

INSIGHTS DISCOVERY · EXPERT GUIDE

The five hidden conflict indicators

A leader's guide to the relational friction slowing your team down

This guide describes the five patterns through which hidden conflict most commonly shows up in teams.

Each indicator includes a description of what it is, why it matters, the observable signals to look for and a reflection question to take into your next team conversation.

**Based on expert insight from Insights Discovery practitioners with extensive experience in team development and conflict resolution.*



The conflict you don't see is doing the most damage

Conflict in teams is rarely loud

It looks less like two colleagues arguing in a meeting and more like a meeting that feels slightly flat. Like decisions get made and then quietly unmade or two people who work fine independently but create friction when they're in the same room. It looks like a team that delivers, but only just.

These signals are easy to rationalise. "We've been through a lot of change." "These two have always been like that." "It's a demanding time." And because the rationalisation is plausible, the underlying relational dynamics never get examined. The friction becomes part of the furniture.

This is the defining characteristic of hidden conflict: It's invisible because it's been normalised. Performance is a relational outcome. Teams struggle because the relationships between people can't absorb difference, pressure and change without breaking down.

The five indicators in this guide are drawn from the experience of Insights Discovery practitioners who work with teams at all levels, from functional units to executive leadership. They represent the most consistently observable patterns of hidden conflict across sectors, team sizes and organisational contexts.

Not every team will show all five. But most teams experiencing hidden conflict will recognise at least three.



Most senior leaders, if they're honest, already know where the tensions sits. It's not that leaders are blind, but they avoid it.

I've seen even the most capable, experienced leaders step around behavioural issues, while doubling down on KPIs and metrics.



Howard Scott

Senior Consultant, Facilitator and Coach - Unify Partnership





THE FIVE INDICATORS

What to look for and what it means

Each indicator describes a distinct pattern.

Read them as a professional observer would: With curiosity rather than judgment, and with your team specifically in mind.

1 The suppressed meeting

When the real conversation happens after the meeting, not in it

What it is

Meetings may feel productive on the surface. Decisions are made, but people leave without conviction. Side conversations start before the door is fully closed.

Why it matters

The meeting is the team's most visible arena. When it becomes a performance because the relationships in the room can no longer hold disagreement safely, the suppression is structural.

People have learned through experience or instinct that it isn't safe to disagree openly. The conflict relocates.

What to look for

- 🔍 The **same voices** consistently dominate; others are **consistently quiet**
- 🔍 Decisions made in the meeting get **revisited, delayed** or **quietly ignored**
- 🔍 When a **difficult topic** arises, it's acknowledged then **moved past quickly**
- 🔍 The most **candid views** emerge in **one-to-ones**, not in the group
- 🔍 **Energy** in the room drops when **certain topics** come up

Reflection question

If I asked each member of my team to write down the team's single biggest challenge, how different would their answers be?



THE FIVE INDICATORS

2 The misread behavioural style

When different approaches to work are interpreted as personal failures

What it is

People bring fundamentally different approaches to decision-making, communication and conflict.

Without a shared system for understanding them, differences get attributed to character rather than style, and character judgments are harder to recover from.

Why it matters

Behavioural misinterpretation damages performance because it erodes the relationships between people, replacing curiosity with judgment.

A direct communicator is read as aggressive.
An analytical thinker is read as disengaged.
A fast decision-maker is read as dismissive of others' views.

None of these interpretations are correct, but all of them are invisible to the person being judged, and often to the person doing the judging.

What to look for

- Specific **pairings** of team members consistently produce **visible friction**
- Feedback** about individuals tends to be framed as **personality** rather than **approach**
- People on the team have **strong fixed views** about certain colleagues' **intentions**
- Some voices get **significantly more airtime** than others in **group discussions**
- Quiet** team members are described as **'disengaged'** rather than **'processing'**

Reflection question

When I observe friction between team members, do I understand it as a style difference, or have I formed a view about who's difficult?



THE FIVE INDICATORS

3 The avoided conversation

When feedback stops flowing, and the impact on teams

What it is

Healthy teams have friction. The difference between productive and destructive friction is whether it can be expressed directly and received without defensiveness.

When it can't, when feedback becomes a risk rather than a gift, conflict goes underground.






