WHITE PAPER | APRIL 2026

From Individual Reaction to Collective Practice: Building Cultures of Conflict Competence

Lowe Insights | Nashay Lowe, PhD

Why sustainable change depends on systems, not just skill

> Sustainable change does not come from what people know. It comes from what systems consistently reinforce.



Executive Summary

Organizations often invest in communication and conflict training with the expectation that improved skills will lead to better outcomes. In many cases, they do—briefly. Over time, however, familiar patterns tend to return. Conversations revert. Tension resurfaces. The same dynamics reappear under pressure.

This is not typically a failure of individuals. It is a reflection of the systems in which they operate. This white paper examines why conflict patterns persist even after intervention and explores how organizations can move from isolated skill-building to collective practice embedded in everyday operations.

Central Premise

Sustainable change does not come from what people know. It comes from what systems consistently reinforce.

This Paper Explores

- Why conflict patterns persist after intervention
- How to move from skill-building to collective practice
- What systems must do to sustain change

Introduction: The Limits of Good Intentions

In many organizations, efforts to improve communication follow a familiar path—and a familiar cycle.

1

Training Delivered

New language is introduced and teams leave with shared intentions

2

Visible Change

Conversations become more thoughtful, feedback more direct, tension handled with greater care

3

Gradual Reversion

Under pressure, time constraints, or competing priorities, old patterns return

This cycle is common. It reflects a gap between learning and environment.

Why Behavior Reverts

Behavior does not exist in isolation. It is shaped by context. Even when individuals adopt new approaches, their ability to sustain them depends on several environmental factors. Research in organizational learning suggests that without reinforcement, new behaviors are unlikely to persist.[1] When the surrounding system remains unchanged, it continues to produce the same outcomes.

Time for Reflection

Whether the pace of work allows individuals to pause and apply new approaches

Communication Norms

The unwritten rules that govern how people speak, listen, and respond

Leadership Expectations

The standards set—explicitly or implicitly—by those in positions of authority

Consequences for Speaking Up

Whether candor is rewarded or silence is the safer choice

The Difference Between Skill and Practice

Skill

The ability to apply a concept when called upon. Organizations frequently invest here—through workshops, training sessions, and facilitated conversations.

Practice

The repeated, consistent use of that ability over time. Fewer organizations deliberately design for this. It requires system-level support, not just individual willingness.

> Like learning a language in a classroom versus using it daily in conversation—without use, fluency fades. The same is true for conflict competence.

Many organizations invest in skill. Fewer design for practice. The distinction matters enormously for whether change endures.

How Systems Reinforce Patterns

Organizational systems shape behavior in subtle but powerful ways. Over time, these systems create consistent patterns—regardless of individual intention.

Meeting Structures

If meetings prioritize speed over dialogue, reflection is limited and new communication behaviors have no space to emerge.

Decision-Making Processes

If decisions are made quickly by a few voices, broader participation diminishes and diverse perspectives go unheard.

Feedback Norms

If feedback is infrequent or risky, issues go unaddressed and tension accumulates beneath the surface.

Performance Pressures

If outcomes are prioritized without attention to process, reactive behavior is reinforced and relational costs are ignored.

From Intervention to Integration

To shift patterns, organizations must move beyond isolated interventions. This requires integrating new ways of engaging into daily operations—not adding more work, but changing how existing work is done.

Embed Structured Dialogue

Incorporate intentional conversation into regular meetings—not as an add-on, but as a core element of how teams operate together.

Create Consistent Reflection Spaces

Build recurring opportunities for teams to examine what is working, what is not, and what patterns are emerging.

Align Leadership Behavior

Ensure that leadership actions consistently reflect stated communication values—especially under pressure, when alignment matters most.

What Collective Practice Looks Like

When conflict competence becomes embedded, it is visible in everyday interaction. These shifts are often subtle, but they accumulate. Over time, they redefine what is normal.

Earlier Engagement

Tension is addressed earlier, not avoided—before it compounds into something harder to resolve.

