

Talking to Fired-Up People How to De-Escalate & Move Forward

How Humans are Wired

A very upset person is in an altered mental state. Strong emotion literally overwhelms the rational centers of the brain. As a result, being strictly logical with a fired-up individual doesn't work well. It's not your fault or your individual's fault. Their brain is in an emotional fog. A brain flooded with emotion does not:

- Care about reason
- Respond to objectivity
- Calm down with rational discussion

Expect this reality. It'll be much less frustrating, when you remember that the person is not being intentionally difficult. They're acting the way human brains are wired.

Talking to the Fired-Up

Fortunately, there are six proven communication techniques that will help you effectively de-escalate a fired-up individual.

1. Don't Get Triggered

Humans are wired to protect and defend. The impulse to defend against an upset person is automatic. The individual's emotion fires-up the emotional centers in your brain. It's very easy to get triggered and find yourself battling your own emotional fog. The crucial first step is to accept the individual's emotion and *not* react instinctively. It's entirely normal to feel: mad, anxious, annoyed, repulsed, suspicious, deflated or alarmed. Unfortunately, normal reactions tend to escalate the emotion, yours and the individual's. Instead of reacting to the anger, turn the emotional intensity down by approaching the upset person with empathy. Empathy is the opposite of the instinctual response, and stops the cycle of emotional escalation. It turns down the emotional heat and is the first step toward calming the person.

2. Listen

Strong emotion clouds reason until it is released. Dealing with the emotion effectively clears the emotional fog that blocks productive communication. After adopting an attitude of empathy, keep going with the power of *Reflective Listening*. Follow three simple steps:

1. Listen *carefully* to both facts and feelings
2. Summarize and reflect back what you heard
3. Acknowledge the concerns with respectful empathy

Acknowledging concerns helps lower the emotion by directly addressing the strong feelings. It assures the individual that you value their feelings and care about their problems. Even if you can't completely fix the problem, genuine care is powerfully soothing. As the emotional intensity lessens, it will become easier to work with the person. The problem-solving part of the brain engages, as intense emotion wanes.

3. Connect with One @ 100%

Once you've fully reflected and acknowledged the concerns, further reduce the emotion by connecting with their viewpoint. Find one thing or even part of a thing you can agree with, then agree 100% with conviction. Even if all the facts are wrong, you can likely agree that the situation is very upsetting, from the individual's point of view. The emotion will calm down further, if you approach the person with agreement. The individual will feel that you are a partner, rather than an opponent.

After you agree with genuine conviction, you can add some additional input. Never use the word "but". That erases your agreement and will inflame the person. Instead, use connecting words like: "and", "also", "in addition". As the person calms down, you can start adding your viewpoint.

4. Attempt to Problem-Solve

Only *after* you've fully acknowledged the concerns, and connected with agreement, attempt a shift to problem-solving. You'll notice the right moment when the individual shows less intensity. The process of venting emotion, and having someone acknowledge concerns is very calming. You'll notice it in the body language or tone. It may take some time, before the emotion is sufficiently vented. When people are really fired-up, they may not be able to calm down immediately. Keep up the empathic concern and reflective listening.

5. Broken Records Work

If the person is able to shift into collaborative problem-solving, wonderful. You can start collaborating. Keep acknowledging concerns, focusing on areas of agreement and showing how you can partner together. If the individual starts re-escalating or throwing in distractions, remember broken records work.

Don't get distracted and don't escalate. Instead, stick to your main focus. As needed, respectfully (this is key) repeat your focus. Stay on point, repeating if necessary. When you can't be distracted or escalated, the individual will hopefully join you in collaborating. If not, keep repeating. If after a number of repeats, you're stuck in a rut, you may need to use the final technique.

6. Meta-communicate to Observe & Pivot

Meta-communication is a psychology term for communication beyond the words. Body language, tone, intentions, and conversation patterns are all part of the meta-communication, in addition to the words. To break out of an unproductive conversation, it's helpful to meta-communicate by observing what's happening. For example, if you've gone around the broken record five or six times without progress, observe that the conversation is stuck and pivot to break the cycle. You might say: "It seems like we're going around in circles and not coming to a good resolution. How about we pick this up later, after we've given it some more thought." There are many times when meta-communicating is a powerful tool. It's particularly helpful when a conversation is stuck in a rut.

Underlying these six techniques is the continual focus on step one, don't get triggered. Emotional contagion is a real thing. It takes great mental discipline to stay genuinely empathic when someone keeps coming at you hot. Holding on to empathy will help you and the fired-up person get past the negative emotion, and move toward productive collaboration.

If you'd like to chat about specific situations, reach out at the contact below:

bk@barbarakaycoaching.com

630.212.5460

www.barbarakaycoaching.com