

**WORK ENVIRONMENT**

**DEPARTMENT OF GEOSCIENCE**

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**Conflicts and  
Communication**

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### WHAT IS A CONFLICT

A conflict is often a struggle between people that have conflicting ideas or opinions. Conflicts arise because there are needs, values or methods that are seen to be different, and there is no means to reconcile the dispute. Conflicts concerns an issue (case) but affects relations. Therefore a conflict can be extremely frustrating and stressful for the parties involved, as well as affect the workplace.

Sometimes conflicts emerge between individuals or groups due to unprecise or inappropriate communication. It is common that conflicts are rooted in what is *not* being communicated: When details are assumed, or you (out of habit or convenience) start labelling another person.

If everyone chooses to communicate respectfully and make an effort to listen we can improve work relations and our cooperation skills considerably.

### WHEN COMMUNICATION LEADS TO CONFLICTS

It is not just what we say or do in relation to one another that determines the reaction of the other person. It is also how the other person interprets your message that is decisive, which makes communication a complicated matter. Events are interpreted differently by two people, even though they have in principle been involved or witnessed the same episode: We each have our own reality.

There are many factors that affect how a person interprets and thus experiences communication, the most important are listed here:

- Personal baggage (experience, mindset etc.)
- The subject being communicated about
- The circumstances under which the communication takes place
- The verbal and nonverbal language

### THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTACT

Normally, when communicating with another person in the same room, you sense the atmosphere while you talk and listen: You can more easily put yourself in the other persons place.

Communication without contact is confusing and strenuous, e.g. if the person has a facial expression or body language that you cannot read. You are constantly in doubt about what you say or do and how it is received.

It is well-known that communication via e-mail (or video) can create conflicts, due to the lack of physical contact. Depending on the situation it may be better to pick up the phone, or seek out the person and talk.

Communicating about 3<sup>rd</sup> parties that are not present should never take place: It creates a negative work environment and distrust between colleagues ("do they talk like this about me as well?").

### THE CHOICE OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION CHANNEL IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

The *assertive language* does not offend the other person because it is open and honest. Using assertive language, one speaks for oneself: You take responsibility for yourself and stay on your own half of the playing field. You say exactly what is on your mind, what you see, feel and want.

When one similarly approaches others, one can do so by respectfully asking what the other person needs to address. You must downplay your automatic tendency to blame, interpret, or diagnose. Try to be objective and use neutral words. Don't fall into the trap of placing the situation into a predefined box: "This is because she is a TAP", "it wouldn't have happened, if it was a woman", "it only applies to old people". Such categorizing may only enlarge the gap between the conflicting parties.

Care must be taken when communicating through e-mail. In writing you don't have the benefit of reacting to body language and adjust your words accordingly. Take your time. Make sure you don't write texts that may come off snappy. Even if it is unintended the use of exclamation marks and capital letters are often perceived this way. In e-mail communication there is a risk of leaving out context that is clear to you but maybe the recipient doesn't have the same information as you do: In writing some issues may need more explanation than during a real-time conversation.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO

*Benefit from having a face-to-face meeting*

The most optimal situation when communicating is having a conversation where everyone is in mental and physical contact: Be present and open, show how what is being communicated affects you directly. Communication can constantly be corrected in relation to what is happening and being said. There is no fixed "sender" or "recipient": Communication flows continuously in many directions.

*Choose to communicate openly*

There are ways of talking and listening that block our channels to others and to ourselves - and there are ways that open up. Assertive communication can be learned and eventually practiced. What is important is to always speak from the heart: Everything you say must be authentic.

*Accept that the other person has his or her own reality*

It is fundamental in the understanding of conflicts that everyone has their very own perceptions of the environment and of themselves. This perception is invisible to others. Only one person knows what one's landscape looks like - and then not even completely.

*Don't be judgmental, prejudiced or make assumptions*

If you tell others who they are, what their motives are and how they think, then you are attacking their territory and they will inevitably start defending themselves. This approach can cause a disagreement to escalate.

**WHAT TO CONSIDER DURING COMMUNICATION**

Emphasis, voice and body language are of great importance in communication - not just the actual content of the message being delivered. You should consider the verbal and nonverbal signs that we send to one another:

- What words do you use? In what way are they communicated?
- Is there a specific tone, or use of silence?
- What about eye contact, gestures or even your posture?
- Is it a direct or indirect communication?
- A formal or informal indictment?

