



# The Executive Field Guide to Sources of Conflict

A Reflective Guide for Leaders Navigating Tension  
Without Losing Trust or Performance

# How to Use This Guide

This is not a resource to skim once.

It is designed to be used **in moments of tension**, when something feels off with a peer, your executive team, or the organization—but the root cause isn't immediately clear.

As you move through the sections, pause often. Write your responses. Notice where you feel defensive, certain, or uncomfortable. Those reactions are data.

Conflict rarely escalates because leaders lack intelligence or good intent. It escalates because pressure exposes unexamined habits, unclear structures, and unspoken assumptions.

## Section 1: Reframing Conflict at the Executive Level

At the executive level, conflict is not an anomaly. It is a feature of responsibility.

You are making decisions with incomplete information, navigating trade-offs between speed and risk, and leading through constant change. If conflict is absent, it often means something important is being avoided.

### Reflection prompts:

- When conflict shows up for me, what do I instinctively assume it means?
- Do I interpret conflict as a threat to alignment, or as information about the system?
- Where might I be treating conflict as a personal failure rather than a leadership responsibility?

### Consider:

What would change if you stopped asking how do I get out of this conflict and started asking how do I lead through it?

## Section 2: How You Learned to Do Conflict

Every executive brings a conflict history into the room—whether they acknowledge it or not. Most leaders learned conflict not through formal training, but through early modeling. Those patterns resurface under pressure, even decades later.

### Reflection prompts:

- How was conflict modeled for me early in life?
- Was conflict something to win, avoid, manage, or endure?
- Which behaviors do I recognize in myself today that feel inherited rather than chosen?

### Notice:

Which of your conflict reactions feel automatic rather than intentional?

## Section 3: Your Conflict Operating System

Under pressure, leaders default to familiar patterns.

Some push harder.

Some soften their message.

Some withdraw.

Some intellectualize.

None of these are wrong. All of them become limiting when they are unconscious.

### Reflection prompts:

- When tension rises, what is my first move?
- What does this pattern protect me from?
- How might this pattern create friction for others, even if my intent is positive?

### Ask yourself:

How do I adapt my approach when others are less skilled—or simply different—than I am?

## Section 4: Structural Conflict vs. Personal Conflict

Much executive conflict feels personal but is structural at its core.

Unclear decision rights.

Misaligned incentives.

Competing KPIs.

Ambiguous ownership.

When structure is unclear, leaders end up defending territory instead of solving enterprise problems.

### Reflection prompts:

- What conflicts am I currently carrying that might actually be structural?
- Where are decision rights ambiguous on my team?
- What clarity, if created, would immediately reduce tension?

### Pause:

What problem am I trying to solve relationally that actually needs a structural decision?

## Section 5: Liminality and Change as Conflict Accelerators

Executives are often leading while standing in liminal space—the old way has ended, but the new way is not yet clear. Mergers, reorganizations, role changes, shifting strategies, and talent movement all create uncertainty. Uncertainty fuels anxiety. Anxiety fuels conflict.

### Reflection prompts:

- Where am I leading in liminal space right now?
- What feels unfinished, undefined, or unresolved?
- How might others be responding to this uncertainty differently than I am?

### Consider:

What reassurance, clarity, or acknowledgment might matter more right now than answers?

## Section 6: Executive Team Conflict That Goes Underground

Executive teams rarely fail because of open disagreement. They struggle when conflict leaves the room.

Pre-meetings.

Post-meetings.

Side conversations.

Unspoken dissent.

These behaviors are not character flaws. They are signals of low trust or low safety.

### Reflection prompts:

- Where is conflict being managed outside the room instead of inside it?
- What topics feel unsafe to surface with the full team?
- How might I be contributing—intentionally or unintentionally—to that dynamic?

### Ask yourself:

What conversation keeps getting postponed that is actually central to our performance?

## Section 7: One-to-One Conflict Between Executives

Some of the most exhausting conflict happens quietly between two leaders.

Often, one person feels the tension acutely while the other believes everything is fine. This asymmetry creates confusion, resentment, and paralysis.

### Reflection prompts:

- Is there someone I feel “stuck” with?
- Have I assumed they know how this is impacting me?
- What might I not be curious enough about in their experience or constraints?

### Challenge:

Before correcting, defending, or escalating—what would genuine curiosity sound like here?

## Section 8: The CEO's Role in Conflict

Whether explicitly or not, CEOs shape how conflict is handled.

Mixed messages, favoritism (real or perceived), rapid decision changes, or avoidance at the top all cascade through the organization.

### Reflection prompts (for CEOs and executive leaders):

- Where might my operating style be amplifying conflict unintentionally?
- What signals am I sending about whether disagreement is safe?
- Where am I expecting others to do conflict better than I do myself?

### Consider:

What would change if conflict leadership was treated as part of your role, not an interruption to it?

## Section 9: Conflict as a Cultural Act

Executives teach the organization how to do conflict—whether they mean to or not.

### People are watching:

- How you handle disagreement
- Who gets heard
- What happens when tension arises

Culture is shaped in these moments, not in values decks.

### Reflection prompts:

- What does my organization learn from how I handle conflict?
- Where might silence be safer than honesty right now?
- What would healthier conflict unlock for performance and trust?

## Section 10: A Personal Leadership Commitment

Conflict capability is not something you master once. It is something you practice over time.

### Commit to one shift:

- One habit to interrupt
- One conversation to have earlier
- One assumption to test
- One structure to clarify

### Final reflection:

If conflict is inevitable at this level, how do I want to be known for leading through it?

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**“It is irresponsible to lead hundreds of people and not know how to manage conflict.”**

– Tegan Trovato