

## Issue Resolution Ladder

**Background:** One of the greatest difficulties in a business venture with other organizations is determining when and how to resolve issues. Sounds strange, but our court systems are choked with issues resulting from contract disputes. Particularly when the partners disagree that there is a problem, or do not see the problem in the same way.

Through the 1990's construction projects racked up, often, hundreds of contractual issues that did little but delay completion of public projects and make lawyers rich while the general public suffered enormous cost overruns. In the late 1980's the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Mobile District, created a concept called Partnering as a strategy to reduce or avoid virtually all issues that normally went to litigation. Central to the Partnering process they developed the Issue Resolution Ladder (aka. Issue Escalation Ladder).

The Issue Resolution Ladder is a unique document that represents a structured process that facilitates the quick resolution of many issues during the course of the project with the aim of avoiding all litigation. Organizations involved in "Partnering" have been significantly successful in issue avoidance and when they approach the resolution process from two perspectives. First, proactively, they agree that the likelihood for experiencing real issues exists and they set about to prepare a process for identifying and resolving these issues at the lowest level possible in the shortest amount of time. This process focuses the actions of field, supervisory, managerial and executive level personnel to a set of operational protocols.

Issue Resolution Ladder		
Org "A"	Org "B"	Escalation Protocol
Executive	Executive	
Sr Manager	Sr Manager	
Lower Mgmt	Lower Mgmt	72 hrs
Supervisory	Supervisory	48 hrs
Subordinate	Subordinate	12 hrs

**Rules for Escalation:** The process of elevating an issue from a lower level progressively through to a higher level for resolution is called Escalation. A leadership team, made up of project participants from all organizations involved in the project, develops the goals of the project and the rules for escalation specific for each level as part of the initial Partnering Team Meeting. Following are several general guidelines most often used for rules:

1. Establish protocols for escalation:

**Timing:** From the time that an issue is identified, at whatever level it appears, the persons at that level have a specific period of time in which to resolve the issue. The timing is selected to ensure the issue does not impact or delay the goals. This quick action ensures that issues cannot stagnate or grow. However, the period between escalations usually increases as the level increases. If the issue is not resolved within that period, together, they must mutually and simultaneously escalate it to the next level.

**Authority:** Identify the level of authority for individuals at each level. This is a threshold for escalation. Thresholds may vary between organizations but they must be proactively and explicitly set. This is a matter of delegation by the

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chain of authority. When an issue reaches a threshold level, by either side, it requires escalation by all parties involved.

**Process:** The team must identify the process for escalation. For example: the process may require the participants to identify the issue from their perspective, concerns, points of agreement, unresolved issues and recommendations. It could require that all parties follow this format, in writing, sharing it with each other prior to the escalation meeting (video or phone conference call).

2. Inaction is unacceptable. The purpose for the Issue Resolution Ladder and, ultimately, Partnering is to "avoid" litigation by acting to solve the issue at the lowest possible level. Not taking action to resolve the issue is, therefore, not acceptable.
3. Issues will be escalated as a team from the level at which it is discovered, not singularly through one organization. Escalation is done by level. No jumping or bypassing levels. Subordinates that identify the issue will attempt to correct it with their counterpart in the partners organization. If they are unable to resolve it within the timing protocols they escalate, preferably, together to the next level.
4. Invite other parties involved in the issue to participate in the problem solving and escalation process.
5. The ladder is designed to identify specific individuals on each level of the ladder. It is tailored to the structure of the team.
6. When an issue is resolved, promptly notify all participants, at all effected levels, of the outcomes.
7. When a person is uncomfortable making a necessary decision, they are to elevate it

to the next level without hesitation while keeping their team members appropriately informed.

### Application:

Any time a facilitator works with a long-term group made up of people from different departments or organizations it is appropriate for them to discuss, create and use an issue resolution process.

The results can be even more impressive when this approach is combined with an effective problem solving process. Both of these processes are usually assumed to exist, while in reality they are often dysfunctional. This process-centric approach helps to clarify levels of delegated authority while legitimize elevating problems as a team effort.

### Resources:

Naval Facilities Engineering Command Construction Partnering Handbook: [https://portal.navfac.navy.mil/pls/ptl/docs/PAGE/NAVFAC/NAVFAC\\_WW\\_PP/NAVFAC\\_NAVFACLANT\\_PP/LANT\\_BL/LANT\\_CI/LANT\\_CI5/NAVFAC%2BPARTNERING%2BPOLICY.PDF](https://portal.navfac.navy.mil/pls/ptl/docs/PAGE/NAVFAC/NAVFAC_WW_PP/NAVFAC_NAVFACLANT_PP/LANT_BL/LANT_CI/LANT_CI5/NAVFAC%2BPARTNERING%2BPOLICY.PDF)

Maryland Field Guide to Partnering: <http://mdqi.org/documents/SHA%20FieldGuide%20Partnering.pdf>

AASHTO Partnering Hdbk 2005 (pg B-7): [http://quality.transportation.org/sites/quality/docs/AASHTO\\_Partnering\\_Handbook.pdf](http://quality.transportation.org/sites/quality/docs/AASHTO_Partnering_Handbook.pdf)

CalTrans Partnering Field Guide (Chapter 6, pgs 23–24 & Appendix F; Pg 37): [http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/construc/Partnering\\_Fieldguide.pdf](http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/construc/Partnering_Fieldguide.pdf)

State of Arizona DOT: Issue Resolution Ladder Report Form: [http://www.dot.state.az.us/Highways/ConstGrp/const\\_manual/Forms/Chapt\\_1/ResolutionLadder.pdf](http://www.dot.state.az.us/Highways/ConstGrp/const_manual/Forms/Chapt_1/ResolutionLadder.pdf)