

Dynamics of Email Conflict In the Workplace

Conflict generation, escalation, and resolution in an electronic age

Mary McGoldrick

Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

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What is conflict?

Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement, Pruitt and Kim: 7-8

“Conflict means perceived divergence of interest or a belief that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.”



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Storytelling

Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzer, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for talking when the stakes are high*:125



See
Hear

Tell
a
Story

Feeling

Action



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Traditional Conflict Resolution Theory

Pruitt and Kim, *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY, 2004

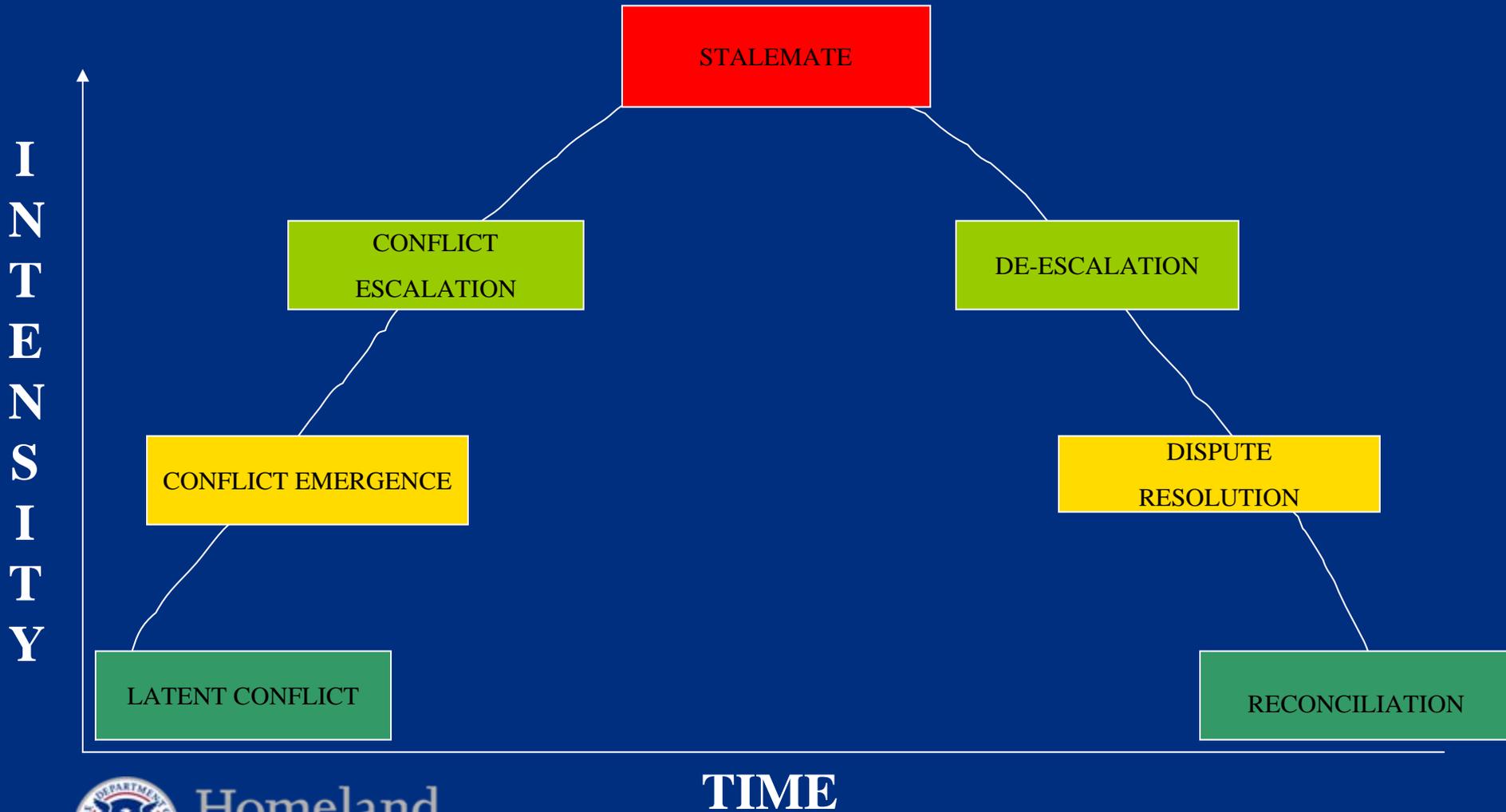
- Latent conflict
- Conflict emergence
- Contentious Behavior
- Escalation
- Stalemate
- De-escalation
- Conflict Resolution
- Reconciliation



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Stages of Conflict

(*Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement*, Pruitt and Kim)



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TIME

There's a new weapon out there

THE CYBER-SPEAR



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Electronic Conflict Resolution Theory

- Conflict Emergence
- Conflict Escalation – contentious behavior
- Stalemate
- De-escalation
- Resolution with some of the parties (retraction, apology to party and all recipients)
- Some damage cannot be undone
- It all reflects on you!



