



Chapter 4: How to Preempt Team Conflict

Five conversations to have before getting started

Based on the research of Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux | Instructor-Led Training Module

The Dual Nature of Team Conflict

The Core Tension

- Conflict adds value: It fosters respectful debate and yields superior solutions.
- Conflict destroys value: It kills productivity and stifles innovation when members cannot get past differences.

The Proactive Solution

- The Failure: Conventional approaches react to conflict after it arises.
- The Fix: Surface differences before the team starts work.
- The Goal: Immunize the group against destructive friction by establishing ground rules early.

Source: Based on 25 years of research and coaching at Duke, London Business School, and IMD.

Learning Objectives: Concepts & Analysis

01. Analyze Root Causes

Differentiate between “disparate opinions” and “perceived incompatibility.” Identify how personality, industry, race, gender, and age contribute to incompatibility.

02. Understand ‘Thin Slices’

Explain the psychological concept of rapid judgment based on brief exposure and recognize how these trigger stereotypes.

03. Define the Methodology

Articulate the difference between focusing on content vs. focusing on the process of work.

Learning Objectives: Application & Facilitation

04. Master the Framework

Distinguish between the five domains of friction: Look, Act, Speak, Think, Feel.

05. Apply Facilitation Techniques

Utilize the 'In My World' questioning technique to neutralize judgment and construct a safe environment for exchange.

06. Evaluate & Construct

Diagnose team scenarios to identify the specific domain causing conflict and create a preemptive team charter.

Conceptual Foundation: The Roots of Destructive Conflict

The Common Misconception

Assumption: Conflict erupts because of differences of opinion or goal misalignment.

The Reality (Toegel & Barsoux)

Root Cause: Perceived Incompatibility in how team members operate.
Drivers: Personality, functional background, demographics, and cultural norms.

Consequence: Frustrations build silently. Trust erodes before the problem is visible. Negative impressions calcify.

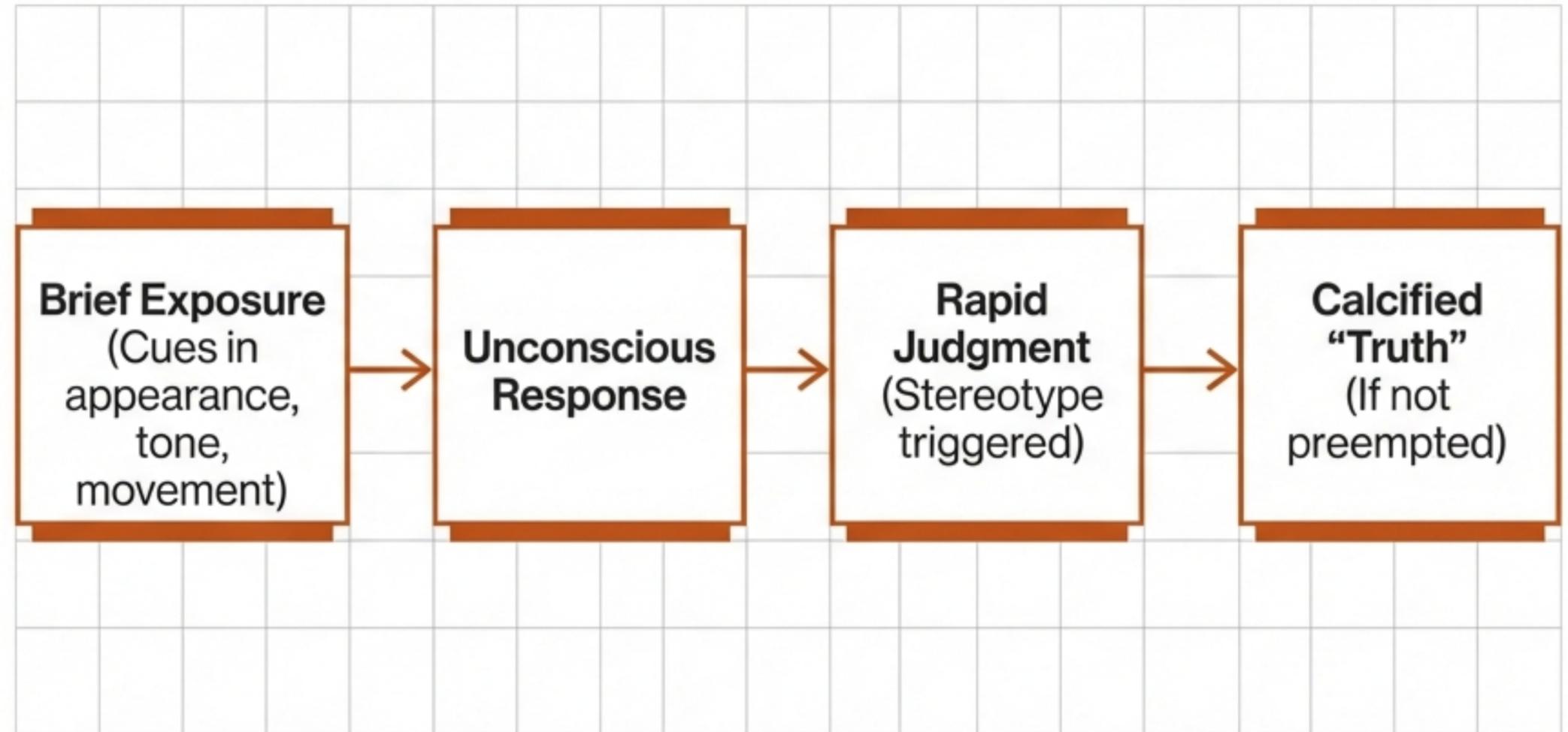
Conceptual Foundation: 'Thin Slices' of Behavior

