

# MCL & Associates, Inc.

## Conflict by Design:

*How Organizational Constraints Shape Behavior*

*—and What Leaders Can Do About It*

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## Executive Summary

Organizations continue to invest heavily in conflict training, often emphasizing communication styles, personality frameworks, and situational techniques. While these approaches offer useful language and awareness, they frequently fail to produce meaningful changes in behavior—particularly under pressure.

The reason is not a lack of training. It is a misdiagnosis of the problem.

Conflict behavior in organizations is not primarily driven by individual preference or style. It is shaped by the conditions under which people are expected to act. Time pressure, power dynamics, incentives, perceived risk, information gaps, and individual capacity all influence whether someone speaks up, stays silent, escalates, or withdraws.

In practice, employees are often making a rational calculation:

- Am I sure I'm right?
- Will it matter if I speak up?
- Do I have the capacity to deal with the consequences?

When the answer to any of these is uncertain or negative, behavior adjusts accordingly—regardless of training.

As a result, organizations frequently observe patterns they misinterpret.

- Silence is seen as disengagement rather than risk-aware restraint.
- Escalation is treated as interpersonal conflict rather than pressure-induced behavior.
- Withdrawal is labeled as lack of commitment rather than a response to low-impact or high-cost participation.

This paper proposes a shift in focus.

Rather than attempting to correct behavior through additional training, leaders should examine and adjust the conditions that produce that behavior. The Constraint Identification & Design Framework introduced here provides a practical method for doing so. It enables leaders to identify the constraints influencing a situation, interpret the behavior those constraints produce, and make targeted adjustments to improve engagement and decision quality.

This approach does not eliminate conflict, nor does it guarantee optimal outcomes. It does, however, increase the likelihood that relevant information is surfaced, concerns are raised earlier, and decisions are made with a fuller understanding of the underlying issues.

For leaders, the implication is clear:

If behavior is shaped by conditions, then improving conflict outcomes requires designing the environment in which that behavior occurs.

## Why Conflict Training Fails

Most organizations approach conflict as a behavioral problem.

When disagreements become unproductive, when employees hesitate to speak up, or when discussions escalate, the response is typically the same: provide training. Employees are taught communication techniques, conflict styles, and structured approaches to managing difficult conversations.

Yet under real conditions—tight deadlines, visible stakes, uneven authority—behavior frequently reverts.

This gap is not a failure of learning. It is a failure of alignment between training and environment.

Most training assumes that behavior is primarily a function of individual choice. That assumption holds in controlled settings. It breaks down under pressure.

In practice, behavior is shaped less by what individuals know and more by the conditions under which they are expected to act.

When the perceived cost of speaking up exceeds the expected benefit, silence is not a failure of skill. It is a rational response to the environment.

The same pattern appears in escalation and withdrawal. Across these situations, a consistent pattern emerges:

Behavior reflects the conditions in which it occurs.

Training that focuses on behavior without addressing those conditions will have limited and inconsistent impact. It may improve awareness, but it cannot reliably override the pressures created by time, authority, incentives, risk, and capacity.

To improve how conflict is handled, leaders must look beyond behavior and examine the environment that shapes it.

## **From Behavior to Conditions: A Different Lens on Conflict**

Most approaches to conflict begin with the individual.

They ask how a person should communicate or adapt their style. These are useful questions, but they assume behavior is largely a matter of choice.

In practice, choice is constrained.

Before any individual decides how to act, they are already operating within a set of conditions that shape what feels possible, appropriate, or worthwhile. These conditions are often unspoken, but they are consistently understood.

Experienced leaders often recognize this implicitly. As Steve Knott observed in a leadership lecture, effective leaders must understand “who’s who in the zoo”—the informal dynamics, relationships, and pressures that shape how individuals actually behave, often several levels below them.

This awareness goes beyond formal roles or reporting structures. It reflects an understanding that influence, risk, and incentives are not evenly distributed, and that these factors shape how and whether individuals engage in conflict.

The framework presented here makes those conditions explicit and provides a structured way to assess and adjust them.

Behavior is not only a function of skill. It is a function of context.

