



Navigating Group Dynamics in Academic Leadership

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Welcome & Introductions

Office of the University Ombudsperson

- Founded in 1967
- Centered in International Ombuds Association Standards of Practice
- Use the Fairness Triangle as our lens to conflict



What the Ombuds Office Offers

- A place to talk through concerns
- Support for navigating difficult situations
- Help thinking through options
- A space for reflection and problem-solving

What the Ombuds Office is Not

- Not an advocacy office
- Not a decision-maker
- Not a formal complaint office
- Not a substitute for human resources or other processes

Group Dynamics Snapshot

1. Think about a group you are currently part of—department, leadership team, committee, or project group.
 - a. Who speaks most often?
 - b. Who speaks least, or not at all?
 - c. How does disagreement typically show up?
 - d. When conflict happens, what usually follows?
2. In pairs, share one pattern you notice in that group (not a person, but a pattern).

Group Dynamics Premise

- Academic leadership often happens through groups rather than hierarchy
- Conflict in academic settings often reflects patterns, roles, and structures
- Leaders can shape the conditions for productive disagreement and stronger collaboration

Why Group Dynamics Matter

- Universities rely on shared governance, expertise, and collaboration
- Leadership challenges often emerge in committees, departments, labs, and interdisciplinary groups
- Many conflicts that appear interpersonal are actually systemic or role-based

What Are Group Dynamics?

- Roles — formal and informal
- Norms — explicit and implicit expectations
- Power and status — who holds influence
- Communication patterns — who speaks, who withdraws, how disagreement happens
- Decision-making processes — how choices are made and by whom

What Makes Academic Groups Distinct?

- Expertise-based authority
- Distributed or ambiguous power
- Multiple competing missions: teaching, research, service, administration
- High value placed on autonomy and disciplinary identity
- Norms of collegiality that may obscure conflict

Schein's Model of Organizational Culture

Edgar Schein describes culture at three levels:

- Artifacts (visible behaviors and structures)
- Espoused Values (stated commitments and principles)
- Underlying Assumptions (unspoken beliefs that shape behavior)

Applying Schein to Academic Groups

Artifacts

- meeting design
- speaking patterns
- decision processes

Espoused Values

- collegiality
- shared governance
- inclusion
- respect for expertise

Underlying Assumptions

- who belongs
- whose ideas carry weight
- what disagreement means
- how power should operate

Designing the Gathering: Priya Parker

Leaders influence group dynamics through:

- Clarity of purpose
- Intentional structure
- Norms for participation
- How disagreement is invited or contained

Pointless Meetings



Redesigning a Meeting

1. Think of a recent meeting that didn't go well. If you could redesign it, what would you change about:
 - a. It's purpose?
 - b. It's structure?
 - c. How participation was invited?

Lencioni: Fear of Conflict and the Cost of Avoidance

- Absence of trust
- Fear of conflict
- Lack of commitment
- Avoidance of accountability
- Inattention to results

Psychological Safety and Productive Dissent

- Ask questions
- Express uncertainty
- Challenge ideas
- Offer dissent without humiliation or retaliation

An Example (Collaborative Discussion Toolkit)

Anticipating Conflict and Developing Group Guidelines

1. Generating Lists of Positive & Negative Attributes
2. Prioritize Attributes
3. Discuss as a Full Group
4. Craft Guiding Principles
5. Debrief as a Full Group

Power, Identity, and Belonging in Academic Groups

- Rank and tenure status
- Disciplinary prestige
- Administrative authority
- Identity dimensions
- Career stage and professional role

Leadership Reflection

- What patterns are shaping this group?
- What norms seem visible or invisible?
- Where might fear of conflict be limiting honest dialogue?
- How are power and identity affecting participation?
- What assumptions may be driving interpretation?

