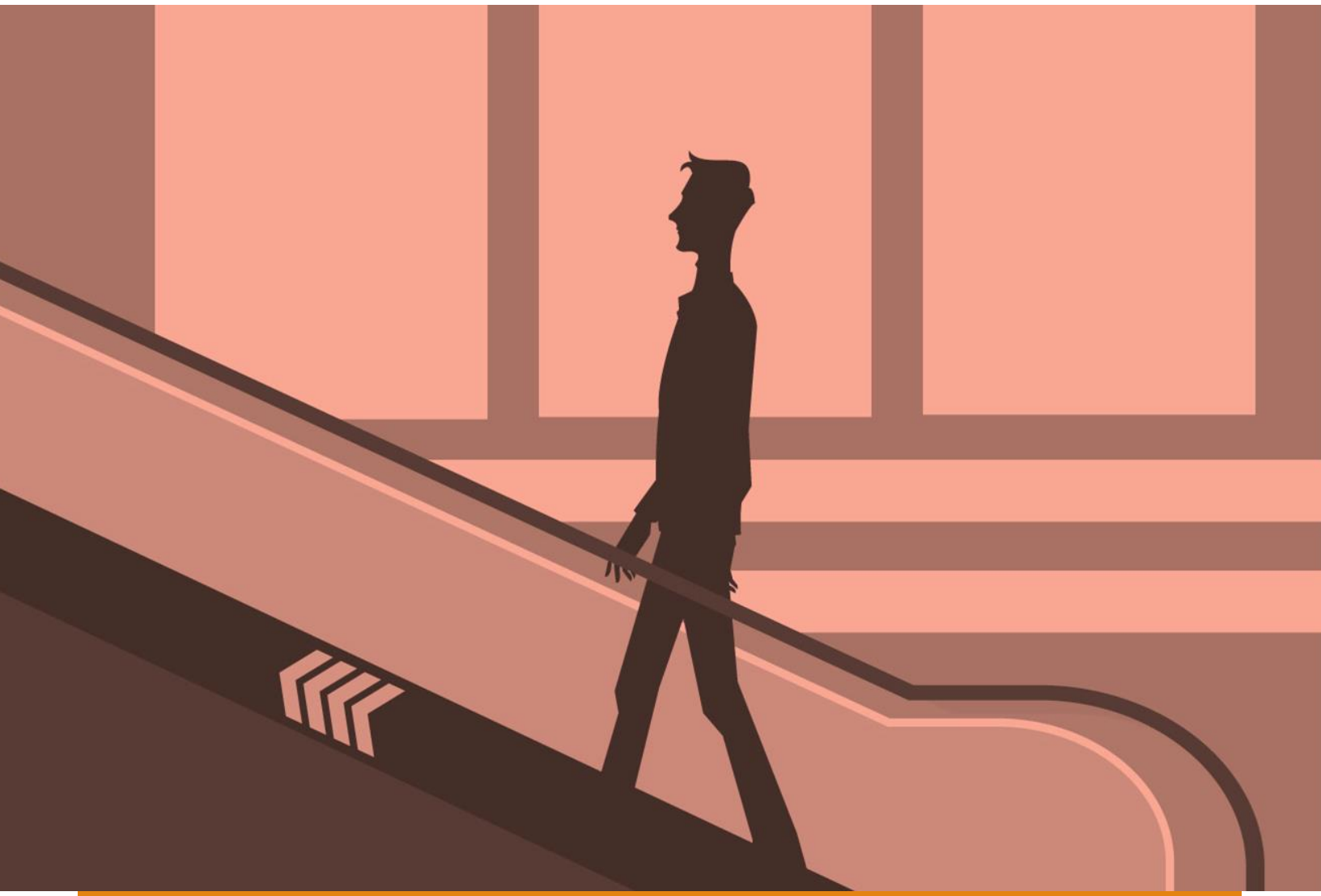
# MASTERING ESCALATION MANAGEMENT



# MASTERING ESCALATION MANAGEMENT

**Between an uncontrolled escalation and passivity, there is a demanding road of responsibility that we must follow.**

**-Dominique de Villepin**

Teams use the term escalation to define a couple of different processes. Escalation can define how an IT engineer escalates an issue to receive assistance from a colleague. Escalation can also describe how an automated alert escalates through a digital on-call group to apprise the correct on-call individual. Importantly, each must be managed responsibly to ensure teams avoid undue escalations while maintaining proper IT management.

The goal of this whitepaper is to delve into both definitions and highlight the manner in which IT can improve each.

## CHALLENGE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The objectives of IT incident management[1] focus on maintaining stability. When service is disrupted or fails to deliver, IT teams must return these processes to proper service as quickly as possible. Indeed, any condition such as inability to access software to downed servers has the potential to result in a service degradation needs to trigger a response that prevents the actual disruption from occurring.

However, at times the skills of the level 1 support is exceeded by the demands of the request. According to ITIL, escalations should occur when the skill set of the team initially assigned the task is exceeded.[2] But this definition can quickly become slippery. How does a team know when to escalate an issue? Effective communication can help but knowing when an IT is out of their depths is challenging.

Ideally, IT teams should prevent un-needed escalations by having the tools and training they need to be successful. Managers should coach team members to take ownership of difficult situations and avoid passing the buck.[3] This means that team members have the ability to communicate with colleagues to arrive at the answer in a difficult situation.