When organizations focus exclusively on improving individual behavior, they address only part of the system. The remaining conditions continue to operate, often in ways that override training.

A more effective approach is to make these conditions visible and manageable.

If behavior follows conditions, then improving conflict outcomes requires attention to those conditions.

## **The Constraint Identification & Design Framework**

The framework provides a practical way to understand and influence how conflict unfolds.

It consists of six core constraint categories and a repeatable operating loop.

- Time Pressure
- Power / Authority
- Incentives & Consequences
- Risk Exposure
- Information & Clarity
- Capacity & Cognitive Load

These categories represent the most common factors shaping behavior in organizational conflict.

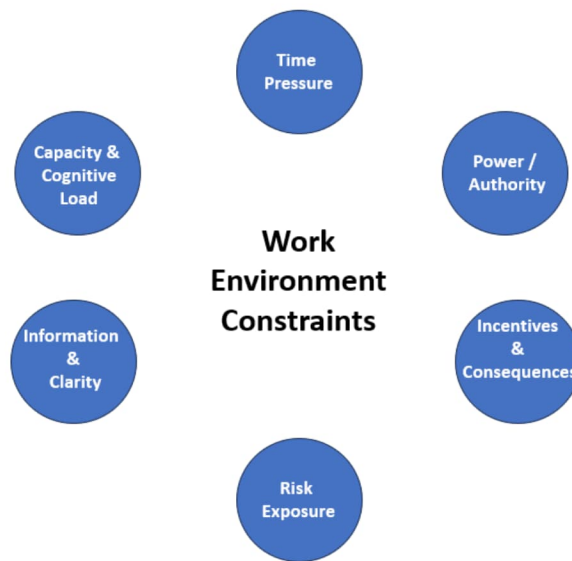


Figure 1: Work Environment Constraints

## The Operating Loop

- **Scan:** What constraints are present?
- **Clarify Context:** What am I missing? Do I understand the decision stage, others' constraints, and my latitude to intervene?
- **Interpret:** What behavior are these constraints producing?
- **Diagnose:** Are constraints aligned or in conflict?
- **Help:** What can I realistically do to improve the conditions?
- **Observe:** What changed?
- **Monitor:** How will I ensure follow-through so this does not get lost?

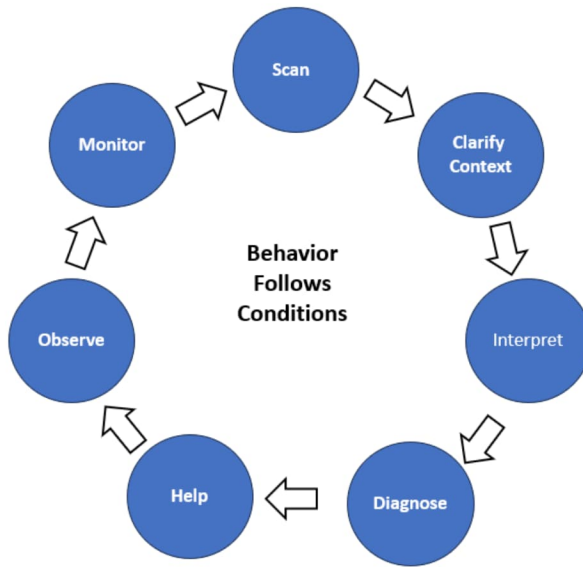


Figure 2: Constraint Identification & Design Framework

### Core Diagnostic Lens

- Am I sure they believe they are right?
- Do they believe it will matter if they speak up?
- Do they have the capacity to engage?

Before interpreting behavior, leaders must assess how individuals are likely evaluating their situation. These questions provide a quick diagnostic lens for understanding whether engagement is likely—and why it may not occur.

| Behavior   | Primary Constraint Drivers                                                                                                                    |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Silence    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High perceived risk</li> <li>• Low perceived impact</li> </ul>                                       |
| Escalation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High time pressure</li> <li>• High visibility</li> </ul>                                             |
| Withdrawal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low perceived impact</li> <li>• Low perceived incentive</li> <li>• Low available capacity</li> </ul> |

Figure 3: Behavior Outcomes Comparison

## Scenarios

### Scenario 1: Silence Under Constraint

A decision is being discussed in a meeting. An employee recognizes a potential flaw or risk in the proposed approach. They have the experience and knowledge to raise a meaningful concern. They remain silent.

