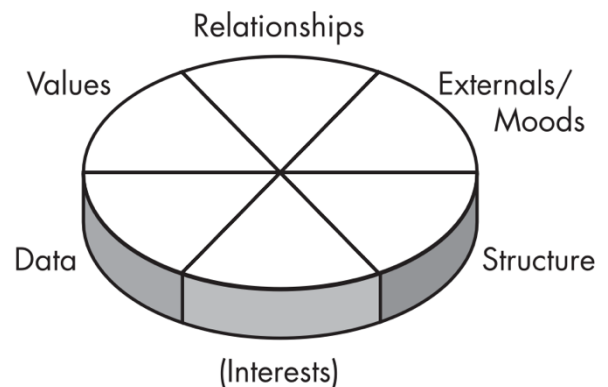


The circle of conflict

The circle of conflict is a model that helps us pause and ask, “what’s really driving this conflict?” developed by conflict resolution experts, it identifies six key sources of conflict: relationships, data, interests, structure, values, and moods/externals. These categories serve as lenses to diagnose the root causes behind disagreements. Instead of rushing to solve surface issues, this model encourages self-reflection and analysis.



Relationship conflicts

Relationship-based conflicts often stem from negative past experiences, breakdowns in communication, or patterns of unhelpful behaviour. Over time, small incidents accumulate and become personal. Stereotypes and assumptions may develop, making it harder to see the person as they are now, rather than how we remember or imagine them. These conflicts are emotionally charged and can be cyclical if left unaddressed.

Self-coaching questions:

- Have we had repeated negative interactions before?
- Am I making assumptions based on past behaviour?
- Are we stuck in a pattern of “tit-for-tat” behaviour?
- Am I stereotyping the other person based on previous encounters?
- Have I taken time to understand their perspective recently?
- Is there unspoken history between us that needs to be surfaced?
- Do I feel emotionally safe engaging with this person?
- Is my reaction more intense than the current situation justifies?

Data conflicts

Data conflicts are surprisingly common – and solvable. They occur when information is missing, misunderstood, or misinterpreted. Too much data can be overwhelming, and poor information management can fuel suspicion. These conflicts often involve differing perceptions of the same facts. Without accurate, shared data, people fill in the gaps with assumptions, often making things worse.

Self-coaching questions:

- Do we have access to the same information?
- Could the conflict be due to outdated or incomplete data?
- Are we interpreting the same facts in different ways?
- Have we clarified what data matters and why?
- Is the sheer volume of information causing confusion?
- Are we making assumptions to “fill in the blanks”?
- Are we clear about what’s fact, opinion, or assumption?
- Would it help to jointly review the information or data sources?

Interest conflicts

Interests are the needs, hopes, desires, and concerns that sit beneath the surface. When people feel that their interests are threatened or ignored, they may dig in, present fixed demands, or become defensive. Uncovering interests (our own and others') is a key step in moving from positional fights to collaborative problem-solving.

Self-coaching questions:

- What do I really need in this situation-and why?
- What concerns or fears might the other person have?
- Are we arguing positions instead of exploring what we care about?
- Have we each had a chance to explain what's most important to us?
- Could there be multiple ways to satisfy both our interests?
- Have I been honest with myself about my real motivations?
- Am I focusing too narrowly on winning, rather than understanding?
- What would "success" look like for both of us?

Structural conflicts

Sometimes the way a system is built causes or maintains conflict. Structural issues include limited time or money, role confusion, conflicting departmental priorities, or authority gaps. These aren't personal-but they feel personal when people are caught in them. Identifying structural causes can depersonalise conflict and point toward systemic solutions.

Self-coaching questions:

- Is this conflict made worse by lack of resources (time, money, space)?
- Are roles or responsibilities unclear or overlapping?
- Are decisions being made by people without the needed authority?
- Are different parts of the organisation pulling in different directions?
- Would a change in process or structure ease this tension?
- Are geographic or logistical factors creating misunderstanding?
- Are there systemic pressures that we're taking out on each other?
- Is anyone being held accountable without the power to affect outcomes?

Values conflicts

Conflicts rooted in values go deep. They touch on our beliefs about what's right and wrong, fair and unfair, good and bad. These conflicts can be especially volatile and difficult to resolve, since people often see values as non-negotiable. Even small policy disagreements can escalate if they activate deeper moral or identity-based concerns.

Self-coaching questions:

- Is there a clash between our personal or professional values?
- Am I judging the other person based on what I think is "right"?
- Have I clearly expressed what value or principle is important to me?
- Is there a way to understand or acknowledge their values without agreeing?
- Are there shared values we can build upon?
- Am I reacting to a deeper value threat that isn't obvious?
- Is there room for respectful disagreement here?
- What would it mean to respect their view while staying true to my own?

Moods / externals

Sometimes the conflict isn't really about the issue at hand—it's about everything else. Stress, fatigue, illness, organisational uncertainty, or external pressures can cloud how we perceive and respond to others. These conditions don't excuse poor behaviour, but they do help explain it. Checking for external factors can shift the tone from blame to understanding.

Self-coaching questions:

- Is someone under unusual stress, pressure, or fatigue right now?
- Am I reacting to them, or to something going on in my life?
- Are external events making the situation more charged than usual?
- Would this conflict feel as intense under different conditions?
- Am I bringing emotional baggage from elsewhere into this situation?
- Is it possible that physical or psychological health is affecting behaviour?
- Are environmental or organisational factors adding fuel to the fire?
- Could a short break, change of setting, or better timing help ease this?

The circle of conflict is not just a model for mediators and conflict professional, it is a practical tool that anyone can use in their everyday work life. whether you're leading a team, collaborating on a project, or navigating difficult conversations, this model can guide you toward more thoughtful and effective responses.

1. Pause before reacting - When a disagreement arises, take a moment to pause and reflect. instead of responding emotionally or defensively, ask yourself: what might really be going on here? the circle helps you shift from reaction to reflection.
2. Identify the dominant conflict driver - Use the model to consider which of the six drivers—relationships, data, interests, structure, values, or moods/externals—might be playing the biggest role. often, more than one is involved, but identifying the most pressing can bring clarity and focus.
3. Guide your response accordingly - Each type of conflict calls for a different kind of response. if the issue is about data, focus on clarifying facts. if it's structural, raise concerns about roles or processes. if values are in play, show respect and look for shared ground. the model helps you tailor your response, rather than defaulting to a one-size-fits-all approach.
4. Use it as a team reflection tool - Consider bringing the model into team discussions or retrospectives. ask your team to reflect on recent tensions using the six categories. this can help depersonalise conflict and foster a culture of learning and improvement.
5. Support others in conflict - When you're supporting colleagues in a conflict (formally or informally), use the circle as a coaching guide. help them explore what's really fuelling the issue and what might shift it. the reflection questions are especially useful in coaching conversations.

Consider keeping the model visible: on a desk card, whiteboard, or meeting agenda. make it part of how your team talks about tension, disagreement, and problem-solving. used well, the circle of conflict builds insight, empathy, and better outcomes.