## ESCALATION FOR BETTER COMMUNICATION

While effective communication can be challenging in the best of circumstances, it can be especially trying when an internal or external customer is facing an issue. The first goal of the incident management process is to restore a normal service operation as quickly as possible and

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[1] http://www.bmc.com/guides/itil-incident-management.html

[2] http://www.seriosoft.com/blog/escalation-incident-management

[3] http://theoperationsblog.com/2016/04/customer-escalation-management/

to minimize the impact on business operations, thus ensuring that the best possible levels of service quality and availability are maintained.[4] To achieve this end, there are a number of tools that IT engineers should have at their disposal in order to expedite resolution of the issue.

- The first maxim of true incident management is to develop runbooks so that teams can manage incidents as independently as possible. Through information-sharing and judgment skill development, escalations are less likely to occur.[5] Effective incident management relies on having access to information on similar incidents which happened in the past. With this access, IT support can streamline resolution and reduce the risk of implementing a new plan.

  With runbooks, engineers are clear on what steps need to be taken to effectively handle incident and what precautions to take in responding to the situation

- The second maxim of true incident management actually suggests a tool to *not* use. This rule is to never use email to effectively escalate and manage an event. Escalation can easily generate an overwhelming number of emails notifications [6] which can effectively derail the incident management process.

  According to *Harvard Business Review*[7]*:*

  The only way to keep productive energy flowing through this [email] network is for everyone to continually check, send, and reply to the multitude of messages flowing past—all in an attempt to drive tasks, in an ad hoc manner, toward completion.

  Email becomes the platform where all tasks get dumped – including important IT incidents whose speedy resolution is key to keeping customers happy and the business running. As such, teams should look to communicate with their colleagues on a separate messaging application that has immediacy as well as priority settings.

- The third component of effective escalation management is the use of a critical messaging application with priority messaging. Engineers need to have the ability to instantaneously communicate with one another when attempting to resolve issues. Critical messaging applications should come with alerts so that individuals can ensure messages are recognized when they arrive and encourage a quick response.

  Critical messaging applications can better ensure communications if the application comes with a method for creating persistent alerts. That is, teams want alerts that will continue to notify individuals until the alert is answered. Some technologies like OnPage

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[4] http://www.cisjournal.org/journalofcomputing/archive/vol5no8/vol5no8_8.pdf

[5] https://www.cebglobal.com/blogs/reducing-and-managing-escalations/

[6] https://codebeamer.com/cb/wiki/32333

[7] https://hbr.org/2016/02/a-modest-proposal-eliminate-email

continue to notify individuals for up to 8 hours until the recipient responds to the alert. OnPage also has to send messages based on the priority of the alert. This helps filter out the high priority alerts from the low priority alerts.

- By **using attachments**, IT teams can amplify explanations through documents or screenshots. Often these items are much better at explaining an issue than a much longer text.

## CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL ESCALATION

Many IT teams define **digital escalation** as raising the priority of an issue by alerting the whole on-call group to an incident. Unfortunately, this practice often works to create alert overload. Sending alerts to everyone all the time can result in alerts being treated as noise[8]. If the whole team is being alerted then the individual engineer is left to believe that another team member will respond to the alert. Hence, alerting the whole team fosters a culture of ignoring alerts or as one Google engineer chimed, "foo-alerts".[9]

### ALERT ESCALATION BEST PRACTICES

- Best practices for escalating the actual alerts focus on tying alerts to a **digital scheduler**. That is, alerts should be tied to an on-call group schedule so only the engineer on call receives the alert. This sort of design ensures accountability. By only alerting one engineer, the engineer knows that he or she is responsible for fixing the issue.

- Ensure there's an **escalation order** and a defined escalation group to your digital scheduler. This second point is needed to ensure back-up for the escalation. If the first engineer on-call is unavailable or is occupied with another issue, the alert should escalate to the next engineer on-call.

- Establish an **escalation factor** to determine what defines an acceptable response to an alert notification for your team. Are you satisfied of the alert has been read or does the alert need to be read and responded to in order for the escalation to end? Defining this component might seem inconsequential but during an important outage, you don't want to guess about protocols and you want each team member to know their responsibilities.

- **Escalation interval** defines the amount of time to wait for a response before alerting the next engineer on-call. For critical issues, it is important to limit the escalation interval so that teams can minimize downtime and return to an operational stance as quickly as possible.

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[8] https://dzone.com/articles/5-ways-make-your-devops-team

[9] https://docs.google.com/document/d/199PqyG3UsyXlwieHaqbGiWVa8eMWi8zzAn0YfcApr8Q/edit#

## CONCLUSION

As described above, the word escalation clues us in to the need to resolve an important issue. For IT, we need to understand how to effectively communicate and raise the message priority for effective escalations to take place. IT needs to have the tools accessible which makes these escalations possible.

OnPage's incident notification platform provides critical alerting and messaging capabilities to IT teams of all sizes. Try out OnPage for your IT team today and you and your colleagues can master escalation management.

## ABOUT ONPAGE

OnPage is a cloud-based, industry leading smartphone application for high-priority, real enterprise messaging. The OnPage application addresses the need for critical messaging and incident response management for time-sensitive messages.

OnPage takes mobile communications to the next level with the latest all-in-one app features. The web-based on-call scheduling tool enables enterprise users to plan ahead and route prioritized messages to the right person, at the right time, every time.

Thousands of field engineers, IT and DevOps teams depend on OnPage for rock solid reliability every day.

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT OUR WEBSITE OR CALL: ONPAGE.COM/CONTACT-US 781-916-0040


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