After the meeting, they may express reservations privately or simply proceed with the decision as directed.

From a traditional perspective, this behavior is often interpreted as disengagement, lack of confidence, or unwillingness to take ownership.

Viewed through the lens of constraints, a different explanation emerges.

The individual is not simply deciding whether to speak. They are evaluating the conditions in which speaking would occur.

They consider whether the decision is already effectively made, whether their input will influence the outcome, and what the potential consequences might be if they are wrong or if their challenge is unwelcome. They may also weigh the time available to explore the issue and their own capacity to engage in what could become a prolonged discussion.

If the perceived cost of raising the concern exceeds the expected benefit, silence becomes a rational response.

### Applying the Framework

#### Scan

Multiple constraints are present. The decision appears to be moving quickly, indicating time pressure. Authority is likely concentrated with the meeting leader or a senior participant. Risk exposure is elevated due to the visibility of the setting. Incentives may favor alignment over challenge. Information may be incomplete, and the individual may not be fully certain of their position. Capacity may also be limited.

#### Clarify Context

Before interpreting the silence, the leader must consider what is not visible. Is the decision already considered final? Does the individual believe their input will matter? How confident are they in their assessment? What risks do they perceive in speaking up? Does the leader have the latitude to slow the discussion to allow for input?

## **Interpret**

The behavior—silence—is not necessarily disengagement. It is a response to the current set of conditions. The individual has concluded that speaking up is unlikely to change the outcome or carries more risk than benefit.

## **Diagnose**

The constraints are in conflict. There is an expectation of accuracy or thoroughness, but also pressure for speed and alignment. There may be an implicit expectation to contribute, but a perceived risk in doing so. This combination produces hesitation and restraint.

## **Help**

Rather than addressing the individual's behavior directly, the leader adjusts the conditions.

They may pause the discussion and clarify that the decision is still open. They may explicitly invite concerns before moving forward. They may create a lower-pressure opportunity for input outside the group setting. They may acknowledge that raising concerns is expected at this stage.

These actions reduce the cost of speaking up and increase the likelihood that relevant information will surface.

## **Observe**

If the adjustment is effective, changes are often immediate. The individual may offer input during the meeting or shortly afterward. The tone of the discussion may shift from agreement to exploration. Additional perspectives may emerge.

If there is no change, it may indicate that the wrong constraint was addressed or that multiple constraints remain unresolved.

## **Monitor**

To ensure the issue does not fade, the leader incorporates follow-through into existing routines. This may be as simple as adding a note to the next one-on-one agenda to revisit the decision or setting a brief calendar reminder to check whether concerns have surfaced.

These small actions ensure that the adjustment is sustained and that similar situations are handled more effectively over time.

## **Implication**

Silence in this context is not a failure of communication skill. It is a predictable outcome of the environment.

When leaders focus only on encouraging individuals to speak up, they address the symptom rather than the cause. When they adjust the conditions that make speaking up costly or ineffective, behavior changes accordingly.

## Scenario 2: Escalation Under Pressure

A decision is being discussed in a meeting with multiple stakeholders. Time is limited, expectations are high, and the outcome is visible to others. As the discussion progresses, disagreement sharpens. Participants begin to interrupt, positions become more rigid, and the tone shifts from exploration to defense.

What began as a discussion turns into an escalation.

From a traditional perspective, this is often attributed to personality differences, poor communication, or lack of emotional control.

Viewed through the lens of constraints, the behavior reflects the conditions of the moment.

Participants are operating under time pressure, with limited opportunity to explore alternatives. The visibility of the setting increases the perceived risk of appearing uncertain or wrong. Authority dynamics influence who speaks and how strongly positions are asserted. Incentives favor decisiveness and confidence, even when information is incomplete.

