

What does team conflict look like, what is the conflict that is easy to miss, and what can you do about it

Conflict is an inevitable part of any workplace. When talented, passionate people are combined, differences will arise. Those differences could be working styles, communication preferences, priorities, or personal values. Conflict, however, isn't something to fear. Managed well and in a timely manner, it can lead to growth, deeper understanding, and innovation. It can even strengthen and improve relationships. But if ignored or mishandled, it can hinder progress, erode trust within a team, and hurt your business.

But spotting team conflict isn't always straightforward. It's not always a heated argument in a meeting or a fiery email exchange, or I like to call these flame mails. Sometimes, conflict can be quieter, subtler, and even passive. I call this artificial harmony, and this type of conflict is far easier to overlook

What is conflict in teams?

When I've asked for examples of conflict in Leadership Development cohorts, people immediately jump to stories about loud disagreements or moments of tension. These are examples of active conflict, where the friction is overt and visibly played out. But conflict isn't always so obvious—it can also be passive.

Passive conflict might manifest as disengagement in meetings, a reluctance to collaborate, or even subtle body language cues like crossed arms, averted eye contact, or sighs of frustration. This quiet tension can exist for weeks or months without being openly addressed. But just because it's quieter doesn't mean it's not doing damage.

Spotting conflict—especially the passive kind requires tuned-in leadership. Here are some common signs:

The tell-tale signs

- **Drop in collaboration:** team members are hesitant to discuss ideas or work together. A lack of collaboration can signal underlying tension.
- **Uneven participation:** Individuals suddenly become quiet in meetings or withdraw from team activities, changing their usual behaviour.
- **Resurfacing mistakes or blame games:** Mistakes are not being addressed constructively. Recurring errors lead to blame rather than reflection, which might indicate deeper issues.
- **Politeness masking frustration:** Teams sometimes overcompensate with forced politeness, seemingly avoiding genuine discussions or feedback.

- **Cliques form:** social dynamics shift, and smaller groups start forming, which might hint at internal division.
- **High turnover or absenteeism:** retention becomes challenging, or sick days increase, sometimes correlated with unresolved conflicts.

Have you noticed any of these in your own team?

Conflict doesn't arise from a vacuum. It stems from a team's mismatched expectations, misunderstandings, or structural issues. Some common causes include:

- **Misaligned goals:** Different priorities or unclear objectives can push team members in opposing directions.
- **Personality differences:** Diverse work styles, communication preferences, or even clashing egos can cause friction.
- **Unclear roles and responsibilities:** Undefined ownership can lead to duplicated efforts, finger-pointing, or slack.
- **Lack of communication:** Miscommunication or lack of communication often escalates minor misunderstandings into full-blown issues.
- **Pressure and stress:** High workloads or tight deadlines can amplify tensions, reducing patience and empathy within the team.
- Each team is unique and has its dynamics. However, understanding the root cause of a conflict is crucial for resolving it effectively.

What can you do about it?

So, how can you resolve team conflicts as a leader or team member? While every situation requires its approach, some foundational principles and steps can help:

1. Create a safe space for open dialogue

Be curious, create a safe space, invite your team members, and listen to their concerns or frustrations. Schedule regular team check-ins or one-on-one discussions.

2. Act quickly but thoughtfully

Don't ignore the early signs of conflict. Passive conflicts can escalate into open disputes if left unattended. However, avoid reactive, emotion-fuelled responses—take the time to gather facts and assess the situation.

3. Understand individual perspectives

Effective conflict resolution begins with empathy. Listen deeply. What's driving the frustration? Is it fear, unmet expectations, or something external to the workplace? Understanding the "why" behind a conflict is often half the battle.

4. Extract the facts from the feelings and stories

Without discounting how people feel about the situation, help the team identify the facts and invite them to participate in the solutions.

4. Clarify roles and expectations

Address any ambiguity in roles or tasks. Clear frameworks eliminate guesswork, reduce misunderstandings, and rebuild trust within teams. A great framework I use is the RACI (responsible, accountable, consult and inform). It's a great framework for identifying where accountability sits and who needs to be communicated to.

5. Find common goals

One of the fastest ways to rebuild bridges after a conflict is to refocus the team on shared goals. When team members rally around a common purpose and become part of the solution, it's easier to put aside differences.

6. Invest in team-building activities

Building trust doesn't happen overnight. Workshops or offsite team-building activities can help remind everyone of their purpose, shared mission and customer. It will help reinforce positive relationships. These things don't have to be expensive. I have found that walking around the local park is a much less adversarial way of tackling team problems than in the office.

7. Develop conflict resolution skills

Encourage active listening, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving techniques within the team. Offering training and resources shows that you prioritise the health of the team dynamic.

8. Finally, model the way

Conflict, no matter how small, always needs leaders to lead by example. Show empathy, fairness, and transparency in how you handle disputes. Resolving conflict in a constructive way sets a precedent for the entire team.

Of course, the elephant in the room this blog doesn't call out is whether the conflict or artificial harmony is a result of your leadership style. I break this topic down in my next blog.

Of course, if there is anything **Odel Solutions** can do to help you navigate team conflict, please let us know.