

U2Ch3. Identifying sources and types of conflict in communication

PAPER 01 — Communicative Skills

Unit 2 · Interpersonal Communication

Chapter 3 · Identifying Sources & Types of Conflict in Communication

1 Why Study Conflict?

Communication-related conflict is **inevitable whenever people exchange ideas, emotions, or resources**. Far from being purely negative, well-managed conflict can spur innovation, clarify expectations, and deepen relationships. Poorly understood conflict, however, drains energy, erodes trust, and derails goals. The first step toward healthy management is an accurate *diagnosis* of **where** the conflict originates and **what kind** of conflict you are facing.

2 Foundational Concepts

Term	Working Definition	Key Take-Away
Conflict	A perceived incompatibility of needs, goals, values, or expectations between two or more parties	Conflict starts in <i>perception</i> ; real or imagined clashes produce the same tension
Source	The underlying condition or trigger that <i>sparks</i> conflict	Treat the source, not just the symptoms
Type	The <i>form</i> the conflict takes, based on the parties involved or the issue at stake	Different types require different communication strategies

3 Primary Sources of Conflict in Communication

The table below lists **eight classic sources** with behavioural clues and preventive tactics. Use it as an “early-warning dashboard” when tensions rise.

# Source of Conflict	Typical Indicators	Illustrative Example	Prevention / Mitigation Tactics
1 Information Gaps & Ambiguity	Conflicting data, unanswered questions, assumptions	Two departments use different sales figures to set targets	Establish single data repositories; clarify terms; summarise agreements in writing
2 Resource Scarcity	Competition for time, budget, staff, credit	Project teams fight over one videographer’s schedule	Transparent priority setting; rotate scarce resources; escalate early
3 Role & Responsibility Overlap	“Who’s in charge?” debates, duplicated work	Two managers both approve the same invoices, each rejecting the other’s edits	Write RACI charts (Responsible-Accountable-Consulted-Informed); communicate role changes
4 Value & Belief Differences	Moral or cultural judgments, emotional language	A vegan employee protests company’s steak-house client dinner	Seek common higher-order values (e.g., respect, health); agree to respectful dissent

# Source of Conflict	Typical Indicators	Illustrative Example	Prevention / Mitigation Tactics
5 Personality & Style Clashes	Irritation at tone, pace, risk tolerance, humour	A detail-oriented analyst clashes with a big-picture strategist	Use personality assessments; assign complementary tasks; set empathy norms
6 Power & Status Imbalances	Interruptions, withholding info, "turf guarding"	Senior engineer ignores junior's safety concern	Create safe-speak rules; encourage upward feedback; leaders model humility
7 Communication Barriers	Misinterpretations, language translations, jargon overload	Remote team misunderstands idioms on conference call	Use plain language; back-channel summaries; leverage visual aids
8 Structural or Process Flaws	Bottlenecks, slow approvals, unclear workflows	Marketing can't launch ads until legal reviews every word	Map and streamline processes; add agreed service-level agreements (SLAs)

Quick Diagnostic Tip

Ask, "If we fixed *information*, would tension vanish?" If yes, you likely have an *Information Gap* conflict. If no, probe deeper—perhaps *values* or *power* are at stake.

4 Key Types of Conflict

4.1 By Relationship Level

Level	Parties Involved	Signature Issues
Intrapersonal	One individual vs. self	Doubt about choices, role strain, moral dilemmas
Interpersonal	Two people (peers, friends, manager-staff)	Misunderstood tone, unmet expectations
Intragroup	Individuals within the same team	Task distribution, social loafing, identity sub-cliques
Intergroup	Two or more teams/departments	Resource allocation, territoriality, silo mentality
Inter-organisational	Separate organisations or alliances	Contract terms, market share, intellectual property

4.2 By Issue Orientation

Orientation	Focus of Disagreement	Potential Upside	Special Risk
Task/Content Conflict	Facts, ideas, methods, decisions	Better solutions via debate	Can slip into personal attacks if ego enters
Process Conflict	<i>How</i> work is done—timelines, roles	Streamlined workflows	Paralysis if prolonged
Relationship Conflict	Interpersonal dislike, value clash	Low—often drains energy	Spreads quickly, harms morale
Status Conflict	Relative power, recognition	Clearer hierarchy or merit system	Turnover, sabotage
Affective/Emotional Conflict	Hurt feelings, anger, fear	Emotional clarity when resolved	Escalates rapidly, clouds reasoning

4.3 By Duration & Visibility

Dimension	Sub-Types	Management Implication
Duration	<i>Acute</i> (short-term flare-up) vs. <i>Chronic</i> (long-running)	Chronic conflicts demand structural fixes, not quick apologies



Dimension	Sub-Types	Management Implication
Visibility	Overt (explicitly expressed) vs. Covert (hidden, passive-aggressive)	Covert conflicts require trust-building to surface real issues

5 Conflict Source-Type Matrix

Use the matrix below to pinpoint the DNA of any conflict. Locate the **row** matching the likely *source* and the **column** matching the *type* you observe; the intersecting cell suggests a tailored inquiry focus.