Contentious Email Examples

- Inappropriate use of **BOLD** lettering, underlining or punctuation
- Messages that are mean-spirited “This product is laughable.”
- Demeaning phrases “I guess you’re not smart enough to do this.”
- Exaggeration or hyperbole “You always do this wrong.” “You’ve never done anything right around here.” “This is the worst thing I’ve ever seen.”
- Personal insults “You’re incompetent, stupid, and lazy”
- Sending copies to people who don’t need to receive the message---for the purpose of embarrassing the recipient
- Passive-aggressive messages “I frankly don’t care if you come to work or you don’t.”



Contentious Email Cont.

- Sarcasm – “Thank you so much for including me in the meeting”
- Dismissive statements – “You weren’t included in the address line because
no one thought you would know about this topic.”
- Loss of face – Alerting others to your inadequacies.
- Forming coalitions – cc: all your support group (external intervention)
- Sabotaging other’s efforts
- Defensive behavior – “It’s not my fault”
- Retaliatory emails – Getting even – and upping the ante



Examples of De-escalation

- Conciliatory behaviors
- Forgiveness
- Direct / Honest expression of thoughts
- Engagement in problem-solving
- Group unification toward joint goals
- Speaking for oneself
- Supporting others / offering constructive ideas
- Cooperative behaviors



Extent of Damage

- Anger or de-motivate the recipient
- Create a retaliatory attitude on the part of the recipient
- Create retaliatory attitude on recipient's coalition
- Create evidence to be used against you in a grievance, EEO complaint, performance appraisal, or court case – or in the “court of public opinion”
- Create a harassing environment



What Can I Do?

- Model “conflict competent” email behavior
- Begin the process of de-escalation
- Think before you hit the send button – if you’re unsure – give it some time in your draft box
- When creating new email, insert the address last
- Train everyone – new employees, current workforce about email dangers
- Remind often and explain why important
- Take appropriate action when you become aware of “conflict-producing” email
- Apologize if you send it, and make rapid restitution for damage you caused



What about a mistake?

- Work as quickly as you can to correct the error in judgment or the error in sending a message prematurely or to the wrong recipient
- Express your regret to all recipients or cc: addressees
- Inform your supervisor – he/she hates to hear about this from someone else first!
- If honest mistake and the good you do outweighs the bad, you'll probably be forgiven



How big is this problem?

- Morale does matter
- New equipment brings new opportunities to damage morale, limit productivity, cause conflict escalation, reduce trust and cooperation among employees
- All the above cost money



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News Bulletin

Email is a tool; it is not a substitute
for good judgment



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A Good Policy:

If you're not sure how an email message is likely to be received, let it have a 24-hour "time-out" in your draft box.



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3 Elements of Communication

First, there are basically 3 elements in any face-to-face communication

- Words – 7%
- Tone of Voice – 38%
- Body Language – 55%

Second, the non-verbal elements are particularly important for communicating feelings and attitude, especially when they are incongruent: if words and body language disagree, one tends to believe the body language.

(Email gives us words (7%) and some of the tone (?%)).

- Albert Mehrabian – emeritus professor of Psychology, UCLA – best known for his publications on the relative importance of verbal and non-verbal messages. Mehrabian, A. (1971) Silent Messages. Wadsworth, Belmont, California.



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Read More About It

- Pruitt and Kim, *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY, 2004
- Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzer, *Crucial Conversations: tools for talking when the stakes are high*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY, 2002
- Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzer, *Crucial Confrontations: tools for resolving broken promises, violated expectations, and bad behavior*, McGraw-Hill New York, NY, 2005
- LeBaron, *Bridging Troubled Waters: Conflict resolution from the heart*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2002
- Shipley and Schwalbe, *SEND The Essential Guide to Email for Office and Home*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, NY, 2007