Under these conditions, individuals move quickly from considering options to defending positions.

## Applying the Framework

### Scan

The constraint environment is compressed and intensified. Time pressure is high. Risk exposure is elevated due to the public nature of the discussion. Authority is active and visible. Incentives favor speed and decisiveness. Information is likely incomplete. Capacity is reduced as individuals react rather than reflect.

### Clarify Context

Before interpreting the escalation as interpersonal conflict, the leader considers the situation. Is this a discussion or a decision point? Do participants believe they need to defend their position publicly? Is there sufficient information to make a decision? Does the leader have the latitude to slow the conversation in the interest of clarity?

## **Interpret**

The observed behavior—interruption, rigidity, sharper tone—is not simply conflict between individuals. It is a response to pressure. Participants are attempting to maintain credibility, protect their position, and reach closure under constrained conditions.

## **Diagnose**

Constraints are reinforcing each other. Time pressure increases risk. Risk combined with visibility encourages defensiveness. Incomplete information combined with urgency produces premature certainty. The result is a rapid escalation that appears interpersonal but is structurally driven.

## **Help**

Effective intervention focuses on adjusting the conditions rather than controlling individuals.

The leader may pause the discussion to slow the pace. They may clarify that the decision is not yet final. They may separate discussion from decision-making. They may move part of the conversation to a lower-visibility setting. They may refocus the group on the problem to be solved rather than the positions being defended.

These actions reduce pressure, lower perceived risk, and reopen space for exploration.

## **Observe**

When conditions are adjusted effectively, changes are often visible quickly. Tone moderates. Interruptions decrease. Participants shift from absolute statements to conditional reasoning. Additional information and perspectives begin to emerge.

If escalation continues, it may indicate that the underlying constraints remain in place or that the adjustment did not address the dominant pressure.

## **Monitor**

Escalation under pressure often recurs in similar settings. The leader ensures follow-through by incorporating small structural adjustments into future interactions. This may include clarifying decision stages at the outset of meetings or revisiting prior discussions in one-on-one conversations to assess whether the pace or setting contributed to the outcome.

## **Implication**

Escalation in this context is not primarily a function of personality. It is a predictable response to compressed time, elevated risk, and visible stakes.

When leaders attempt to manage escalation by focusing on individual behavior alone, they address the surface of the issue. When they adjust the conditions that produce defensive and accelerated responses, the nature of the interaction changes.

### **Scenario 3: Withdrawal Over Time**

An employee who was previously engaged begins to participate less. In meetings, they offer fewer opinions. They respond when asked but rarely initiate input. Over time, they appear compliant but detached.

There is no single triggering event. The change is gradual.

From a traditional perspective, this behavior is often labeled as disengagement, lack of motivation, or declining commitment.

Viewed through the lens of constraints, a different pattern emerges.

The individual is responding to a set of conditions that have made active participation less valuable or more costly over time. Prior input may not have influenced outcomes. Raising concerns may have carried risk or led to friction. Workload may have increased, reducing available capacity to engage. The connection between their contribution and meaningful impact may no longer be clear.

Under these conditions, withdrawal is not abrupt. It is learned.

### **Applying the Framework**

#### **Scan**

The dominant constraints differ from the previous scenarios. Capacity and cognitive load may be elevated due to workload or competing demands. Incentives for engagement may be weak or unclear. Risk exposure may be present if prior input led to negative outcomes. Authority may feel distant or unresponsive. Information may not clearly connect the individual's role to decisions.

#### **Clarify Context**

Before interpreting the behavior, the leader considers what may have changed. Has the individual's workload increased? Have their contributions been acknowledged or acted upon? Do they believe their input has impact? Is there a history of their concerns being overlooked? Does the leader have the latitude to create space for a different kind of conversation?

## **Interpret**

The behavior—reduced participation—is not necessarily a lack of interest. It reflects a conclusion that engagement is not effective, not valued, or not worth the effort relative to other demands.

## **Diagnose**

The constraints are reinforcing rather than colliding. Low perceived impact, combined with limited incentives and reduced capacity, leads to a steady decline in participation. If risk is also present, the tendency toward withdrawal is strengthened.

