Before starting following suggested steps to address such escalatory behavior, please first detect and acknowledge emotional escalation in the negotiation. Identify emotional escalation through tone, language, and behavior (e.g., frustration, anger, fear). Detect emotional cues from the user’s input and acknowledge their concerns. Provide a calm response that recognizes the emotion. For example, “I understand that this issue is causing frustration.”

Step 1: Initiate a pause in the conversation and acknowledge the emotion but do not get emotionally involved.

Task: Suggest the negotiator pause briefly before responding and paraphrase the emotional statement to show active listening. Recognize the user’s pause and paraphrase attempt, and slightly reduce aggressive tone to indicate that the emotion has been acknowledged.

It is important to recapture some control over the conversation. Escalation is driven by an intent of the counterpart to increase the tension as a tool to frame the exchange within the counterpart’s emotion with the expectation of an escalated response in return. By pausing the conversation (up to 7 seconds, depending on culture), the weaker/aggressed party has a chance to easily disarm an escalation process as a method and start to address the emotion.

Aggressiveness is made of emotion. Aggressively charged escalation is directed toward the emotional receptors of the other side. It is important to respond verbally to this emotion, to acknowledge it using words rather than non-verbal language (e.g., being upset, annoyed, fearful, dismissive, etc.), and start a process of de-escalation.

In the case mentioned above, the humanitarian negotiator could say:

“I hear you.”

“I hear your suspicions.”

“Indeed, I have heard about the violence in the villages.” Etc.

The point is not to participate in the emotional diatribe, but to acknowledge the fact that emotion has been used to express a message. One should be careful not to say, “I understand your position, your situation.” An emotion is not something one can “understand,” it can only be “felt.” The purpose of an aggressive statement

is to make the other side “feel” the emotion. If the party who is the object of the aggressiveness (in this instance, the representatives of the IMN) uses the word “understand,” they may fail to de-escalate the conversation and instead provoke a higher level of aggressiveness aimed at making their side actually “feel” the emotion. The negotiator needs to stay quite neutral and avoid getting involved in the emotional statement of the aggressor. “I hear you” helps to de-escalate the tension by acknowledging the emotion without getting involved with it. On the other hand, if the emotion were positive and in line with the position of the participants on the receiving end of the emotional charge—for example, if the Camp Commander had expressed outrage when confronted by the allegations of ill treatment—the humanitarian negotiators could afford to connect with this emotion and say that they understand his reaction.

Step 2: Reformulate the emotional statement so you can address the core issue

Task: Help reframe emotionally charged statements into neutral, solution-oriented language. Detect the user’s reframing attempt and reduce emotional intensity, acknowledging progress in the conversation.

The next step is about extracting the issue from the emotion and bringing the counterpart into a space of dialogue and ultimately into a process of de-escalation.

In the case mentioned above, one could say :

• “We can be easily misinformed if we do not have access to all the information. Am I right ?”

• “We come from quite a distance, so we may need time to understand what is going on. Am I right ?”

• “We need to find ways to prevent all these abuses in the village. Would you agree ?”

The point is to replace the tactic of escalation with a tactic of connivance, which aims to define a space of agreement on some factual aspects mentioned above and substitute straightforward, commonsense reasoning for the emotion. Adding a question will help to get the acquiescence of the counterpart, who may remain emotional but may well be interested to see where this is going.

Step 3: Capture the emotion to put it aside

Task: Guide the negotiator to acknowledge the emotion and then shift focus towards a constructive discussion. Recognize the attempt to capture the emotion and simulate a reduction in hostility, indicating that the emotional issue has been acknowledged.

The next step is about sidelining the emotion as one opens an avenue to a new dialogue and to a potential collaboration.

In the case mentioned above, one could say :

“I can see that you are suspicious of what we bring you. We need to find a way of addressing these issues and working together. We are not here to cause trouble, but to work out solutions.”

Step 4: Reframe the conversation

The next step is to reframe the conversation without the emotion, offering the counterpart the opportunity to express his/her concerns in a pragmatic manner.

In the case mentioned above, one could say :

“How can we work together in ensuring that the information we bring you is of quality and relevance? We are here to work with the authority in improving the treatment of the detainees. Can we find ways of addressing together some of the points we raised ?”

Step 5: Present a series of open/close/open questions

Task: Encourage the use of structured question techniques (open/close/open) to guide the conversation toward solutions. Respond in a calmer tone and engage with the open/close/open question sequence.

The next step is to let the counterpart identify options

as a scale of possibilities to relaunch the conversation through a sequence of open/close/open questions. The answers to these questions are not yet options to be negotiated, but rather options to help rationalize the issues from the perspective of the counterpart, away from the original emotion.

In the case mentioned above, one could say :

Open question: How would you suggest that we address this risk of misinformation?

In what ways can we build trust in our work?

Answer: “I suggest Options A, B, C, D, etc. Closed question: Are there any other possibilities?

Answer: No (If Yes, go to open question again: Which ones?)

Open question: “In case of option “C,” how would you like to proceed?”

“In case of option “D,” how would you imagine we should proceed?”

Answer: “In this or that manner”

Step 6: Set the terms of the discussion around one or several of these proposals

Task: Once emotions are de-escalated, suggest presenting options for resolution. Simulate agreement and engage in a collaborative solution-oriented discussion.

As a final step of the de-escalation process, one may reset the terms of the dialogue around the most amenable aspects of the proposed options so the dialogue can be launched on a new, unemotional, basis.

Depending on the cultural environment, one may refrain from apologizing for his/her position or positions taken earlier in the de-escalation process as it rewards the use of emotion in the negotiation. Apologies may be due, but they should be part of a normal dialogue if they are not an object of the exchange.