

Most organizational conflict is not about the people involved. It is about the dynamics between them — the patterns of power, communication, culture, and structure that create the conditions in which conflict becomes inevitable. This handout introduces the concept of organizational dynamics and what it means in practice.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS MEANS

Organizational dynamics refers to the patterns of relationship, communication, power, and culture that shape how people interact within institutions. These are not personality problems — they are systemic patterns. The same conflict that appears to be between two difficult people is often a predictable product of unclear roles, misaligned incentives, or a culture that systematically avoids honest conversation.

Understanding organizational dynamics means looking beneath the presenting conflict to the structural and relational conditions that produce it: who holds power, how decisions are made, what is permitted to be said, and what remains systematically unspoken.

WHY IT DIFFERS FROM ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT	ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS
An event — visible, acute, disruptive	A pattern — often invisible, chronic, structural
Between specific individuals or groups	Embedded in roles, culture, and systems
Addressed through mediation or intervention	Addressed through cultural and structural change
Resolves when the dispute is settled	Resolves when the conditions that generate conflict shift

THREE LEVELS OF ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

Leadership Dynamics

How leaders communicate, make decisions, exercise authority, and manage disagreement shapes the conflict culture of an entire organization. Leaders set the tone — not through policy but through behavior.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How decisions are made and who is included
- How disagreement is handled at the top
- Whether leaders model the communication they expect from others
- The relationship between formal authority and informal influence

Team Dynamics

Teams in conflict are rarely fighting about what they appear to be fighting about. Beneath the surface dispute are patterns of trust, recognition, fairness, and belonging that determine how teams function under pressure.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Trust levels and how they were built or broken
 - Who speaks, who is heard, and who stays silent
 - How workload, recognition, and credit are distributed
 - The unwritten rules about what can and cannot be said
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Institutional Culture

Organizational culture is the sum of how conflict is habitually handled — what is named, what is avoided, what is rewarded, and what is punished. A culture that punishes honesty produces silence.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- What behaviors are rewarded and what are tolerated
 - How the organization responds to people who raise problems
 - Whether feedback flows upward as well as downward
 - The gap between stated values and actual practice
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HOW WE WORK WITH ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

Effective work with organizational dynamics begins with diagnosis — understanding the patterns before intervening in them. This means conversations with people at multiple levels, attention to what is said and what is avoided, and a clear-eyed assessment of the structural conditions that generate the presenting conflict.

Intervention then works at the level of the dynamic, not just the dispute — building the relational and structural conditions that allow organizations to handle conflict before it becomes crisis.

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