



4 Star Self-defence

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Understanding Conflict

First a couple of caveats. While it might be nice to be able to say that all conflicts, including physical assaults, follow a clearly defined set of rules or a neatly choreographed progression, this is rarely the case in real life. So while it can be quite useful to understand how a conflict tends to develop and what types of responses or interventions are most likely to work at various stages, don't be too surprised when reality tends to deviate from theory.

Secondly, because our focus here is on personal self-defence, and we aren't writing a comprehensive text on conflict theory, we emphasize those areas of conflict theory which are relevant to conflicts where personal self-defence might be involved. We don't intend to deal with topics like mediation, arbitration and other specialized, areas such as large group (international, social, labor-management, etc.) conflict dynamics and game theory. If you're interested in pursuing the broader topic of conflict theory your public library or https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_theory is a good place to start. For our purposes you can assume that whenever we use the word conflict below, we are referring to interpersonal conflict. But not all interpersonal conflicts involve threatened or actual physical violence where personal self-defence concepts and techniques come into play.

We're not suggesting that you should stop in the midst of a confrontation and attempt to analyze what stage of the conflict you are currently in and then consult a reference or otherwise determine how best to proceed, but understanding how a conflict usually develops can make a difference in how you deal with things. It can be particularly important when it comes to intervening in a conflict (see the final section). But don't forget that real life tends to be messy and the well-defined boundaries between stages and their defining characteristics are rarely as clear and neatly delineated as they are on paper or a computer screen.

Of course if you accept our seven principles of self-defence and, in particular, the second principle of awareness and avoidance, you will recognize that the best form of self-defence is recognizing and avoiding situations which could require you to defend yourself. If that's not possible it's still preferable to extract yourself from the situation during the lead up or initiation stage, but we're getting a little ahead of ourselves.

Speaking of the stages of conflict, you may notice that the stages listed below aren't numbered. This is because it's important to understand that, when we talk about stages of conflict, we don't mean to imply that every or even any conflict moves neatly and predictably through a progression of stages until it ends at resolution. The only thing that is guaranteed is that every conflict has a beginning (initiation) and an end (resolution). That resolution can be win-win, win-lose or something in between. And between the initiation and resolution things are definitely going to get messy. There will probably be one or more points where things escalate and, quite likely one or more intermediary stages – the order and duration is anybody's guess.

The stages of conflict:

Lead up

Most conflicts have a background or lead up. This is significant because knowing what led up to a conflict may offer clues about how to avoid, control, de-escalate or resolve it. However, when we're talking about a physical confrontation where personal self-defence is likely to be required, this may not be the case. That being said, bear in mind that in North America far more reported cases of violent assault involve situations where the parties are known to each other than “stranger assaults.”

The absolute best form of self-defence is avoidance. The greatest opportunities to avoid open conflict occur during the lead up stage.

Initiation

Conflict is initiated when the actions of one or more individual defines or re-defines the relationship between them as adversarial. Another way of saying this is that when there are opposing sides and when they have a mutually exclusive goal or goals a conflict exists. Does that still sound overly academic? How about if we put it this way: If you have two people and the both want the same object or they want different outcomes which can't co-exist, you have a conflict.

For instance if two children are playing in a sandbox and one decides they want the dump truck the other is playing with, a conflict is initiated as soon as the child without the truck either declares that they want it or just take it. Or maybe it's a case of a mugger demanding your wallet or your cellphone.

Sometimes, but not always, a conflict progresses directly from initiation to escalation. However, that mugger mentioned above won't always immediately follow up a demand with an attack. There may be an opportunity to redefine the nature of the conflict before things escalate. For instance, the mugger has probably initiated the conflict with the assumption that they are in the more powerful position. If you respond, as expected, like a victim, it's quite likely that the conflict will either escalate or be resolved by you capitulating to the mugger's demands. If, on the other hand, you imply that you don't consider your would-be attacker a serious threat by responding with humor or (feigned or real) indifference, the mugger may re-consider the assumption of superior power and call off the mugging.

But be careful. While presenting yourself as a counter threat can't be construed as acting like a victim, it can and probably will cause things to escalate quickly. Humor may work, pretending not to understand may work, but anything that might be perceived as a challenge probably won't. Also remember that capitulation won't always end the conflict or prevent the assailant from harming you.

Escalation

In the above example with the dump truck, the conflict is escalated as soon as it's initiated if the child who wanted the dump truck simply takes it. Escalation is probably easier to recognize than it is to define. It can be verbal or physical, it can be escalation from verbal to physical or escalation in the level of violence, such as from pushing to striking. The simplest way to define escalation is that the intensity of the conflict increases.

The significant thing about escalation is that what we refer to as a true resolution or a win – win outcome, which requires agreement, is not possible while a conflict is in an escalation stage. The only way a conflict will end if it escalates and can't be moved into one of the intermediary stages, such as de-escalation or a plateau, is in a win – lose resolution by means of conquest or capitulation.

This is particularly relevant to self-defence for two reasons. First, when assault is involved, initiation and escalation are almost simultaneous. Although there are self-defence situations, such as bullying, where the conflict can be initiated with threats, which, although they may be considered to be verbal assault, don't necessarily result in immediate escalation.

