

Conflict Management: When Conflict Turns Personal



Recognizing the Early Signals of Relational Breakdown

The Staines Air Disaster (BEA Flight 548)

On June 18, 1972, a Hawker Siddeley Trident departed London Heathrow bound for Brussels. Just minutes after takeoff, the aircraft entered a deep stall and crashed near the town of Staines, killing all 118 people on board.

The immediate cause involved the premature retraction of the aircraft's leading-edge "droops," which reduced lift at a critical moment during climb.

But investigators later examined more than technical factors.

They examined the environment on the flight deck.

Nearly two hours before the flight, the captain had been involved in a heated confrontation in the crew room regarding an ongoing pilot labor dispute. Witnesses described the exchange as unusually intense.

Two young second officers assigned to the flight witnessed the incident.

By the time the crew entered the flight deck, the authority gradient was already steep.

The captain was experienced and dominant. The junior crew members were new to the aircraft.

When the configuration error occurred during climb, the crew did not effectively challenge the developing situation.

The technical sequence of events lasted only seconds.

But the relational dynamics that shaped the flight deck environment began long before the aircraft left the ground.

When Conflict Shifts from Task to Relationship

Not all conflict is dangerous.

In fact, healthy disagreement is often essential for strong decision-making. When team members feel comfortable challenging assumptions and raising concerns, organizations benefit from broader thinking and better outcomes.

The risk emerges when conflict stops being about the task and becomes about the relationship. In those moments, communication begins to change. Questions become hesitations. Concerns become silence. Disagreement becomes avoidance. The shift is subtle—but its consequences can be significant.

The Early Signals Leaders Should Notice

Relational breakdown rarely begins with open confrontation. More often, it appears through small behavioral changes that leaders can easily overlook.

Some of the most common warning signs include:

- **Conversations move offline Concerns that should be discussed openly are instead shared in side conversations or private complaints.**
- **Participation begins to drop Individuals who once contributed actively begin speaking less or deferring more frequently.**
- **Sarcasm replaces direct feedback Humor begins carrying criticism rather than constructive dialogue.**
- **Disagreements repeat without resolution The same issues surface again and again without meaningful progress.**
- **Concerns are escalated indirectly Instead of addressing issues directly, individuals seek a third party or higher authority to intervene.**

Individually, these signals may seem minor. Together, they often indicate that conflict is no longer centered on solving a problem but on managing tension between people.

Why Leaders Often Miss the Moment

Most leaders are trained to respond when conflict becomes visible.

Raised voices. Formal complaints. Open disagreements.

But relational conflict often develops long before those signals appear.

By the time conflict becomes obvious, trust may already be eroding, and communication patterns may already be shifting. This is why effective leaders treat early tension as information, not disruption. Small changes in communication often reveal the health of a team long before formal problems emerge.

The WYVERN Perspective

Within a Safety Management System (SMS), hazards rarely appear suddenly. They emerge through signals:

- A change in behavior.
- A change in communication.
- A change in participation.

Conflict behaves the same way.

When tension becomes personal, communication begins to narrow and critical dialogue becomes less likely. In high-reliability environments, the responsibility of leadership is not to eliminate disagreement. It is to ensure that disagreement remains professional, direct, and focused on the task. Because safety culture is not defined by the absence of conflict. It is defined by how organizations recognize and manage conflict before it becomes silence.

Looking Ahead

In the next article, we will explore how leaders can redirect tension back into productive dialogue and the practical communication techniques that keep disagreement constructive rather than destructive.

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