Leadership Takeaways

Effective academic leadership involves:

- Reading group dynamics, not just individual behavior
- Making assumptions and norms more visible
- Supporting constructive conflict rather than conflict avoidance
- Attending to power, identity, and belonging
- Creating conditions for psychological safety and shared accountability

Conflict is:

- Natural
- Uncomfortable for most of us
- A barrier to communication / dialogue
- Sometimes necessary, even desirable, to achieve a truly collaborative outcome
- Important to address and not avoid
- Something that everybody approaches differently

Helping Others Through Conflict

- Know Thyself
- Listen
 - What do you know, what don't you know?
 - Have you identified any information gaps?
- How are disputants engaging in conflict?
- Consider power dynamics
- Identify needs
- Facilitate communication

Reflection

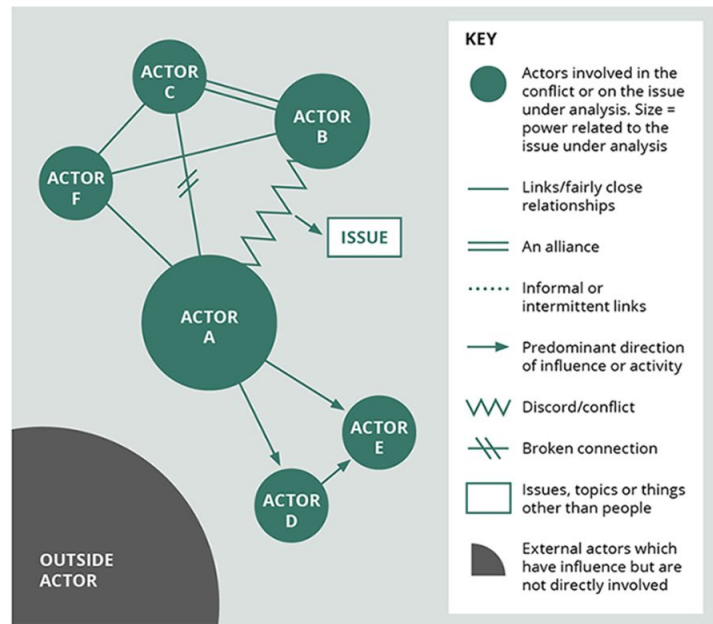
- When faced with conflict, what is my initial gut response?
- How does this shape my response to conflicts in a team, or as a conflict resolver?
- Think about individuals who have shaped your approach to leadership. How did their approach to communication and conflict resolution influence their leadership?

Diagnosing Group Dynamics as a Leader

- Conflict might be a “one off” or indicate an underlying issue - pay attention to both, but decide how and when to respond.
- Conflict and bullying
- What does communication look like on your team?
- Engage with “fears and feelings”
- Develop conflict (and communication) competency within your organization



Conflict Mapping



<https://ombuzz.blog/ever-try-conflict-mapping/>

Source: Adapted from Fisher, et al. (2000: 23)

Addressing Underlying / Root Causes

- Remain curious: asking questions using open ended questions
- Consider relationships, hierarchy, and power dynamics
- What is being said, and what is *not* being said?
- Beyond the open door policy

Conflict Responsive Leadership Strategies

- Understand your own conflict responses
- Map channels of communication, enhance robust communication
- Create environments that normalize *healthy* conflict
- Model healthy conflict engagement, lead responses with curiosity
- Build conflict capacity within your organization

Applied Practice: Case or Scenario Discussion

A dean has asked department chairs to identify potential budget reductions for the coming fiscal year. During a leadership meeting, the dean invites ideas about where adjustments might be made.

One chair suggests reducing funding for graduate travel. Another proposes postponing a faculty search. A third chair remains silent throughout the discussion but appears visibly uncomfortable.

As the conversation continues, two chairs begin debating the relative importance of research productivity versus maintaining graduate student support. Several other chairs contribute only briefly, and the meeting ends without a clear direction.

After the meeting, one chair emails the dean saying the discussion felt “tense” and that some chairs were reluctant to speak openly in front of others.

The dean is now planning the next leadership meeting.

Applied Practice: Case or Scenario Discussion

A department is revising its teaching assignments due to increased enrollment. At a faculty meeting, the chair presents a proposal to redistribute courses more evenly across faculty.

During the discussion, one faculty member notes that the proposal does not account for the significant advising and service work some faculty are doing, particularly related to student support initiatives.

Another faculty member responds that “everyone is busy” and that teaching loads should remain the primary measure of contribution. Several faculty nod in agreement, while others remain quiet.

The conversation shifts quickly back to course coverage, and the chair suggests finalizing the plan at the next meeting.

Afterward, two faculty members separately share with the chair that they feel the workload conversation is “not capturing the full picture,” but neither raised their concerns during the meeting.

The chair is now considering how to move forward.

Thank you and Questions!