviour." The counterpart is provoked, insulted and criticized, but in forms that do not formally infringe on the etiquette. Blows can be dealt through insinuations, ambiguous comments, irony and body language, but the perpetrator can flatly deny that any harm was intended, if challenged. However, since the other party can not respond by openly discussing the incident, retaliatory action is very likely to ensue. The veiled nature of the attacks prevents a dramatic public loss of face (see stage 5).

In this stage, the parties actively try to enlist support from bystanders. Actions to enhance one's image in the eyes of others are planned and implemented. The parties also consciously seek to stage their confrontations in public, in order to recruit supporters.

The conflict activities are now focussed on affecting the counterpart and gaining the upper hand in the power struggle, rather than achieving issue-related results. Attacks are made on the identity, attitude, behaviour, position and relationships of the counterpart. The causes of the conflict are no longer seen in terms of incompatible standpoints, but as rooted in the very character of the counterpart.

The threshold to stage 5 is constituted by acts that lead to a public loss of face for one or both parties. If the basic honour of someone is offended repeatedly and deliberately, in particular in a public setting, the conflict is highly likely to slip into stage 5.

### **STAGE 5: LOSS OF FACE**

The transition to stage 5 is particularly dramatic. The word “face” signifies here the basic status a person has in a community of people. As long as a person is regarded as a respectable citizen, he or she has an intact “face,” and is entitled to fair treatment and respect. The “face” is reproduced by the members of a group, by their avoiding any overt actions that challenge the basic status a person has. The “face” is hurt by public events, not by private gossip or individual opinions. Loss of face means that the conflict parties feel that they have suddenly seen through the mask of the other party, and discovered an immoral, insane or criminal inside. The transformation of the image one party hold of the other is radical. It is not an expansion of the old biased image, but is felt as a sudden insight into the true, and very different, nature of the other. The whole conflict history is now reinterpreted: one feels that the other side has followed a consequent and immoral strategy from the very beginning. All their “constructive” moves were only deceptive covers for their real intentions. There is no longer ambiguity, but everything appears clear.

The images and positions the parties hold are no longer regarded in terms of superiority and inferiority, but in terms of angels and devils. One’s own side is a representative of the good forces in the world, whereas the other side represents the destructive, subhuman, and bestial forces. The counterpart is no longer only annoying, but an incarnation of moral corruption. A palpable sign of this stage is when a party feels bodily nauseated in the presence of the other. In stage 4, the image of the counterpart was built up of elements depicting the incompetence and the irritating behaviours of the other. In stage 5 the image of the counterpart centers on the moral inferiority attributed to the other. The conflict is no longer about concrete issues, but about the prevalence or not of holy values.

The transformation of the image of the other side drastically increases the role of negative expectations and suspiciousness. All seemingly constructive moves of the counterpart are dismissed as deceptions, while one single negative incident is conclusive proof of the true nature of the other. This leads to a situation where it is extremely difficult to build mutual confidence. The gestures needed for establishing minimal trust in the sincerity of the other side become extreme, and are often felt to be humiliating. For example, in order to prove a sincere constructive intention, one side might be asked to make a public apology for past

statements. However, the parties often fear that such concessions would be interpreted as weakness or culpability, and that they would further damage one's public status. In this deadlock, denigrating the other side may be the only visible option for gaining a moral upper hand.

Incidents leading to loss of face are usually followed by dedicated attempts by the parties to rehabilitate their public reputation of integrity and moral credibility. Such efforts may now dominate the conflict process. Loss of face, and ensuing retaliatory acts often isolate the conflict parties from bystanders. This may further exacerbate the escalation mechanisms, because the opportunities for getting tempering feedback about the conflict are reduced.

The threshold to stage 6 is felt to be less dramatic than to stage 5. When the parties start to issue ultimatums and strategic threats, the conflict enters stage 6.