## **Help**

Effective action focuses on restoring the conditions that make participation worthwhile.

The leader may re-establish the connection between the individual's input and outcomes. They may revisit prior contributions and acknowledge where input was not fully considered. They may create a lower-pressure setting for discussion, such as a one-on-one conversation. They may clarify where the individual's input is most needed and adjust expectations to align with available capacity.

These actions signal that participation has value and that it will be considered.

## **Observe**

If the adjustment is effective, changes appear gradually. The individual begins to offer input more readily. Contributions become more specific. Engagement increases in situations where relevance and impact are clear.

If there is no change, it may indicate that the underlying constraints—particularly capacity or perceived impact—have not been meaningfully addressed.

## **Monitor**

Because withdrawal develops over time, sustained attention is required. The leader incorporates follow-up into existing routines, such as revisiting engagement during one-on-one discussions or observing participation patterns across multiple meetings. Consistency matters more than intensity.

## **Implication**

Withdrawal in this context is not simply disengagement. It is a rational response to conditions that reduce the value or increase the cost of participation.

When leaders attempt to correct this behavior through encouragement alone, the underlying conditions remain unchanged. When they address the factors that make participation meaningful and manageable, engagement is more likely to return.

Across these scenarios, different behaviors—silence, escalation, and withdrawal—emerge from different combinations of the same underlying constraints.

The implication is consistent:

Behavior does not need to be forced to change.  
It changes when the conditions that shape it are adjusted.

The final section of this paper examines what this means for leaders in practice and how this approach can be applied consistently within existing organizational structures.

## **Leader Implications and Practical Application**

The framework does not require new systems. It requires a shift in attention and consistent application.

When behavior does not align with expectations, the question is not only what individuals should do differently, but what conditions are shaping their behavior.

Leaders influence these conditions through small, deliberate actions.

- Clarifying decision stages.
- Inviting dissent.
- Creating lower-risk channels for input.
- Ensuring follow-through through existing routines.

These actions are not complex. Their effectiveness depends on consistency.

*There are no one-time fixes. No guarantees.*

Effective use of this approach requires personal managerial discipline. Without it, even well-judged adjustments will fade under competing demands.

The objective is not to eliminate conflict, but to create conditions where conflict contributes to better decisions.

In this context, managing individuals is less about directing behavior and more about shaping the conditions under which that behavior occurs. When individuals are placed in environments where their input can influence outcomes, where risk is manageable, and where capacity allows for engagement, they are more likely to contribute value and develop professionally over time.

## Closing Thought

Improving how conflict is handled is not primarily a matter of teaching better techniques.

It is a matter of understanding and shaping the environment in which those techniques must be applied.

When leaders attend to that environment—consistently and deliberately—behavior follows.

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*The concepts presented in this paper reflect ongoing work in conflict analysis and organizational process design conducted by MCL & Associates, Inc.*

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## About MCL & Associates, Inc.

MCL & Associates, Inc. focuses on analyzing and improving organizational processes, with particular emphasis on how constraints shape behavior, decision-making, and performance outcomes.

Drawing on experience in process engineering, conflict analysis, and systems thinking, the firm works with organizations to identify structural factors that influence how individuals and teams engage—particularly under conditions of pressure, uncertainty, and competing priorities.

### Applying the Framework in Practice

The Constraint Identification & Design Framework presented in this paper can be applied in a range of organizational contexts, including:

- Diagnosing environments where critical input is not surfacing
- Improving decision-making under time pressure and high visibility
- Aligning authority, incentives, and expectations
- Reducing unproductive escalation and disengagement
- Strengthening practical conflict-resolution capabilities

The focus is not on changing individuals, but on adjusting the conditions under which individuals are expected to perform.

### Typical Engagement Areas

Work is structured around practical application rather than theory, and may include:

- Leadership discussions and working sessions
- Process and decision-environment diagnostics
- Targeted workshops focused on real scenarios
- Advisory support for ongoing organizational challenges

All work is grounded in observable behavior and operational realities, with an emphasis on actionable insight.

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