Heated differences preventing productive conversations?
Time for a de-escalation triage!

Think of a time you've been in a meeting that is going downhill, fast. Maybe you've become embroiled in a conversation where differences are causing things to spin out of control. Maybe you're just along for the ride but the conversation is unfolding right in front of you.

Whether you're an onlooker, a participant, or a facilitator, you may find yourself wishing that people would just resolve their differences, take them offline, or simply move onto another topic. If this dysfunctional conversation is getting in the way of accomplishing anything useful, you feel that something must be done by some*one* to take back control of the conversation.

Without some kind of intervention, the meeting will devolve and the conversation will continue to escalate. Someone should take action, but when, who, and how?

Try this model to triage the situation and determine how best to proceed:

When?	Who?
Is the situation taking on one or more of these incendiary characteristics? • The thread of the original conversation has been lost • Emotions and tensions are running high • People are talking over each other • The conversation is going in circles • Attacks are becoming increasingly personal • Non-escalating participants may have checked out • Bystanders are being held hostage • Disagreements can't be reasonably solved in the moment • Established norms are being trampled • The protagonists don't seem to have the will or desire to stop arguing	**Do I personally have the authority or agency/credibility to *effectively* <u>initiate</u> and <u>facilitate</u> the de-escalation?** Depending on your role in the meeting, you may need a different approach: **As a meeting leader or facilitator** • You already have a formal designation to proceed and pause/diverge from the agenda. • However, if you are more centrally involved in the escalation, would you benefit from a co-facilitator or delegating to another member of the group? **As a meeting participant** • Will the meeting leader defer to your facilitation? You may only be able to speak-up and initiate, but go no further. • Do you have the trust/respect of the group? Especially if the leader is centrally involved in the dispute, you may need to follow-through with facilitation as well.

Assessing the risks:

With any tense or awkward situation, deciding whether to intervene comes down to considering the risks of taking action vs. the risks of ignoring the problem, hoping it will go away on its own.

Most times, you'll have to make a decision in the moment without time for careful deliberation. Ask yourself these questions when determining whether to intervene:

1. What's the risk of intervening? *(What's the worst that could happen if I do?)*

   - Will I be seen as overstepping?
   - Will I my risk my credibility?
   - Will this jeopardize my career?
   - Will I cause anyone harm?
   - Will I throw the meeting even more off-track?

2. What's the risk of <u>not</u> intervening? *(What's the harm if I let this continue?)*

   - Will I increase the likelihood that the meeting will be completely derailed?
   - Will other people continue to tune out?
   - Will I be seen as a "co-conspirator?"
   - Will people trust me as a facilitator if I let it go?
   - Will people take their shared principles seriously in the future?
   - Will I be asked to facilitate this group again?

How to intervene:

Assuming you've decided that you must and can jump in, here are some approaches that may work. Please note that the best approach to use will depend on your role, the relationships of participants to you and each other, and contextual factors.

How?

Regardless of your role in the meeting, you need to first initiate a break in the conversation and explain why.

Step 1: Initiate, *which can take different forms, depending on your role and the meeting dynamics*

- Note what you're observing, using neutral language
- Summarize what you see the disagreement to be, pause and ask for validation
- Call a quick break and take protagonists aside, or call a time out and pause in silence
- Suggest that everyone take a quick stretch break to breathe and relax

Step 2: Facilitate, *which can also look different, depending on your role…*

1. <u>State your concern</u> and explain why you were concerned enough to interrupt the pattern - e.g.:
   - "We still have a lot to get through"
   - "We can't solve this difference right now"
   - "We need more data/input before we resume this conversation"
   - "Other participants seem to have checked out"

2. Based on any responses or reactions, make a judgement call on whether to <u>divert</u> or <u>resume</u>:
   - <u>Divert</u>: Make a clear suggestion - e.g.:
     - "Let's park this for now and continue the conversation later"
     - "Let's make sure to capture the differences in our notes"
     - "Let's ask each person what additional information they need to continue the conversation later and who needs to be there"
   - <u>Resume</u>: Recap where the group was *before* the conversation went sideways, re-centering on substance over emotion, and resume the conversation with a constructive question for other participants

---

Note: Sometimes you have to go it alone and sometimes you can get assistance from a colleague, senior leader, ally, or the official facilitator (if it's not you). If you want to enlist someone else's support in an in-person meeting, you might take a quick break for a quiet huddle before proceeding. If it's a virtual meeting, try sending an IM, text, or private chat as things are unfolding, making sure that neither of you is sharing your screen.