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## WIFU\_compact\_19: Conflicts, or Nine Steps to the Precipice

Conflicts have one outstanding characteristic: they develop their own dynamic which can be controlled less and less as the escalation progresses. If a conflict cannot be constrained at an early stage, it becomes even more important to understand these dynamics and recognise the stage that the conflict has reached..

### Do these frictions not just sort themselves out?

You don't have to make a mountain out of every molehill, that is true. Yet, to be able to differentiate between a verbal argument and a conflict shareholders must acquire a certain competence in handling conflict. Some may be quarrelsome, others more balanced – but everyone should have a minimum level of professionalism in addressing the situation. The Witten Model of Family Strategy Development lists this as a separate subject. Business families often report that the family is well aware of imminent conflict, but this rather unpleasant topic is often pushed aside.

### Are conflicts as individual as each family?

Indeed, and this individuality results from the particular conflict situation, family situation and the people involved. However, beneath the surface, they all show the same pattern at work. WIFU works with the nine-step model developed by conflict researcher Friedrich Glasl. The nine steps are arranged in three phases of three steps: in the first three steps, it is still possible for the family to find a solution itself. The next three steps are more and more concerned with an either-or situation: winning or losing. In the last three steps, all those involved will usually be harmed: there can only be losers.

**STEP 1:** Opinions clash; no consensus or compromise can be found.  
The fronts harden.

**STEP 2:** Each party is determined to convince the other side; they try to exercise force; disputes occur and, now, an either-or situation emerges.

**STEP 3:** Pressure increases and sympathy with the other side declines. Communication worsens, ending conversations.

**STEP 4:** The substantive conflict results in a conflict of relationships. Members attempt to form coalitions and discredit the reputation of the other side. The struggle to win commences.

**STEP 5:** Each party slanders the other side, supposing they damage that side's credibility. Mutual trust is lost.

**STEP 6:** Each party to the conflict wants to control the situation; they seek to demonstrate their power and start to issue threats.

**STEP 7:** The desire grows to harm the other party, at one's own expense if necessary, as long as the damage to them is greater.

**STEP 8:** The scope of what is understood to be the "other side" becomes broader, supporters of the other side are to be harmed as well.

**STEP 9:** Each party accepts its own destruction as the price for the destruction of the other party.

The Nine-Step Model (by Friedrich Glasl)



### Who is mad enough to get carried away by a conflict like that?

Extreme forms of dispute, fortunately, occur only rarely. However, Steps 1 to 6 can already cause considerable damage. The fatal element of this kind of conflict escalation is that more and more irrationality becomes involved. Conflicts do build through inherent dynamics, through the tunnel vision of participants and the situation quickly loses any rational guidance. It is about feelings, ego and status, and quickly becomes “about the principle”. Camps emerge of “them” and “us”. The willingness and ability to see the situation through from the perspective of the opposite side vanishes; only one’s own view – or that of one’s own group – is considered true. If others cannot see that, they must be stupid – or they are pretending to be so, meaning that they have ill intentions

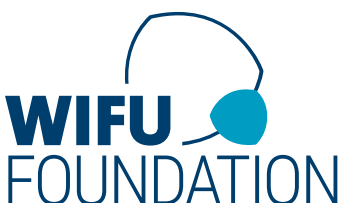
### What are the warning signs?

A conflict quickly affects all forms of social interaction: people no longer open the door for each other or send birthday greetings to each other’s children. Like a forest fire, the conflict jumps from one social situation to another. The psychologist and relationship therapist John Gottman identified four characteristics whose appearance in social interactions clearly indicate an increasing disruption of the relationship: blunt criticism, blame and accusations | defensiveness and justification while denying one’s own part in the conflict, counter-criticism | contempt: a lack of respect for the other party in which sarcasm and cynicism are central and the intensity of the conflict may even decline (although this is not positive but simply because the parties have stopped caring and no longer talk to each other) | stonewalling: physical avoidance, silence and ignoring the other party to the extent that they may as well be talking to a wall.

### Can conflicts be passed down through generations?

Sadly, they can, and the world literature gives many examples of this. Generations do not start from zero; they inherit the conflicts or even articulated hostilities of the family or family branch. These become part of the collective memory of the business family. For subsequent generations, the processing of a conflict is especially difficult as even their grandparents or great-grandparents may not recollect the original reasons for falling out. They only know that they can never trust the other branch ... Regaining control over a conflict and solving it is extremely important for this reason, to prevent the passing on of conflict to other generations. A heritage poisoned in this way is more burdensome than debt.

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#### Reference:

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