

Levels of conflict

As part of Project Forge, the Ohio site is rolling out new team structures and shift models to support 24/7 automated production. The redesign involves moving several experienced machine operators into new hybrid roles that blend traditional line work with digital monitoring and maintenance tasks.

Markus, the long-standing Operations Manager, is responsible for delivering this transition smoothly on the shop floor. He knows the people, the machinery, and the local rhythms of the plant. He believes in gradual, practical change and builds loyalty through trust and stability.

Khaled, the HR Director, is pushing for broader talent mobility and skill development. He sees Project Forge as a catalyst to modernise how roles are defined, how people are assessed, and how performance is managed. He's introduced new job profiles, digital training platforms, and a revised performance framework—all rolled out from HQ, with local adoption expected.

On paper, the two roles should be complementary. In practice, friction is mounting:

- Markus has started quietly bypassing the HR processes. He's writing his own shift schedules and reverting some team leads to their original roles when he thinks the new structure isn't working.
- Khaled has escalated concerns to Emma, citing lack of alignment, missed reporting deadlines, and a "resistance to strategic HR initiatives."
- Neither man has raised the issue directly with the other. They remain polite in meetings but cold.
- Employees are confused as some follow Markus' instructions, others follow HR's. Nobody knows what version of the job description is real.
- A line supervisor recently commented, "If you ask Ops, we do it one way. If you ask HR, it's a different story. So we just wait and see who shouts louder."

Reflection questions

What level of conflict is this currently at?

Use clues from the scenario—tone, avoidance, triangulation, employee confusion—to decide whether this is at Level 2, 3, or even bordering on 4.

How might it have started at level 1? - How could early signs of irritation have shown up when HR initiatives began?

What escalated it? - identify behaviours or structural decisions that pushed the conflict up a level. what moments likely triggered Markus' quiet resistance or Khaled's escalation?

What risks emerge if this moves to level 4 or 5? Consider the impact on:

- Frontline morale
- Delivery of Project Forge
- Cross-functional collaboration norms

How could this be de-escalated? if you were advising Emma or either party:

What kind of structured conversation is needed?

What might restore clarity and trust?

What deeper needs or concerns might be acknowledged?