The physical setting also plays an important role while communication takes place: During a conflict (even for minor disagreements) you should meet in neutral surroundings where no-one feels intimidated. Try to create a safe place, invite a companion, if it makes you feel more comfortable.

In an international workplace many different cultures interact and sometimes clash. The typical Danish use of irony or sarcasm may not be appreciated. Jokes can be funny to one person but offensive to another.

If you find it difficult (or impossible) to make contact, start a dialogue or interact to resolve a conflict, feel free to seek help from colleagues, members of LSU or LAMU, or the Head of Department.

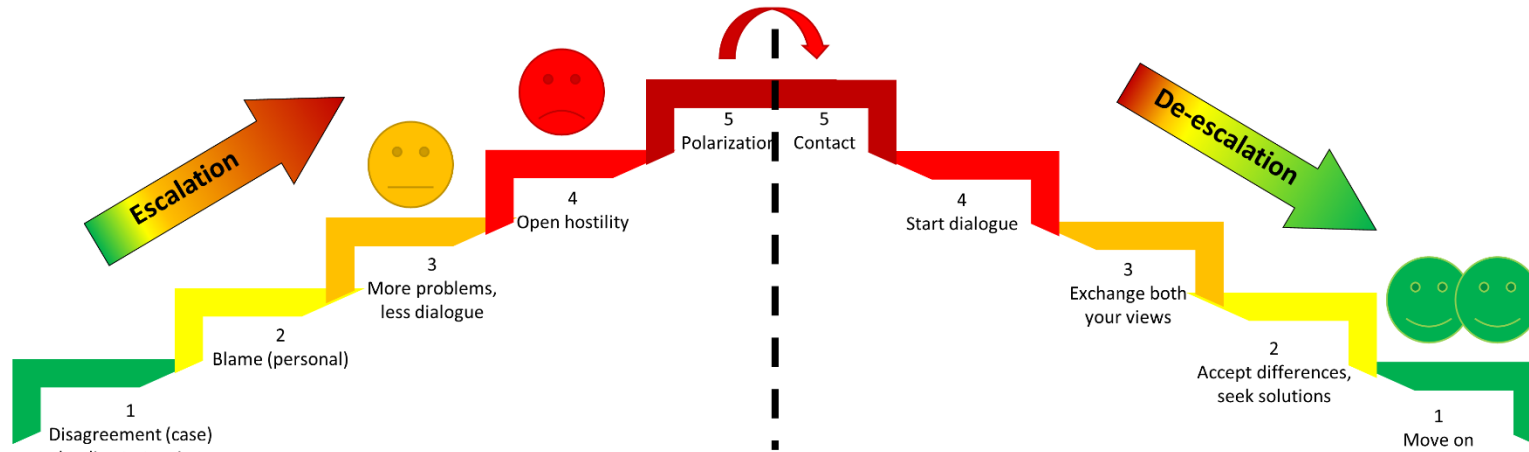
**HOW TO DE-ESCALATE A CONFLICT USING COMMUNICATION ("THE STAIRCASE MODEL")**

5: Choose to be proactive and seek contact to resolve the conflict. Preferably you never reach step 5 but deal with the disagreement on lower levels before it turns into an open conflict. It is very difficult going from polarization to reestablish contact: You may want to involve others for support.

4/3: Keep talking and stay focused on the issue that led to your disagreement (do not become personal). Continue to listen actively and have an open mind: Ask and be emphatic! Try to understand the other person and his or hers perspective. That doesn't mean that you should forget yourself. Explain details and provide information to clarify both your views. It may be hard and you may become emotional. Sometimes steps 4 and 3 is a long process, take breaks in-between to reflect and digest what has been exchanged.

2: Provide options and choices to resolve your differences, do not expect that everyone knows what is best for you, or that it is clear what is needed to move on. Make sure to find a solution that both parties can agree on. Maybe some changes are needed for you both. Write down your agreements for later. Plan how and when to follow up to evaluate the progress.

1: Keep in mind that the solution or outcome may not be what you wish for. You may never find mutual respect, nor end up liking the other person afterwards, but you have to be ready to move on from the conflict in some way. If you don't put it behind you it may lead to stress and more disagreements.



**STAIRCASE CONFLICT MODEL**

# WORK ENVIRONMENT ORGANISATION

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## DEPARTMENT OF GEOSCIENCE

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### FURTHER INFORMATION

Geoscience rules, regulations and information regarding physical and psychological work environment are located at the staff homepage of the department

<https://geo.medarbejdere.au.dk/arbejdsmiljoe/>