The second reason is that any type of counter-attack tends to escalate a conflict and can only be expected to end it if it's devastating enough to result in conquest or so ineffectual that it exposes the defender to an overwhelming response, resulting in defeat or capitulation. This is true even if your intent in counter-attacking is to re-define the balance in power. The intent behind an action is rarely as relevant as how the action is perceived by the other party or parties to the conflict.

Intermediary stages

De-escalation: De-escalation occurs when both parties to the conflict back off. This might occur as a result of some outside event or intervention, because they're tired or there might be some sort of verbal or non-verbal agreement to ease up. Examples of de-escalation are when punches are replaced with shoving or physical violence changes into a shouting

match. It may just be a tactical “rest and re-group” move before ramping the hostilities back up a notch or two. In fact, many conflicts oscillate through multiple cycles of escalation and de-escalation without ever reaching a plateau stage where the chances for negotiation or outside intervention increase significantly. However, any time de-escalation occurs can present an opportunity to achieve a plateau that rarely exists in an escalation stage.

Plateau: A plateau is usually a stalemate or any other situation where a conflict is neither escalating or de-escalating. It can be a period where potential combatants are sizing each other up or maybe pulling back to catch a breath or assess damage. It can also be a situation where one party has another under control but can't hold it forever or advance it to submission. A plateau might also be achieved when it becomes apparent to both parties that they are equally matched.

A plateau (or truce or temporary cessation of hostilities) should not be mistaken as resolution. That mugger who wanted your cellphone may agree not to fight back if you release them from a choke hold, but that doesn't mean they don't still want your phone or even that they can be trusted to keep their word.

However, plateaus are significant because they can be opportunities to explore mutually agreeable ways out of the conflict or, in other words, a true resolution or win – win solution, either worked out by the parties to the conflict themselves or engineered by a third party who has recognized a plateau for the opportunity it presents.

Resolution

In very broad terms, there are three possible ways in which an interpersonal conflict can be resolved.

Capitulation: A conflict may end which one party simply decides to give up. In a self-defence situation this could be as simple as deciding that the only logical answer to the old “your money or your life” proposal is to give up the money. But be careful. Can you count on the other party to the conflict to keep their end of the bargain – i.e. take your money and not injure you or worse?

And be clear: capitulation involves one party deciding that, for whatever reason they will not continue the conflict. There are clear hazards to capitulation as a means to achieve resolution. First and foremost, as hinted at above, is the fact that the other party won't necessarily accept your surrender on your terms.

If, on the other hand, you are able to employ escape or control strategies in a self-defence situation, an attacker may capitulate, deciding that you're not such an easy victim after all or at least not worth the fight or pursuit.

Conquest: Conquest also involves surrender of a sort, but in this case one party is unable to continue the conflict. No decision is required. While some people may consider conquest to be the best form of conflict resolution in a self-defence situation, totally overwhelming or subduing a real-life attacker is rarely as neatly accomplished in the real world as it is on TV, in the movies or in a martial arts class.

Also remember that if you expect to conquer an adversary by means of an overpowering counter-attack or the use of a weapon, any form of counter-attack is just as likely to escalate the level of conflict as it is to end it. Any counter-attack that doesn't end a conflict prolongs it, increasing the possibility that someone, including you, will be injured, and statistics prove that a weapon is more likely to be turned against a defender than it is to end the confrontation in the defender's favour.

True resolution: What we refer to as true resolution or a win – win outcome occurs when all parties to a conflict agree on a means of ending the conflict. True resolution is most likely to actually bring a conflict to a close in a way that greatly

increases the odds of it staying closed. Conflicts which end in capitulation or conquest are far more likely to be rejoined at a later time when the one who originally lost believes themselves to have gained an edge.

In a self-defence situation true resolution is not as likely to occur due to mediation or arbitration or other forms of third party intervention. However, in certain circumstances, negotiation may take place during an intermediary stage.

Let's go back to the sandbox. Both kids are now tugging at the dump truck, but neither has sole possession. After a brief period of escalation involving a bit of sand throwing and halfhearted punching with the non-dominant hands, a stalemate is achieved. At this point there is a chance for true resolution if one child points out that nobody is playing with the truck as long as they're both pulling on it and that taking turns might make more sense.

Of course, let's be realistic. Negotiation is a give and take process generally requiring two parties willing to interact in a rational manner. These conditions aren't particularly likely in a self-defence situation. And anyone who has ever tried to negotiate with a bully knows how unrealistic that is.

There are, however two other ways in which true resolution is possible that don't necessarily involve negotiation. The first is introduction of what is called a super-ordinate goal – something which both parties to the conflict would consider desirable. One type of super-ordinate goal is a mutual threat – not all that easy to introduce without a good script writer to start a fire or put you both on a sinking ship, but it can happen. The other type of super-ordinate goal is something which both parties to a conflict find more desirable than the current object of the conflict. Again, not too likely, but watch for it in case something pops up.

