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Early Signals: Detecting Conflict Before It Escalates

Why the most important moments in conflict are often the least visible

Lowe Insights
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Conflict is most often addressed at the point where it becomes visible—when tension surfaces, communication breaks down, or disagreement escalates. By that stage, the dynamics shaping the conflict are already in motion. This paper focuses on what comes before: the subtle, often overlooked signals that indicate a shift is underway.

> The central premise is this: **Conflict is rarely sudden. It becomes visible only after it has already begun.**

The Moment Before It Becomes a Problem

Most people can identify when conflict is present. A conversation becomes tense. A decision stalls. A disagreement becomes explicit. These are recognizable moments. They are also **late-stage indicators**.

What is less visible is the period before these moments—when something begins to shift, but has not yet formed into a clear issue. This is where conflict begins to take shape.

The Nature of Early Signals

Early signals are not definitive. They do not announce themselves as problems.

A change in tone

Difficult to name, easy to rationalize away in the moment.

A hesitation

Where there was previously ease, a pause now lingers.

A pattern of delay or avoidance

Responses slow, meetings get rescheduled, topics get sidestepped.

Repeated misunderstanding

Each instance feels minor in isolation—but they accumulate.

ⓘ Individually, these signals are easy to dismiss. Collectively, they form a trajectory.

Why These Signals Are Missed

Early signals tend to go unnoticed for several reasons. Understanding these barriers is the first step toward overcoming them.

Ambiguity

They are open to interpretation. It is not immediately clear whether they matter or signal something meaningful.

Competing Priorities

Attention is often directed toward what feels urgent, not what feels uncertain or still forming.

Social Risk

Naming something too early can feel unnecessary, presumptuous, or even disruptive to the group.

Normalization

Patterns that repeat over time can begin to feel expected rather than noteworthy or worth addressing.

⚠ These factors create a gap between **what is happening** and **what is acknowledged**—and that gap is where conflict takes root.

From Signal to Pattern

The challenge is not simply recognizing a single signal. It is recognizing **repetition**.

When similar moments occur across time—the same tension between the same individuals, the same hesitation in similar conversations, the same breakdown following a familiar sequence—the issue is no longer isolated. It is **patterned**.

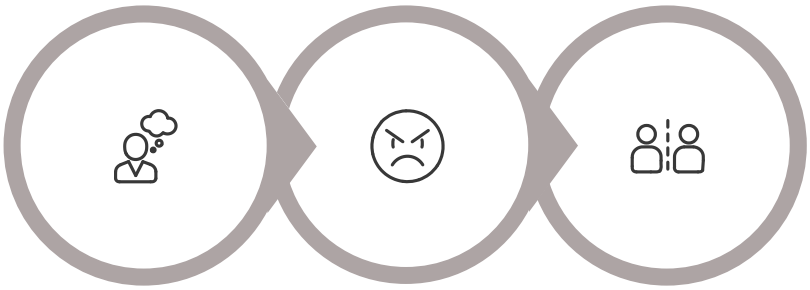
At this stage, the system is signaling something more consistent than a one-time disruption.

Patterns to Watch

- Same tension, same individuals
- Same hesitation, similar contexts
- Same breakdown, familiar sequence

Escalation as Accumulation

Conflict rarely escalates in a single leap. It builds. Small, unaddressed moments accumulate over time.



By the time conflict becomes explicit, these accumulated layers shape how it is experienced. The response is no longer to a single issue, but to everything that preceded it—making resolution far more complex.

The Cost of Late Recognition

When conflict is only recognized at the point of escalation, the conditions for resolution become significantly more difficult.

Greater Emotional Weight

Conversations carry accumulated frustration, making it harder to engage with the immediate issue clearly.

Fixed Positions

Positions become more entrenched. Flexibility decreases as each party has more invested in their stance.

More Effort Required

Resolution demands significantly more time and resources when conflict has been allowed to fully escalate.

Research on conflict escalation suggests that early-stage intervention is more effective because positions are still flexible and less defined.[1] Late recognition limits the range of possible responses.

What It Means to Intervene Early

Early intervention does not mean resolving an issue immediately. It means **engaging with it while it is still forming**.

→ Name a shift in tone

Without assigning meaning or blame—simply acknowledging that something feels different.

→ Ask a question

Instead of drawing a conclusion. Curiosity keeps the conversation open.

→ Revisit a recurring moment

Before it solidifies into a fixed pattern or entrenched position.

These actions are small, but they interrupt accumulation.

Designing for Awareness

Recognizing early signals is not only an individual skill. It is influenced by the environment in which people work and communicate.

Regular Reflection

Structured opportunities to pause and examine what is happening beneath the surface of day-to-day interactions.

Norms for Uncertainty

Cultures that allow uncertainty to be voiced without judgment make it safer to raise early-stage concerns.

Clarity Over Speed

Communication practices that prioritize understanding over efficiency create space for signals to be heard.

In these environments, signals are more likely to be noticed—and addressed.

An Illustrative Contrast

Setting A — Signals Dismissed

Repeated misunderstandings were treated as isolated miscommunications. Each instance was addressed briefly, then set aside. Over time, frustration built, and a larger conflict emerged.

- Patterns went untracked
- Questions were not asked early
- Assumptions solidified unexamined

Setting B — Signals Engaged

Similar moments were approached differently. Patterns were noted across conversations, questions were asked earlier, and assumptions were surfaced before they solidified.

- Patterns tracked across time
- Questions asked proactively
- Assumptions surfaced early

> The difference was not in the absence of tension, but in **when attention was applied**.

Key Insights

1

Subtle and Ambiguous

Early signals are often subtle, ambiguous, and easy to dismiss—which is precisely why they are so frequently missed.

2

Accumulation, Not Sudden Change

Conflict escalates through the accumulation of small, unaddressed moments—not through a single dramatic event.

3

Repetition Over Intensity

Repetition is a more reliable indicator of emerging conflict than the intensity of any single moment.

4

Timing Shapes Outcomes

The timing of attention shapes the range of possible outcomes—earlier attention preserves more options.

Strategic Implications



For Leaders

- Pay attention to shifts, not just breakdowns
- Create space for early-stage conversations



For Teams

- Track recurring moments, not just major conflicts
- Normalize raising concerns before they escalate



For Organizations

- Build systems that support reflection and feedback
- Value early intervention as much as resolution

Conclusion: Learning to Notice

The earliest moments of conflict are rarely dramatic. They are quiet, uncertain, and easy to overlook. But they are also where the most flexibility exists.

> **The difference between escalation and alignment is often not what is done at the peak of conflict, but what is noticed—and addressed—before it gets there.**

Developing the capacity to recognize early signals is not about predicting conflict or eliminating tension. It is about cultivating the kind of attention that keeps options open—and keeps small moments from becoming large ones.

References

1. Friedrich Glasl, *Confronting Conflict* (Stroud: Hawthorn Press, 1999).
2. Morton Deutsch, *The Resolution of Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

About Lowe Insights

Lowe Insights, led by Nashay Lowe, PhD, provides research-grounded frameworks for conflict awareness, organizational communication, and early intervention strategy. This white paper is part of an ongoing series on conflict dynamics in professional settings.

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