Source \ Type	Task/Content	Process	Relationship	Status	Emotional
Information Gap	Invites data audit	Clarify workflow data inputs	Rare	Rare	Low
Resource Scarcity	Prioritise scope	Re-plan timelines	Blame cycles	Turf claims	Medium
Role Overlap	Decide accountabilities	Re-map hand-offs	“Who’s boss?” feelings	High	Medium
Value Difference	Ethical arguments	Policy redesign	Moral judgement	Medium	High
Personality Clash	Style friction on deliverables	Meeting-flow disputes	High tension	Medium	High
Power Imbalance	Decisions questioned	Approval bottlenecks	Fear-based silence	Very High	High
Communication Barrier	Translation errors	Remote-tool gaps	Misread tone	Medium	Medium
Structural Flaw	Conflicting KPIs	Broken escalations	Frustration spreads	High	High

6 Early Warning Signals

Signal Category	Red Flag Behaviours	Suggested Immediate Action
Verbal	Sarcastic tone, abrupt “fine.”	Paraphrase content + emotion: “Sounds like you’re worried about timing—let’s unpack.”
Non-Verbal	Eye-rolls, crossed arms, silence	Pause meeting; check-in privately: “I noticed you seemed concerned—can we talk?”
Process	Repeated missed deadlines, endless email loops	Convene brief root-cause huddle; realign roles/data
Relational	Social exclusion, “meeting after the meeting”	Hold team retro; reinforce psychological safety

7 Practical Toolkit for Conflict Detection

- Stakeholder-Map Scan**
 - List all parties.
 - For each, note *interests* (what they want) and *power* (ability to block).
 - Conflicts often hide where interest is high and power feels threatened.
- 5-Whys Inquiry**
 - Ask “Why?” up to five times on the presenting problem.
 - The 3rd-5th “Why” usually surfaces the true source (values, role, structure).
- Conflict Journal**
 - After each tense exchange, jot: *Who, What, Where, When, Emotion Felt, Possible Source, Type*. Patterns will emerge over a week.
- Heat Map**
 - Colour-code sections of a workflow diagram by frequency of disputes.
 - Hot zones often reveal process or resource clashes.

8 Illustrative Case Study

Scenario

A software team (developers, QA, UX) misses two sprint deadlines. Devs blame QA for “last-minute defect floods”; QA blames Devs for “sloppy code.”

Diagnosis

- **Source:** Structural & Process (bug triage timing) + Resource Scarcity (not enough QA staff)
- **Type:** Intragroup Task **and** Relationship Conflict

Detection Clues

- Passive-aggressive JIRA comments (covert relationship conflict)
- Repeated defects discovered late (overt process conflict)

Remedies Applied

1. Shifted daily stand-up to earlier hour so QA could flag issues same-day.
2. Added one contract tester (resource).
3. Facilitated empathy workshop (relationship repair).

Outcome: Velocity improved by 30 % and inter-team sentiment survey rose from 2.8 → 4.1/5 within two sprints.

9 Self-Practice Corner

1. **Conflict Autopsy** Recall a recent disagreement. Map *source* and *type* using the matrix. Write a 150-word reflection on what you misdiagnosed.
2. **Role-Play Radar** In trios, Person A & B enact a subtle conflict (given by facilitator). Person C observes and lists all red flags and hypothesised sources. Rotate roles.
3. **Heat-Map Exercise** Draw your team’s workflow. Mark points where delays or friction often occur. Compare maps within the group; discuss structural fixes.
4. **Values Card Sort** Each team member ranks ten value cards (e.g., speed, accuracy, creativity). Discuss top three overlaps and mismatches to pre-empt future value conflicts.

Chapter Takeaways

- Conflict stems from **specific, identifiable sources**—data gaps, scarce resources, mismatched roles, clashing values, personalities, power, barriers, or flawed structures.
- It manifests in predictable **types**—task, process, relationship, status, emotional—across intrapersonal to inter-organisational levels.
- Early detection relies on vigilance for verbal, non-verbal, process, and relational signals.
- Accurate diagnosis via tools (5-Whys, heat maps, source-type matrix) guides customised solutions, turning potential dysfunction into dialogue and progress.

Master these diagnostic skills now, and the next chapters—on conflict resolution strategies, negotiation, and mediation—will feel intuitive and actionable.