The second non-negotiation path to true resolution is referred to as posing a dilemma. Let's go back to the mugger after your cellphone. If you manage to fling the phone a considerable distance away you have presented your attacker with a dilemma. Do they leave off the attack and chase after

what they wanted in the first place, possibly exposing themselves to counter-attack if you decide to jump them from behind? Or do they pound you to a pulp first for having the temerity to fling it away and then go get it. Neither of these options is especially favorable from your point of view, but that's not the point. The purpose of posing a dilemma is to allow alternatives to emerge. In this case the most likely alternative is that the mugger decides that things are not at all going the way they anticipated and maybe they'd be better off giving up. An alternative with which you're likely to agree.

Escape: Since we're all about self-defence and since we define self-defence as being all about creating the opportunity for escape, we add a fourth way of resolving a conflict that doesn't fit cleanly into any of the forms of resolution listed above. If you are able to create or seize an opportunity to escape from a conflict situation, and do so in a way that pursuit either isn't possible or, from the point of view of the other party, pursuit isn't desirable, you can probably consider the conflict to have been resolved. In some ways, depending on the specifics of the situation, escape might be considered to be conquest or capitulation or maybe even true resolution through posing a dilemma, but who cares how it's classified if you get out of a dangerous situation.

We are, after all, talking about real life, not a theoretical exercise with a written exam to follow. The theory is relevant only in as much as it aids you in achieving the desired results in the real world.

Intervention by a superior third party: Finally, there's the possibility of intervention by a third party with perceived or real power over both parties to the conflict, such as a parent, teacher, boss, peace officer or other authority.

Equal vs. Unequal

All conflicts, whether physical, verbal or otherwise in nature can be divided into equal and unequal types. What matters in determining whether or not a party engages in conflict on equal or unequal terms is not an external or qualitative measurement of power or resources, but, rather, the perception of the parties to the conflict.

You may enter a physical confrontation believing that you have the upper hand because you are bigger, younger and stronger than your opponent. But your opponent may believe themselves to have the advantage because of extensive training in Brazilian Jujitsu. You both proceed on the assumption of superiority.

1. Equal: If the parties to the conflict perceive themselves to be equally matched, the lead up to the conflict will usually be characterized by maneuvering for strategic advantage. A true resolution is far more likely when the parties to a conflict either enter a conflict perceiving themselves to be equally matched or, due to shifts in the balance of power during the course of the conflict, believe that they have lost or gained advantage to the point of becoming equally matched.
2. Unequal: If, on the other hand, one party to a conflict believes themselves to have a significant advantage, the conflict is likely to rapidly advance to the escalation stage. A true resolution to an unequal conflict is virtually impossible through negotiation and can rarely be achieved without the introduction of a super-ordinate goal or goals or, in some cases, a truly compelling dilemma unless a significant power shift redefines the conflict as equal or a third party intervenes.

Conflict vs. Assault

Assault, whether physical or otherwise, is a special class of conflict. That is to say that all assaults are conflicts and, in general, develop and play out in a similar fashion. There are, however two things which distinguish assaults from other conflict situations. Since a self-defence situation is quite likely to involve assault it is important to understand the distinctions.

1. In an assault the roles of the parties to the conflict are automatically defined as attacker and defender, which almost always defines the conflict as being of the unequal type with the attacker having the advantage.
2. An assault initiates the conflict at the escalation stage. The ability of the defender to bring the conflict to a plateau or de-escalation stage depends almost entirely on situational control, redefining the balance of power or outside intervention.

Intervening in a Conflict

Entire books are written on the topic of conflict intervention. Peace officers of various sorts train extensively on the topic, so what can we say in a few paragraphs that might be helpful? Let's start with the fact that this is one place where understanding conflict stages is definitely important.

When a conflict is escalating the only useful intervention is to push it into an intermediary stage. How this is best accomplished will depend on the specifics of the situation, but the most common forms of successful intervention include separating the parties to the conflict either by distance or a physical barrier, restraining one or more of them or otherwise addressing the balance of power such as by disarming anyone wielding a weapon. This is not to say that we recommend that anyone who is not properly trained attempt to disarm a combatant – just that disarming is one way to redefine the balance of power.

It's important to understand that attempting to resolve a conflict through negotiation or other means when it is escalating is pretty much pointless.

It's even more important to understand that attempting to take control of the situation with any action that might be construed as an attack or as taking sides is likely to only serve to further escalate things. Hostage negotiators understand that a plateau, stalemate or, as it is sometime called, a perception of equilibrium is a prerequisite for negotiation.

When a conflict is moved to an intermediary stage a third party intervenor can attempt to achieve true resolution by negotiation or introducing a super-ordinate goal. Remember the kids in the sandbox? How about offering them a bulldozer if they can agree to play together, taking turns with the truck and the bulldozer?

Whatever you do as an intervenor be sure you don't unnecessarily expose yourself to the threat of injury or put yourself in a position to be perceived as a threat by both parties to the conflict. Although the later case might be seen as another form of super-ordinate goal, it's more likely to result in just re-defining the conflict than resolving it. Either way it will probably turn out badly for you.