

Working with people who are escalated

What is 'de-escalation'?

At times in our work, we might interact with people who become distressed, frustrated, angry or threatening. This can happen in person, online or over the phone. De-escalation is when we use verbal and non-verbal techniques to assist people to manage their conduct and communicate effectively.

De-escalation techniques are a respectful way to respond to someone who is escalated – but keep in mind that they can sometimes go against our natural fight-or-flight reflexes. Remaining calm in the middle of a confrontation is not easy and may need practice. It's not your job to stop the person being angry, but there are steps that can help the person feel calmer – this makes it much easier to work through the situation and address the person's concerns as effectively as possible.

Common causes of escalation

! Power imbalances

When we perceive we have less power in an interaction, we might feel we have to escalate to have our needs met.

This is especially the case for those of us with a history of marginalisation and trauma. Political offices and government agencies can hold a lot of power in people's minds – as the point of contact, we represent the whole institution.

! Defensive responses

Especially during face-to-face interactions, our own physical presentation needs to be front of mind.

Actions such as folding our arms, interrupting the person, fidgeting, avoiding eye contact or turning away can come across as dismissive or hostile, which can raise the person's level of distress.

! Feeling unheard or disrespected

Often, people seek assistance or make a complaint because there are few places in which their concerns have been listened to or acknowledged.

Not allowing someone the chance to express their concerns can increase their sense of marginalisation, and they may escalate to feel heard.

! Feeling threatened

This could include perceived threats to livelihood, relationship/s or employment.

A government decision or a party's political stance may cause someone to feel threatened.

What to do when someone is escalated

It's important to understand that no single approach or technique will work in every situation. When responding to escalated behaviour, consider the individual, the circumstances and the context. If at any time the person threatens harm or you feel unsafe, de-escalation efforts need to stop and you should re-focus on managing risk and referring to relevant authorities if required. This might include ending the call or meeting.

Asking questions

Questions can clearly identify the person's expectations and desired outcome. This helps you assess if you're able to assist, or if the request is outside of your control and influence. Examples include:

- What would help?
- What needs to happen to make you feel better about this?
- What could I do to assist?

If someone continues to escalate or is making unreasonable demands, the below strategies and techniques can support effective communication.

Low and slow – Be conscious of the pace and tone of your voice. When we soften and slow down our speech, it feels less threatening and it's easier for the other person to process what we are saying.

Name it to tame it – This is when we call out the specific feeling we are hearing – for example, "I can hear you're quite frustrated about this". Acknowledging and naming emotions helps them to feel less intense. It also raises the other person's awareness of how they're interacting, and shows that you are listening and engaging with them.

Regulate over educate – When someone is escalated and distressed, they're often not ready to process lots of information. Instead, we need to focus on helping the person become calmer first. We can do this by providing appropriate time and space, such as allowing the person to speak uninterrupted for 3-5 minutes (provided they are not using abusive or threatening language, or becoming more distressed as they talk).

Limit setting – Know your role scope and boundaries, and don't tolerate abusive, harassing or threatening behaviour. While it's good to allow some time for people to express their concerns, we need to be mindful that retelling distressing stories can be re-traumatising, and can have an impact on our own wellbeing. Instead, we can validate the person's distress and encourage them to connect to appropriate professional support.

Paraphrasing/summarising – Offering a short summary of what you've heard can powerfully build rapport and trust. It lets the person know you've listened, provides an opportunity for clarification and shows your willingness to help.

Reaching a positive outcome may not always be possible. However, in most instances, de-escalation techniques will assist in working toward some form of resolution. Some outcomes may be:

- Agreeing to call the person back once you find out more information.
- Identifying an action you can take as a result of the call/enquiry.
- Identifying actions the person can take to resolve the issue.
- Assisting the person to understand that the office is unable to help them with this situation, and facilitate their connection to relevant departmental or support service contacts.

Reframing – This involves communicating in a way that brings focus to a conversation and helps to move it forward. One way to do this is by maximising positive language while minimising 'negative' words.

Example	Suggested action
The person has mentioned a number of concerns, is highly distressed, or has spoken at length without a clear request	'Could we pause for a moment – I can hear there's a lot going on for you right now. What would you say is the main/most important issue for you?' 'What would you most like to focus on right now?'
Instead of saying: 'Unfortunately I haven't been privy to the specifics of your problem.'	Try saying: 'I personally haven't been privy to your situation, however we can certainly work together to find this information out and see if there is a more appropriate person to connect you with if we can't assist.'
The person expresses a strong sense of helplessness and is overwhelmed about their situation	'How have you dealt with challenging times in the past?' 'What has worked for you previously?' 'What would you like to see happen right now?'
The person expresses unrealistic demands or expectations	'What you're asking for isn't possible in these circumstances. Perhaps we can consider...'

Support

The PWSS provides independent and confidential support to all Commonwealth parliamentary workplace participants who have experienced, witnessed, or are managing staff who have experienced escalated or challenging workplace interactions. PWSS Case Coordinators are readily available 24/7, and can provide information and workshops specific to the needs of your office.



www.PWSS.gov.au



24/7 Support: 1800 747 977



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