## **STAGE 6: STRATEGIES OF THREATS**

Since no other way seems to be open, the conflict parties resort to threats of damaging actions, in order to force the counterpart in the desired direction. The strategic threats of stage 6 are very different from the deniable punishment actions characteristic of stage 4. The latter mainly serve the function of giving vent to pent-up frustrations. Strategic threats are actively used in order to force the counterpart to certain concessions.

There are three phases in the increase of issuing strategic threats:

1. The parties issue mutual threats in order to show that they will not retreat. The threatening party wants: (a) to draw attention to themselves and their demands; (b) to demonstrate autonomy and ability to form the agenda; and (c) to get the counterpart to conform with a specific demand or norm by issuing a threat of sanctions.
2. In the next phase the threats are made more concrete, unequivocal and firm. The parties make dedicated statements of self-commitment from which they cannot retreat without losing credibility, in order to enhance the seriousness of their threats.
3. In the third phase, the threats are formulated as ultimatums, where the counterpart is forced to an either-or decision.

One consequence of this dynamic is that the parties increasingly lose control over the course of events. By their own actions they create a pressure to act rapidly and radically.

The perception of the situation becomes increasingly out of touch with reality. The threatening party sees only its own demands, and regards the threat as a necessary deterrence in order to block the counterpart from using violence. One expects the other party to yield to the pressure. The threatened party, however, sees the damaging consequences if the threat becomes reality, and rallies to issue a counterthreat. Feelings of being powerless lead to fear and possibly uncontrollable rage.

In this phase, the conflict becomes increasingly complex, difficult to grasp, and impossible to control. By their actions, the parties introduce time pressure on each other's actions, and thereby curtail their possibilities to weigh the consequences of alternative courses of action in a turbulent and chaotic environment. In order to retain some measure of control, each party insists that its own issues and standpoints must be dealt with in exactly the form they have chosen to present them.

The behaviour is to an increasing extent prone to be ruled by panicky impulses. Any action that seems to promise a powerful effect is attractive. In this stage, taking one's grievances to the media is a common occurrence.

Any threat strategy relies on credibility in order to be successful. Parties issuing threats must therefore try to convince the other party and bystanders that the threat is real and serious. In order to enhance the credibility of a threat, one may act so as to bind oneself publicly to execute the threats if the other party does not yield. Public declarations, or smaller doses of aggressive acts may be used to prop up the credibility of a threat. The other party regards this as proof of the aggressive intentions and capabilities of the counterpart, and seeks countermeasures. By binding themselves to threat strategies, the parties heavily restrict their own freedom of choosing alternative courses of action.

A serious risk in stage 6 is that stress, uncontrollable aggressive actions, and increasing turbulence and complexity lead to disintegration of the parties into smaller units acting autonomously. When this happens, not even binding agreements between the main actors may stop the destructiveness.

The threshold to stage 7 is the fear of the consequences that might ensue if the threats are carried out. When the parties actively seek to harm the other side's sanction potential, the conflict transforms to stage 7. Threat strategies only work as long as the parties believe that a threat may act deterring. However, the very internal dynamics of stage 6 drive the parties to translate the threats into action.

### **STAGE 7: LIMITED DESTRUCTIVE BLOWS**

The threats of stage 6 undermine the basic sense of security of the parties. Now they expect the counterpart to be capable of very destructive acts. Securing one's own further survival becomes an essential concern. It is no longer possible to see a solution that includes the counterpart. The counterpart is regarded as an impediment that must be eliminated by targeted attacks aiming to maim the other. The counterpart is now a pure enemy, and has no longer human qualities. No human dignity stands in the way of the attacks, the enemy is just an object standing in the way. This may go as far as using words like "eliminate" and "exterminate" when discussing what to do.

The attacks target the sanctions potential of the enemy, such as destroying or undermining the counterpart's financial resources, juridical status or control functions. Fear and stress lead to forceful attacks, which are seen as extreme, or at least heavily exaggerated, by the counterpart. The attacks lead to retaliations, often even more destructive. In the frustrated situation, attacks may generate feelings of being powerful and in control, thus giving secondary benefits that reinforce further escalation. The calculation of consequences becomes increasingly skewed: the losses of the counterpart are counted as gains, even though they don't give any benefits whatsoever in terms of one's own interests and needs. The parties may be prepared to suffer losses, if only there are prospects that the enemy will suffer even larger losses. Malice may become a powerful motive.

