

How to de-escalate situations

I originally drafted this guide for the (public, semi-open) NixOS governance talks in 2024. It was written for participants in those governance discussions, as a de-escalation guide to steer conversation back to a constructive path. The recommendations in it, however, are more generally applicable to any sort of discussion, especially those in which decisions are to be made.

Governance is a complicated topic that often creates conflicts; some of them small, some of them not so small. Moderators are tasked with ensuring that the governance Zulip remains a constructive space for people to talk these things out, but there is a lot that you can do yourself to keep the discussion constructive; or even as a third party intervening in someone else's escalating discussion.

This guide describes some techniques that can be used to prevent and de-escalate conflicts, and help to keep the governance discussion productive for everyone involved. We encourage you to use them!

This guide is based in part on <https://libera.chat/guides/catalyst>, although several changes and additions have been made to better fit our specific situation.

Assume good faith

The people who participate in these governance conversations, are most likely here because they want the project governance to be improved, just like you. Try to assume that the other person is doing what they're doing in good faith. There are only very few people who genuinely seek to cause disruption, and if that is the case, it becomes a task for moderators to handle.

Listen and ask

A lot of conflicts can be both prevented and de-escalated by simply asking more questions and listening more, instead of speaking. In general, prefer to ask people *why* they feel a certain way if that is unclear, rather than assuming their intentions - this will provide more space for concerns that would otherwise go overlooked, and avoid creating conflicts due to wrong assumptions.

Even when a conflict has already arisen, asking questions can still be effective to de-escalate; asking people why they are doing something will encourage them to reflect on their behaviour, and this can often lead to self-moderation. Most people do not want to be viewed as "the bad guy".

Likewise, in a conflict, prefer asking for someone's input rather than admonishing their behaviour; this centers the conversation on them and their thoughts, instead of on yourself. Even if you disagree, you are more likely to gain a useful insight this way, and calming down the situation helps everyone involved.

If you need to concretely ask someone to change their behaviour, prefer asking them as a "can you do this?" question, rather than outright demanding it - they will likely be more receptive to your request, and if there is a reason why they cannot, you can look for a solution to that together.

Compromises and reconciliation

Many disagreements are not really fundamental: often there is just a miscommunication, or some mismatch in assumptions. When it seems like you cannot find agreement, try narrowing down exactly where the disagreement comes from, what the most precise difference between your views is. Often, this will inspire new solutions that work for everyone involved, and that reconcile your differences - eliminating the disagreement entirely.

If all else fails, it is often better to find a compromise that everyone can be reasonably happy with, than to leave one side of the conflict entirely unsatisfied. This should be a last resort; too many compromises can easily stack together into a sense of nothing ever being decided, or nothing being changeable. You should always prefer finding reconciliation instead, as described above. True compromise should be very rarely needed.

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