



PILOTING THE CROSSCURRENTS

Crosscurrents are defined as a stretch of turbulent water in a river or sea caused by one current flowing into or across another current. This vividly describes the experience so many of us find ourselves in during a disagreement, misunderstanding, or serious conflict.

River guides teach that we can avert danger by learning to see the challenges ahead. The following are guidelines for noticing early signs of activation and then steps to employ to help calm the waters of conflict.

1. Notice body language

- **Observation:** fidgeting, pacing, restlessness, agitation. Noticeable tightening in jaw, face, shoulders.
- **Voice:** tone gets louder, softer, or more strained. Notice cadence (usually speeding up.)
- **Eyes:** gaze becomes more intense or may avoid any eye-contact.
- **Skin:** may become flushed or reddened.
- **Micro-expressions:** Are involuntary facial movements, often from suppressed emotions. They occur in a fraction of a second. Blink and you will miss them!
Examples: Raised eyebrow, blinking, squinting, widening, or narrowing of eyes, furrowed brow. Check out Paul Ekman's work, the world expert in emotion and deception detection.

Once we notice the signs of activation, the following are guidelines to help de-escalate the situation and allow for needed ventilation:

2. De-escalate to create calm

- Avoid arguing. Become quiet. Let go of any agenda in order to be fully present to the speaker - and with yourself.
- Take a few deep breaths, your calmness and presence become contagious.
- Deepen your listening and then reflect what you heard to make sure that you heard it correctly. i.e., "Did you mean ... What I think you are saying/feeling/thinking is ..." and then, "Is that what you meant?" Keep it up until the other person feels understood. They will tell you by saying, "exactly" or something like that.
- Listen and let go of any need to problem-solve.

3. Validate, legitimize, acknowledge

- What about their argument could you agree with?
- Language: "It makes complete sense that you feel ... when ...?" "You're right, that shouldn't have happened." This skill allows the other person to know that their thoughts, feelings, and behavior are seen as coherent. They start to relax when they feel seen, heard, and respected.
- Ask yourself, "If I were having their same experience, how might I be feeling?" "I wonder what may be going on under the surface for them?"

4. Get curious

- Ask a few robust open-ended questions that solicit an easy response. These questions typically begin with "How" or "What." E.g., "What happened?"
- Try not to interrupt.
- The more you open into dialogue, the more likely you will understand the other's position, even when you disagree.

Even the tensest of situations can be averted by choosing to become present and observant, listening with your heart and curiosity, and validating/acknowledging/legitimizing others concerns. The result is not only de-escalation but also increasing of your empathy and compassion!