

Workplace conflict is one of the most common and most costly forms of organizational dysfunction. Left unaddressed, it erodes trust, reduces performance, drives away talent, and consumes leadership time. Addressed well, it becomes the mechanism through which teams grow, communication improves, and organizations become more resilient.

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## WHY WORKPLACE CONFLICT IS DIFFERENT

Unlike personal conflict, workplace conflict happens inside a structure — with power dynamics, institutional interests, performance consequences, and ongoing interdependence. The people in conflict have to keep working together. That changes everything about how the conflict must be managed.

## THE FIVE MOST COMMON SOURCES

### Role ambiguity

When people are unclear about who is responsible for what, conflict fills the gap. Clarity about roles and decision rights prevents a significant proportion of workplace disputes.

### Communication failure

Most workplace conflict is not about the stated issue — it is about how something was communicated, or not communicated. Tone, timing, and transparency matter more than most leaders realize.

### Competing priorities

When team members are rewarded for different things, conflict is structural rather than personal. Alignment on priorities reduces interpersonal friction dramatically.

### Power and recognition

Feeling overlooked, undervalued, or bypassed generates conflict that is hard to address directly because the real issue is rarely named.

### Change and uncertainty

Organizations in transition produce conflict not because people are difficult but because uncertainty is genuinely stressful. Communication and inclusion during change prevents much of the conflict it would otherwise generate.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGERS

When conflict arises in your team, work through these four steps before deciding how to intervene:

### 1. Understand before acting

Speak with each party separately before bringing them together. Listen for interests, not just positions. Understand what each person actually needs before deciding what to do.

## 2. Name the conflict clearly

Vague acknowledgment of 'some tension' is less useful than a clear, honest naming of what is happening. People engage better with specificity than with euphemism.

## 3. Create the right conditions

Choose the right moment, the right setting, and the right level of structure for the conversation. High-emotion conflicts need more structure, not less.

## 4. Follow up

A single conversation rarely resolves workplace conflict. Check in. Confirm that what was agreed is being implemented. Make the follow-up visible — it signals that the conversation mattered.

## WHEN TO ESCALATE

Not all workplace conflict should be handled by the immediate manager. Escalate when: the conflict involves a power differential that makes direct conversation unsafe; when previous attempts have failed; when the conflict has become structural; or when the parties have lost the ability to be in the same room productively.

*For organizational conflict support and team coaching, contact [diazprin@conflictmanagementspace.com](mailto:diazprin@conflictmanagementspace.com)*