Why it matters

The absence of direct feedback is not the same as the absence of friction.

It usually means friction has found other outlets: Passive resistance, quiet disengagement, gossip or the subtle undermining of decisions.

These are harder to see and address than the original disagreement would have been.

What to look for

-  Performance issues are **managed around** rather than **addressed directly**
-  Team members **rarely challenge** each other's ideas in **group settings**
-  **Feedback** tends to flow in one direction: **Downward**, rarely **upward** or **lateral**
-  When someone **raises a concern**, it tends **not to go anywhere**
-  Individuals who **once challenged** ideas have **stopped** doing so

Reflection question

When did a team member last push back on my view in a group setting? And what happened next?



THE FIVE INDICATORS

4 The purpose gap

When alignment is assumed but never tested

What it is

Leaders consistently overestimate how clearly their team understands and shares the team's purpose, priorities and direction.

This is a relational alignment failure, where shared purpose exists in theory but not in lived interaction.

Why it matters

When team members are working from different mental models of what matters most, disagreement on tactics quickly becomes personal.

Decisions that seem straightforward to some feel threatening or misaligned to others. The argument appears to be about the decision, but it's actually about the goal.

What to look for

- 🔍 Ask team members individually to **describe** the team's **top priority**. Note how much the **answers vary**
- 🔍 **Disagreements** about approach persist **longer** than seems warranted
- 🔍 Cross-functional **collaboration** is **limited**; people stick to their lane
- 🔍 **Accountability** for collective outcomes is **weak**; individuals are strong in their **own remit**
- 🔍 **New members** take **longer** than expected to feel **oriented**

Reflection question

If I asked every member of this team to write down our single most important priority right now, how many different answers would I get?



THE FIVE INDICATORS

5 The normalised friction

When conflict has become part of the culture, and stops being visible

What it is

The most dangerous form of hidden conflict is the kind that's absorbed into how the team operates.

It's hidden because it's been normalised and is now structural; it's 'just how we work here'.

Why it matters

Normalised conflict has the highest commercial cost and the lowest visibility. It affects pace, decision quality, retention and customer experience.

But, because it's always been there, it rarely gets named as the cause. A new leader, a restructure or a period of pressure is often what makes it suddenly visible.

What to look for

- 🔍 The team has been together a **long time** and has known **friction** that has **never been resolved**
- 🔍 Certain **dynamics** are described with a shrug; 'that's just how those two are'
- 🔍 High performers have **left the team** and cited 'team dynamics' in exit conversations
- 🔍 The team **functions well** under **stable conditions** but fractures under **pressure**
- 🔍 An **outside perspective** (new leader, external consultant) has noted **friction** the team itself **didn't register**

Reflection question

If someone new joined my team tomorrow, what would they notice within the first two weeks that we've stopped seeing?

To fix hidden conflict, understand the source

These five indicators have one root cause: Misunderstanding.

Every person on your team takes a different approach to processing information, decision-making, creating and managing what they see as conflict.

As much as these differences create challenges, they are also the source of the team's breadth, creativity and resilience – if they can be harnessed. But first, the relationships between your team members must be strong enough to hold a safe space for differences.

Consider: An analytical thinker is not obstructive. A direct communicator is not a steamroller. A person-centred colleague is not weak. These perceptions stem from the need for a shared understanding of personality types and a common language to interpret different behaviours and approaches.

The trick is to build understanding and embed that common language before these perceptions form.



Conflict can happen simply because we don't understand where the other person is coming from.

When two people face the same situation, like making a decision, one may take a totally different approach that feels baffling to the other person.

Because we're looking at them through our own lens, we interpret that person as being difficult or decide that we're never going to get along with them.



Holly Miller

Senior Consultant, Facilitator and Coach
- Unify Partnership



From conflict that's hidden to behaviour that's understood

Insights Discovery creates a common language amongst people, so conflict can be understood and addressed in a supportive and nonjudgmental way.