Definition:

The tendency to make fast judgments about character, competence, or status based on brief exposure.

Origin:

Research by Nalini Ambady and Ambady and Robert Rosenthal (Harvard).



Without intervention, these rapid judgments trigger negative stereotypes before work even begins.

Methodology: The Five Conversations Framework

Focus on the **PROCESS** of work, not the **CONTENT**.

LOOK	ACT	SPEAK	THINK	FEEL
First impressions, status, and appearance.	Behavioral norms, time, and boundaries.	Communication styles, candor, and language.	Mindsets, risk tolerance, and analytic approaches.	Emotion regulation, intensity, and expression.

Facilitation Technique: The 'In My World' Approach

“ In my world...
In your world...? ”

Source: Edgar Schein

Validates

- Reinforces that differences are based on professional/personal history, not character flaws.

Depersonalizes

- Shifts focus from judgment (“You are rude”) to context (“In my world, directness is valued”).

Safe Space

- Encourages curiosity rather than defensiveness.

Conversation 1: LOOK

Spotting the Difference

The Concept

Colleagues judge competence and status based on presentation. Misalignment occurs when team members emphasize the “wrong” credentials for the specific team culture.

Drivers of Status

- Job-Related: Experience, connections, functional background.
- Demographic: Age, gender, nationality, education.

Key Question: How do you intend to come across vs. how do you actually come across?

LOOK: Real-World Scenarios

The Banker in Advertising

- Context: An executive wore a suit and tie in a business-casual agency.
- Perception: Peers felt he was creating distance and thinking he was “special.”
- Result: Alienation based on dress code.

The Designer on the Board

- Context: A female designer wore colorful clothing and used literary references.
- Perception: Pragmatic peers assumed she valued style over substance.
- Result: Marginalization based on presentation.

LOOK: Inquiry Guide

Facilitator Prompt: “In your world...”

- What makes a good first impression? A bad one?
- What do you notice first about others (dress, speech, demeanor)?
- What does that make you think about them (rigid, pushy, lazy)?
- What intangible credentials do you value (education vs. experience)?
- How do you perceive status differences?

