

Why Escalations Persist - and How to Interrupt the Patterns

If your engagement scores are flat despite repeated initiatives, you may not be addressing the problem that's actually driving them.

A White Paper for Organisations Operating in Complex Environments

1. The Engagement Paradox

Many organisations invest heavily in engagement initiatives, leadership development, and communication training.

Yet certain teams show limited movement.

Engagement scores plateau.

The same interpersonal tensions resurface.

Certain managers generate recurring complaints without clear misconduct.

Talented employees leave citing “fit” or relationship strain.

When this happens, organisations often assume:

- Communication needs improvement
- Expectations need to be clearer
- Individuals need coaching
- Culture needs reinforcement

These interventions matter. But in some cases, they do not shift the underlying issue.

The reason is simple:

Some workplace tensions are driven by behavioural patterns that intensify when challenged and adapt when addressed inconsistently.

Until that pattern is recognised, the problem reappears - in different forms.

2. How Escalation Actually Develops

Most formal escalations do not begin with a serious violation.

They begin with small moments:

A boundary is tested.

A comment is dismissed.

A request is overridden.

A role authority is used to shut down a discussion.

Individually, these moments seem manageable.
They rarely justify formal action.

But over time, they accumulate.

- Trust narrows.
- Psychological safety reduces.
- Conversations become guarded.
- Discretionary effort declines.

Eventually, one of three things happens:

1. A formal complaint is raised.
2. A valued employee leaves.
3. Team performance deteriorates quietly.

By the time the issue reaches HR or leadership formally, the pattern has often been active for months.

3. Why “Doing the Right Thing” Can Make It Worse

When someone attempts to address the behaviour politely, the behaviour typically intensifies.

This is not occasional. It is predictable.

With this pattern:

Polite correction triggers escalation.

The person shifts tactics.

If humour is challenged, it becomes dismissal.

If dismissal is challenged, it becomes interruption.

If interruption is challenged, it becomes emotional pressure.

If emotional pressure is challenged, it becomes formal authority.

The behaviour does not disappear.

It changes form.

This is often misinterpreted as resistance, personality clash, or emotional reactivity.

In reality, it is the mechanism of the pattern.

4. The Role of Selectivity

A defining feature of these patterns is selectivity.

The behaviour does not appear consistently across all relationships.

It may be directed toward specific individuals - often those perceived as less powerful, less confrontational, or less likely to escalate.

At the same time, it may be entirely absent in interactions with senior leaders or strong authority figures.

This selective application creates confusion:

- Colleagues may say, “I’ve never seen that.”
- Leaders may struggle to reconcile reports with their own experience.
- Targets may question their interpretation of events.

Because the behaviour is controlled and strategic, it rarely appears chaotic or openly aggressive.

This makes it difficult to categorise early - and easier to normalise.

Selectivity is not incidental.

It is part of how the pattern sustains itself.

5. The “Doors” Mechanism

The Red Liner Model explains this dynamic using a simple principle:

Behaviour seeks available routes.

Imagine each behavioural tactic as a door.



If all doors are open, the person can move freely between tactics.



If only some doors are closed, the behaviour continues and simply adapts by using the remaining ones.

Closing only one or two behavioural routes does not stop the pattern.

It redirects it.

This is why early boundary-setting can feel ineffective.

Only when the relevant routes are recognised and addressed consistently does the pattern begin to narrow.



Over time, behavioural options reduce.
Volatility decreases.
Stability increases.
The shift is gradual - but reliable.

6. Why Traditional Interventions Fall Short

Policies define standards.
Training builds communication skills.
Coaching supports individuals.
These are necessary.

But they are not designed to interrupt adaptive behavioural patterns.

Policies activate after thresholds are crossed.
Training improves expression but does not address intensification under challenge.
Coaching helps insight but may not alter relational dynamics across teams.
If responses vary from one interaction to the next, the higher pattern remains intact.

Consistency, not intensity, disrupts it.

7. The Organisational Consequences

When adaptive boundary-testing patterns remain unaddressed, organisations often experience:

- Repeated interpersonal escalations
- HR involvement late in the cycle
- Leadership time consumed by the same conflicts
- Reduced psychological safety within teams
- Flat or inconsistent engagement trends

- Turnover attributed to “fit” or “management style”

Engagement does not collapse suddenly.
It erodes through accumulated friction.

Without recognising the pattern, organisations continue to treat symptoms.

8. The Boundary-Led Response Method

The Boundary-Led Response Method builds capability in three areas:

1. Early Recognition

Leaders and teams learn to identify boundary-testing behaviour quickly - before escalation occurs.

2. Proportional Response

Responses are measured and consistent, rather than reactive or avoidant.

3. Structural Consistency

When tactics shift, the response remains aligned.
Escalation is recognised as a transition phase, not as failure.

This approach does not rely on personality labelling.
It does not escalate prematurely.
It does not moralise behaviour.

It focuses on narrowing behavioural options over time through steady, consistent action.

9. What Changes Over Time

When the pattern is recognised and addressed consistently:

- Recurring escalations reduce
- Leadership mediation time decreases
- Boundaries become clearer
- Teams stabilise
- Engagement trends become more consistent

The aim is not to eliminate conflict.
It is to prevent avoidable escalation and the slow erosion of trust.

10. Applying the Model

The Red Liner Model can be introduced through:

- Executive briefings
- Leadership workshops
- HR alignment sessions
- Pilot programmes within specific teams

The goal is shared language, consistent recognition, and aligned responses.

When applied consistently, the model reduces recurrence rather than managing symptoms.

Conclusion

Some workplace tensions persist not because organisations fail to act, but because the behaviour adapts when challenged.

Until the full pattern is recognised, interventions remain partial.

The Red-Liner Model provides a structural explanation for why escalation persists - and a practical method for interrupting it.

If engagement has stalled, if tensions repeat, or if leadership time is being consumed by recurring conflict, the next step is not more intensity.

It is clarity and consistency.