

## **Conflict Navigation Framework: Turning Disagreement into Progress**

The Conflict Navigation Framework transforms meeting disagreements from uncomfortable tensions into valuable opportunities for innovation and alignment. This structured approach helps leaders recognize different types of conflict, prepare effectively, intervene productively in the moment, and learn from conflict experiences. By mastering these conflict navigation skills, leaders can create environments where diverse perspectives are expressed openly and integrated into superior decisions, rather than suppressed or escalated into damaging exchanges.

### **Author**

This tool was developed by Michelle Watson-Grant.

### **Goal**

This tool helps leaders identify emerging conflicts early, facilitate constructive dialogue around differences, transform positional arguments into interest-based problem-solving, and build team capacity for healthy disagreement—ultimately creating a culture where conflict serves as a catalyst for better thinking and stronger commitment to decisions.

### **Advice**

For maximum effectiveness when using this framework:

1. **Practice the framework** in lower-stakes situations before applying it to high-tension conflicts
2. **Reflect on your own conflict tendencies** and how they might influence your facilitation approach
3. **Build team awareness** of different conflict types and their potential value
4. **Establish conflict norms proactively** rather than waiting for tensions to emerge
5. **Debrief conflict navigation experiences** to build team capacity for productive disagreement
6. **Model constructive responses to opposing viewpoints** in both your facilitation and contributions



### Types of Conflict





### Conflict Red Flags

- ▶ **Circular arguments:** Discussions that repeatedly cover the same points without progress, indicating underlying tensions or unstated concerns that need addressing
- ▶ **Rising emotional intensity:** Escalating tone, volume, or emotional language that signals the conversation has moved beyond rational discussion into personal territory
- ▶ **Non-verbal tension signs:** Body language shifts such as crossed arms, reduced eye contact, tight facial expressions, or physical distancing that reveal discomfort before verbal conflict emerges
- ▶ **Polarized positions:** Team members adopting extreme "either/or" stances with no apparent middle ground, showing a breakdown in collaborative problem-solving
- ▶ **Withdrawal/disengagement:** Participants who become silent, physically distance themselves, or mentally check out, indicating they feel unheard or have given up on productive resolution.
- ▶ **Personal comments vs. issue focus:** Shift from discussing ideas and solutions to making statements about individuals' character, intentions, or competence, signaling deteriorating respect
- ▶ **Formation of opposing coalitions:** Team members aligning into distinct "sides" through verbal support, non-verbal cues, or physical positioning, revealing deeper team divisions

## **Before The Meeting**

### **Leader Mindset**

A key aspect of navigating conflict is your own mindset as a leader. Consider the following tips:

#### **View conflict as potentially valuable**

Recognize that productive disagreement often leads to better decisions, greater innovation, and stronger commitment when handled effectively.

#### **Stay curious rather than judgmental**

Approach differences with genuine interest in understanding various perspectives rather than evaluating them as right or wrong prematurely.

#### **Focus on interests behind positions**

Look beyond stated demands to identify underlying needs, concerns, and motivations that, once understood, often reveal compatible interests.

#### **Maintain neutrality while facilitating**

Resist taking sides even when you have a preference, focusing instead on fair process that respects all perspectives.

#### **Model calm and constructive engagement**

Demonstrate through your own responses that disagreement can be handled with emotional regulation and respect, setting the tone for the team.

#### **Cultivate a growth mindset**

Recognize that navigating conflict is a skill to be cultivated and practiced over time. Embrace helpful beliefs about your capacity to develop this crucial leadership skill.

## **Before The Meeting**

### **Meeting Design Considerations**

It is vital that leaders design meetings in ways that support wholesome navigation of conflict. Consider these questions as you prepare for your meeting and for potential conflict:

#### **What parameters have you set for clear discussion parameters?**

Establish shared understanding of the topic boundaries, decision-making process, and acceptable interaction norms before engaging in potentially contentious conversations.

#### **What actions have you taken to establish psychological safety upfront?**

Create explicit norms that value diverse perspectives and separate challenging ideas from personal criticism to encourage honest participation.

#### **How do seating/room arrangements foster collegiality and healthy conflict?**

Arrange physical space to minimize power dynamics and opposition (circular rather than opposing sides) and provide adequate personal space during tense discussions.

#### **How will you plan for cool-down breaks if needed?**

Build in opportunities to pause heated discussions before they escalate, allowing for reflection and emotional regulation when tensions rise.