Conversation 2: ACT

Misjudging Behavior

The Concept

Clashing behavioral norms regarding physical boundaries and time management. Seemingly trivial gestures can aggregate into major alienation.

Areas of Friction

Physical Boundaries

- Touch
- Proximity
- Personal space buffers

Time Perception

- Punctuality vs. Flexibility
- Urgency vs. Analysis

Differences here are often interpreted as “disrespect” rather than just difference.

ACT: Real-World Scenarios

The Thierry Henry Incident

- Scenario: A soccer pundit touched a colleague's leg on air.
- Result: Caused a media firestorm; highlighted vast differences in physical contact norms.

Nordic vs. Non-Nordic Teams

- Scenario: Non-Nordic executives viewed Nordic colleagues as lacking urgency due to strict work-life boundaries.
- Result: Created friction and perceptions of laziness.

ACT: Inquiry Guide

Facilitator Prompt: “In your world...”

- How important are punctuality and time limits?
- Are there consequences for being late or missing deadlines?
- What is a comfortable physical distance for interaction?
- Should people volunteer for assignments or wait to be nominated?
- What group behaviors are valued (helping others vs. staying in lane)?

Conversation 3: SPEAK

Dividing by Language

The Concept

Variations in communication style, candor, and the function of language. Even within the same language, meanings differ significantly.

The “Yes” Trap

In some cultures, “Yes” means “I agree.”

In others, “Yes” means “I hear you” or “I am listening.”

The Candor Dilemma

Direct criticism (valued by some)

vs.

Saving face/Harmony (valued by others).

SPEAK: Real-World Scenarios

FMCG Marketing Director

Corporate culture forbade negativity. “I can’t see this working” had to be phrased as “Yeah, that’s great.”

German Investment Bank

Problem: Assertive consultants dominated meetings.

Solution: Adopted a “four sentence rule” to force turn-taking.

Heineken USA

Method: Used toy horses on conference tables. Tipping a horse over signaled “beating a dead horse” (time to move on).

SPEAK: Inquiry Guide

Facilitator Prompt: “In your world...”

- Is a promise an aspiration or a guarantee?
- Which is most important: directness or harmony?
- Are irony and sarcasm appreciated?
- Do interruptions signal interest or rudeness?
- Does silence mean reflection or disengagement?

Conversation 4: THINK

Occupying Different Mindsets

The Concept

Differences in how members process information and approach risk.

Cognitive Styles

- **Methodical:** Need structured proofs, predictability, and details.
- **Intuitive:** Rely on gut instinct, big picture, and experimentation.

Risk Tolerance

- Uncertainty is a **THREAT**.
- Uncertainty is an **OPPORTUNITY**.

THINK: Real-World Scenarios

Project Management Clash

Conflict: 'Freethinkers' vs. 'Organizers.'

Solution: Rotated leadership. Freethinkers led conceptual phases; organizers led implementation.

Biotech Team

Conflict: Scientists (embraced failure as discovery) vs. MBAs (sought predictability and results).

Solution: Role-play used to bridge perspectives.

THINK: Inquiry Guide

Facilitator Prompt: 'In your world...'

- Is uncertainty viewed as a threat or an opportunity?
- What is the attitude toward failure?
- Is it better to be reliable or flexible?
- What matters more: the big picture or the details?
- How do you tolerate deviations from the plan?

Conversation 5: FEEL

Charting Emotions

The Concept

Differences in the intensity of feelings and how they are conveyed in a business context.

The **Passion** Gap

Enthusiasm can be perceived as motivating OR as overwhelming/unrealistic.

Negative Emotions

- **Venting** (expressive) vs. **Bottling up** (stoic).
- **Indirect signaling** (withdrawal/sarcasm) can be as destructive as **volatile outbursts**.