Shared language

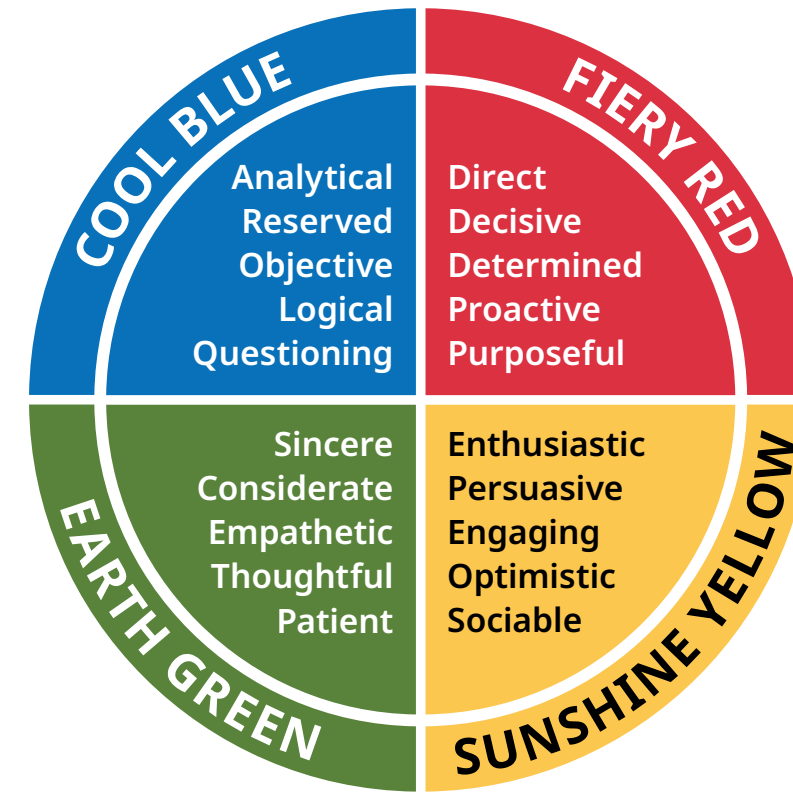
Insights Discovery reduces hidden conflict by providing a common language for addressing different personality preferences.

When people can name differences without judgment, they can understand, value and work with others more effectively.

Psychological safety

Insights Discovery creates honest conversation. It's easier to talk about tension when it's seen as a difference in working styles or personality preferences, rather than a personal issue.

But first, people must trust that what they say will stay safe and won't be used against them.



Structured intervention

Insights Discovery provides a structured and facilitated environment for surfacing invisible dynamics.

The before/after shift is measurable in engagement, better meetings and decisions that stick.



The Insights Discovery workshop often works because it creates a really safe structure where people can learn. Sharing your profile is an act of vulnerability.

And vulnerability, when it's met with curiosity rather than judgement, builds trust. That's where it starts to tip the balance, where teams begin to work effectively rather than just adequately.



Holly Miller

Senior Consultant, Facilitator and Coach - Unify Partnership



A guide to urgency for L&D leaders and professionals

Hidden conflict responds to early intervention and can signal an opportunity to improve performance. Use this guide to assess where your team sits and what level of action is appropriate.



What strikes me most is when conflict becomes so woven into the fabric of how an organisation operates that nobody notices it anymore.

It's become completely invisible, and that's when it most damaging to morale and engagement.



Jack Collins

Business Psychologist and Director, Westminster Associates

If you observe...	The right response is...	Urgency
1–2 of the indicators above	Consider a proactive Insights Discovery session as an investment in communication and resilience. Early intervention is best.	Proactive
3–4 indicators , particularly around meetings, feedback or specific relationships	A facilitated Insights Discovery session is recommended. Don't wait for a crisis point; friction is already affecting performance.	Recommended
All five indicators , including normalised friction or recent attrition	This requires a structured programme. Speak to an Insights practitioner to scope the right intervention for your team's situation.	High priority

One consistent finding from practitioners: Leaders almost always know something is off before they're ready to name it. The cost of waiting is rarely worth it; the friction compounds slowly and the habit of avoidance becomes hard to break.

Ready to address hidden conflict on your team?

If three or more of these indicators are visible in your team, the first step is a structured conversation with an Insights Discovery practitioner.

No commitment, just a clear-eyed look at what's showing up and what a proportionate response looks like

insights.com/hidden-conflict

Want to score your team's hidden conflict first?
Access the **Hidden Conflict Scorecard** at the same link

Expert contributors

This guide was produced in partnership with accredited Insights Discovery practitioners.

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