



OVERCOMING ESCALATION WITH BIG, GENEROUS ACTIONS

BY DAVID W. PACKER

Of all the system structures that affect our lives and world, escalation takes the prize for its negative impact. In situations such as price wars and arms races—prime examples of the escalation dynamic—two competing entities operate, each with the goal of staying ahead of the other. As shown in “Escalation Template,” the basic causal loop structure of escalation has two balancing loops, as each party takes action to achieve its goal and move a bit ahead of its opponent. As the momentum swings back and forth between the two sides, the interaction of these balancing loops creates a figure-8 reinforcing loop (you can trace it out on the causal loop diagram).

One of the characteristics of a reinforcing loop is that, if left unchecked, it leads to powerful exponential growth. As any banker will gladly tell you, a dollar invested each week for 60 years will make you amazingly rich! But for situations that are less rosy, one of the problems is that escalation is very hard to stop once it gets going. A domestic squabble over a small thing can quickly grow to the point of destructive words and maybe even actions. Aware of the damage being wreaked, the partners may try to scale back their responses, but things can still spin out of control, as though the conflict has taken on a life of its own. When this same dynamic comes into play in the international arena between nations with nuclear weapons, it can have potentially catastrophic consequences.

Why is stopping escalation so hard? I think the problem is that small concessions aren't enough; breaking the cycle takes big steps that go overboard in being generous to other side. Because of lack of trust or the desire to

protect ourselves, we tend to tone down our rhetoric slightly—but not go too far. We seek to be conciliatory—but not to be seen as groveling. We make tentative moves toward finding a middle ground—but only as *we* define it.

Unfortunately, with the very real possibilities of miscommunication or misinterpretation, what one side considers to be a dramatic compromise may be viewed by the other as a hollow gesture. This kind of miscue can launch the reinforcing process all over again, often in a flash. Because people take away the impression that compromise isn't possible, they aren't as conciliatory in the future. Stress levels rise even further. These are reinforcing and amplifying elements. This is how wars that nobody wants can start and then gain their own momentum.

Big, Generous Actions

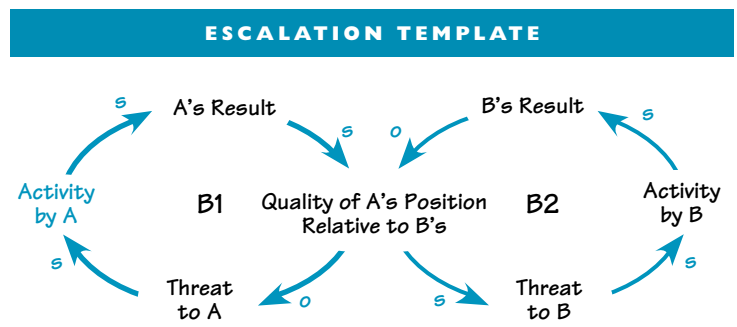
So how can we break free from this vicious cycle? As system dynamicist Jim Hines puts it, if an argument with your spouse has escalated and you want to stop the fight, you not only need to apologize and admit that you said cruel things, but also clear the table, do the dishes, and wash all the windows. To be absolutely sure that the system stops escalating and that the other side views your actions as favorable to their position, you need to take big, generous actions.

It is important to note that “generous actions” need not reflect a truly “generous spirit,” but can merely stem from the knowledge of the kind of response that is critical to averting disaster.

Embarking on this step requires trust, risk-taking, and courage. These are difficult requirements in a world with substantial complexity, time and perception delays, and communication problems. Further, if you don't receive the desired response from the other side, then trust often decays, risk-taking becomes less aggressive, and courage turns to caution.

Real-World Examples

Having just returned from a peace delegation to Israel and Palestine, I have seen with my own eyes the damaging effects of decades of escalation. There have been a number of cycles of hurtful activity on both sides involving Palestinian protests and terrorism in response to repression, and Israeli repression and military action in response to Palestinian actions. This situation is clearly in a downward spiral, as exemplified by Israel's recent con-



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struction of a “security fence”—as high as 8 meters in many places—that extends more than 700 kilometers within the West Bank. The sad irony is that, while this barrier and numerous security checkpoints may create the illusion of safety, by fueling anger and despair among the Palestinians, they may be boosting the escalation dynamic to a new, more deadly level—and increasing danger.

Again, to break this cycle, big, generous actions need to come into play. In a recent article in *The New York Times*, Middle Eastern expert Thomas Freidman suggests bold steps Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah might take to break the Israeli/Palestinian stalemate (“Abdullah’s Chance,” March 23, 2007):

“I would humbly suggest the Saudi king make four stops. His first stop should be to Al Aksa Mosque in East Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam. There, he, the custodian of Mecca and Medina, could reaffirm the Muslim claim to Arab East Jerusalem by praying at Al Aksa.

From there, he could travel to Ramallah and address the Palestinian parliament, making clear that the Abdullah initiative aims to give Palestinians the leverage to offer

Israel peace with the whole Arab world in return for full withdrawal [from the occupied territories].

From there, King Abdullah could helicopter to Yad Vashem, the memorial to the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust. A visit there would seal the deal with Israelis and affirm that the Muslim world rejects the Holocaust denialism of Iran. Then he could go to the Israeli parliament and formally deliver his peace initiative.

Of course, I have no illusions about this. But is it any more illusory than thinking that the incrementalism of the last seven years is going to get anywhere? Now that’s a fantasy.”

This is perhaps an extreme example, but Freidman knows that something of this nature needs to happen. I am not a historian, but I suspect that examination of the underlying dynamics leading to the end of apartheid in South Africa or peace in Northern Ireland or the fall of the Berlin Wall, all of which occurred with surprising suddenness, would yield additional insight into the nature of big actions that reverse long-term escalation. It’s like washing the windows on a global scale!

Because the reinforcing process can so quickly transform a small, even unintentional gap between two parties into a wide chasm, understanding the dynamics can make us more sensitive to risks and more anxious to nip a situation in the bud when it is manageable. Likewise, when we are caught up in this powerful structure, knowing about the leverage in big, generous actions can make our perceptions more focused and deliberate and our responses more confident and effective. From the kitchen to the world of nations, such insight can be priceless in saving relationships and preventing wars. ■

David W. Packer is a founding member of the Systems Thinking Collaborative (www.stcollab.com). He holds a master’s degree from MIT, where he worked in the system dynamics group at the Sloan School, and is also a graduate of the Executive Program at the University of Virginia. David participated for many years in the growth of Digital Equipment Corporation and has served on the board of directors of the Home for Little Wanderers, Domestic Violence Services, Policy Council of the System Dynamics Society, and Pegasus Communications. His broad interest in bringing systems understanding to diverse issues is reflected in this article.