The objectives now revolve around neutralising the firepower of the counterpart, and thereby secure one's own survival. Superiority is sought in order to ensure ability to block the counterpart in a longer-term perspective.

There is no longer any real communication. At stage 6 the threat strategies build upon at least a minimum of communication: one must know if the counterpart rejects or accept an ultimatum. In stage 7 each party is only concerned with expressing their own message, and they don't care about how it is received, or what the response might be. Threats followed by immediate interruption of communication is a sign of stage 7 dynamics.

At this stage ethical norms are subsumed under more pressing concerns. At earlier stages the parties exploited gaps in the norms, now they are cast aside if they are bothersome. This is war, and normal rules do not apply.

The parties see that it is no longer possible to win. It is a lose-lose struggle. Survival and less damage than the counterpart suffers are the main goals.

The threshold to stage 8 is attacks that are directly aimed at the core of the counterpart, attacks that are intended to shatter the enemy or destroy his vital systems.

## **STAGE 8: FRAGMENTATION OF THE ENEMY**

At this stage the attacks intensify and aim at destroying the vital systems and the basis of power of the adversary. One may specifically aim at fragmenting the counterpart into ineffectual splinters, and at the ability of the counterpart to make decisions. Negotiators, representatives and leaders may be targeted, in order to destroy their legitimacy and power in their own camp. The system that keeps the counterpart coherent is attacked, hoping that the very identity of the other side will crumble so that it falls apart through its own internal contradictions and inherent centrifugal forces.

When a party is attacked in a way that threatens to shatter it, it is forced to make strong efforts to suppress internal conflicts. This increases the stress and the internal pressure within the parties, and leads to an even stronger pressure to undertake further attacks on the

other side. The parties fall apart into factions that fight each other, making the situation completely uncontrollable.

The attacks on the counterpart targets all signs of vitality. The main objective is now to destroy the existence basis of the adversary. The only restraining factor is the concern for one's own survival.

The threshold to stage 9 is reached when the self-preservation drive is given up. When this happens, there is no check at all on further destructiveness.

## **STAGE 9: TOGETHER INTO THE ABYSS**

In the last stage of conflict escalation, the drive to annihilate the enemy is so strong that even the self-preservation instinct is neglected. Not even one's own survival counts, the enemy shall be exterminated even at the price of destruction of one's own very existence as an organization, group, or individual. Ruin, bankruptcy, prison sentences, physical harm, nothing matters any longer.

All bridges are burnt, there is no return. A total war of destruction without scruples and remorse is waged. There are no innocent victims, no neutral parties. The only remaining concern in the race towards the abyss is to make sure that the enemy will fall too.

## **ENDNOTES**

Glasl's newest book is available in an English edition: *Confronting Conflict* (Bristol: Hawthorn Press, 1999. ISBN 1 869 890 71X), in which a condensed version of his escalation model is presented and illustrated by two case examples: one conflict in a factory and one in a school. The full version of the conflict escalation model has only been published in German, however. The latest edition of Glasl's *Konfliktmanagement* (6th edition) was published in 1999.

A review of the Glasl's book was published as:

'F. Glasl: *Konfliktmanagement*. Ein Handbuch für Führungskräfte, Beraterinnen und Berater, ' review by Thomas Jordan in *International Journal of Conflict Management*, vol 8:2, 1997, pp. 170-174.

A summary of the escalation model in English, written by Glasl himself, was published as:

GLASL, F. (1982) 'The process of conflict escalation and roles of third parties,' in G. B. J. Bomers and R. B. Peterson, (eds) *Conflict management and industrial relations*, (pp. 119-140) The Hague: Kluwer Nijhoff Publishing.

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