#### **How will you structure processes for decision-making?**

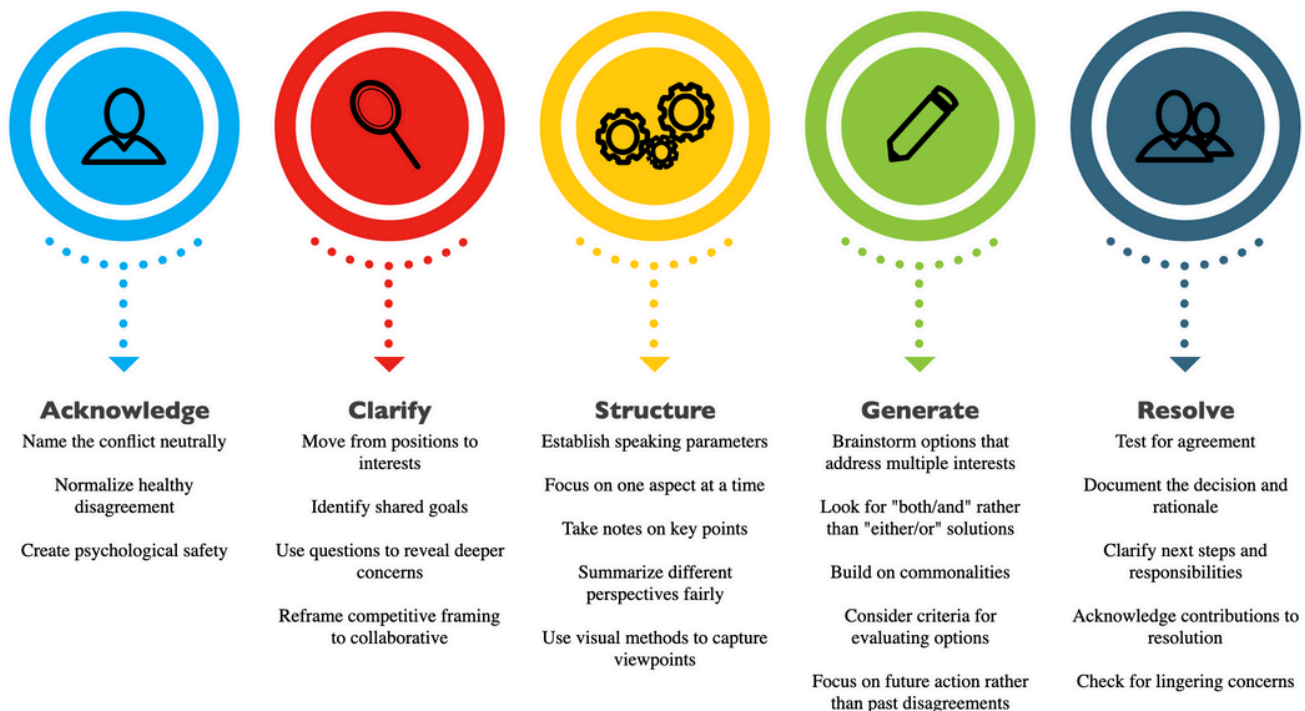
Design clear methods for moving from discussion to decision that ensure all voices are heard and differences are appropriately considered rather than forcing false consensus.

## During The Meeting

When tensions rise and disagreements emerge in professional settings, having a structured approach to conflict resolution can transform potential roadblocks into opportunities for deeper understanding and innovation. The In-the-Moment Conflict Intervention framework provides leaders and team members with a practical, step-by-step process for addressing disagreements as they occur, preventing escalation and fostering collaborative problem-solving.

By acknowledging differences respectfully, exploring underlying interests, structuring productive conversations, generating integrative solutions, and reaching thoughtful resolutions, this approach transforms workplace conflicts from sources of stress into catalysts for better decisions and stronger relationships. Whether you're managing a heated discussion in a meeting, mediating between colleagues with competing priorities, or navigating your own workplace disagreements, these evidence-based techniques offer a clear path toward constructive outcomes that honor diverse perspectives while moving teams forward.

## In-the-Moment Conflict Intervention



## Handling Emotional Escalation

### De-escalation Techniques

- Suggest a brief break: "Let's take 5 minutes to reflect."
- Acknowledge emotions: "I can see this matters deeply to you."
- Refocus on shared goals: "Let's remember what we're trying to accomplish together."
- Shift from verbal to written input temporarily
- Move from abstract to concrete examples

**Example Language:** "I can see there's a lot of passion around this topic. Let's take a 5-minute break to collect our thoughts, and then return to focus on specific solutions."

### When Behavior Crosses Boundaries

- Name the behavior, not the person
- Reference previously agreed norms
- Offer choices for moving forward
- Consider private conversation if pattern continues
- Be willing to postpone discussion if necessary

**Example Language:** "I need to pause us here. We agreed to focus on issues, not personalities. We can either reset this conversation with that in mind, or table this discussion until our next meeting."



## After The Meeting

### Post-Meeting Integration

- Summarize resolution in writing
- Check in with key stakeholders individually
- Monitor implementation of decisions
- Reinforce collaborative behavior
- Use the experience to refine team norms

### Learning from Conflict

- Reflect on what worked in the conflict navigation
- Identify patterns in team disagreements
- Consider process improvements
- Recognize healthy conflict handling
- Build conflict capacity for future discussions

### Reflection Questions:

- What interests or values were at the heart of this disagreement?
- How effectively did we navigate the tension?
- What can we learn from this experience for future discussions?
- How might we prevent unnecessary conflicts while preserving productive differences?
- How might I strengthen my approach to intervening during a team conflict?