

Sources of Conflict in Public Leadership: A Conceptual Framework for Diagnosing and Responding to Conflict

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Conflict is an inherent feature of public service, particularly in settings where leaders must navigate competing priorities and complex systems. Effective public leadership requires the capacity to discern the underlying source of a conflict in order to respond appropriately. This framework outlines the primary sources of conflict commonly encountered by elected officials and public sector leaders, along with additional factors that may intensify or complicate conflict dynamics.

Core Sources of Conflict

Factual Conflict

Definition: Disagreements regarding information, data, events, or interpretations of what occurred.

Examples:

- Divergent assessments of budgetary figures or fiscal projections
- Conflicting accounts of public meetings or administrative procedures
- Disputes over the interpretation of ordinances or policies

Strategies for Resolution:

- Establish shared definitions and timelines
- Engage neutral third-party analysis or data verification
- Align on a common factual basis before proceeding to decision-making

Value-Based Conflict

Definition: Tensions arising from clashing priorities, ethical frameworks, or normative visions of what is good, just, or desirable.

Examples:

- Debates over resource allocation between social services and infrastructure
- Conflicting views on development versus environmental preservation
- Competing priorities among constituents with different lived experiences

Strategies for Resolution:

- Acknowledge differing underlying values
- Identify areas of shared interest or mutual concern
- Facilitate dialogue that reframes zero-sum framings into integrative or collaborative possibilities – make the pie bigger

Identity-Based Conflict

Definition: Conflict stemming from perceived threats to individual or collective identity, belonging, status, or dignity.

Examples:

- Marginalized groups feeling excluded from decision-making processes
- Public discourse that reinforces divisions along individual or group identity lines (e.g. – political party affiliation, race, ethnicity)
- Perceptions of disrespect or delegitimization in leadership interactions

Strategies for Resolution:

- Prioritize inclusion and representation of interested and affected parties in both process and outcome
- Foster shared identity (e.g., public servant, community member)
- Engage in dialogue that affirms dignity and acknowledges lived experience

Additional Dimensions That Intensify Conflict

While most conflict is grounded in the categories above, additional contextual factors often contribute to escalation or misunderstanding. These dimensions interact with and compound the core categories.

Structural and Systemic Conflict

Definition: Disputes arising from institutional constraints, unclear roles, or procedural breakdowns.

Examples:

- Role confusion between councilmembers and city staff
- Delays or miscommunications rooted in legal mandates or administrative timelines

Implications: Clarifying governance structures and processes can prevent misattributions of intent or competence.

Scarcity and Power Dynamics

Definition: Conflict driven by perceived or real competition over limited resources or influence.

Examples:

- Budgetary competition between departments or constituencies
- Resistance to change framed as loss of power or status

Implications: Surface underlying assumptions about control and equity; explore collaborative approaches to shared interests.

Historical and Intergenerational Tensions

Definition: Conflict shaped by prior experiences of exclusion, harm, or broken trust.

Examples:

- Distrust in public engagement processes due to previous neglect or harm
- Interpersonal tensions rooted in organizational history

Implications: Acknowledge the past, avoid retraumatization, and prioritize sustained relationship-building.

Emotional and Psychological Factors

Definition: Conflict amplified by stress, trauma, fear, or emotional fatigue.

Examples:

- Escalation during public comment periods tied to community grief or anxiety
- Disproportionate reactivity among colleagues facing burnout

Implications: Practice emotional regulation, build team dynamics where possible, foster psychological safety, and allow space for emotional expression within structured dialogue.

Conclusion

Public conflict is often multi-layered. Leaders who take the time to assess whether a disagreement is rooted in facts, values, or identity, and whether it is influenced by structural, historical, or emotional factors, are better equipped to lead with clarity, empathy, and effectiveness.

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