Broader Perspectives

Conversations include multiple viewpoints before conclusions are reached, improving both quality and buy-in.

Productive Disagreement

Disagreement is engaged without immediate escalation—treated as information rather than threat.

The Role of Leadership in Reinforcement

Leaders play a central role in shaping which behaviors persist. Not through formal directives alone, but through the texture of everyday interaction. Research shows that organizational culture is strongly influenced by what leaders consistently model.[2]

If leaders revert to reactive patterns, others are likely to follow. If leaders demonstrate reflection and intentionality, those patterns begin to spread throughout the organization.



How they respond under pressure

The moments of stress reveal the true behavioral standard more clearly than any stated value.

What they prioritize in conversation

Whether speed or depth, efficiency or inclusion—these choices signal what actually matters.

What they reward or overlook

Patterns that go unaddressed are implicitly endorsed. Patterns that are recognized are reinforced.

Building Conditions for Sustainability

Sustained change is supported by several reinforcing conditions that work together to create an environment where new patterns can take hold.

Repetition

New behaviors must be used regularly to become familiar and eventually automatic.

Visibility

Patterns must be observable to be addressed. What cannot be seen cannot be changed.

Alignment

Systems, norms, and expectations must support the same behaviors—not pull in different directions.

Adaptation

Practices must evolve as the organization changes, remaining relevant rather than becoming ritual.

An Illustrative Shift

The Initial Pattern

In one organization, communication training initially led to noticeable improvement. However, within months, teams returned to previous habits. A closer look revealed systemic barriers that no amount of individual skill could overcome on its own.

Meetings lacked dialogue time

Agendas were packed; reflection had no place.

Feedback was not built in

No structured mechanism existed for ongoing input.

Leadership responses varied

Under pressure, consistency broke down at the top.

The Shift

When these systems were adjusted—adding structured reflection to meetings and reinforcing consistent leadership behavior—change began to stabilize.

The difference was not additional training. It was system alignment.

Key Insights

Behavior is shaped by systems, not just intention

Individual will is necessary but insufficient. The surrounding environment determines what is sustainable.

Training introduces change; systems determine whether it lasts

The investment in learning must be matched by investment in the conditions that support it.

Practice requires repetition within everyday work

Competence is built through consistent use, not occasional application.

Leadership behavior reinforces or disrupts patterns

What leaders do under pressure sets the standard more powerfully than what they say in calm moments.

Strategic Implications

For Leaders

- Align behavior with the practices you want to see repeated
- Create space for reflection within existing processes

For Organizations

- Examine how systems reinforce current patterns
- Integrate communication practices into daily operations

For Teams

- Focus on consistency rather than perfection
- Use repeated moments as opportunities to reinforce new patterns

Conclusion: Designing for What Endures

Change is often approached as an event—a training, an initiative, a moment of focus. But lasting change is not an event; it is a pattern that emerges through repeated interactions, reinforced expectations, and the structures that shape everyday behavior. What organizations call “change” is often only the beginning of a longer process in which new practices must be supported, revisited, and normalized over time if they are to take root.

Seen this way, conflict competence is not something organizations achieve by asking individuals to become more skilled in isolation. It is something they design for intentionally. That design includes the routines, forums, feedback loops, and leadership behaviors that make constructive dialogue more likely and reactive patterns less likely. When systems are arranged to support reflection, accountability, and consistency, they reduce the burden on individual effort and create conditions in which better habits can be repeated until they become part of the organizational fabric.

Organizations that commit to this systemic approach can do more than resolve conflict more effectively. They can cultivate cultures in which difference is addressed with greater clarity, trust is strengthened through practice, and learning becomes a durable organizational capability. In that sense, the work of change is not simply to improve a moment of response, but to shape an environment in which better responses are more likely to endure.

> Over time, these systems reshape interaction. Not through force, but through consistency.

References

1. Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, *Organizational Learning II* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

2. Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

3. Edgar H. Schein, "Organizational Culture," *American Psychologist* 45, no. 2 (1990): 109–119.

Learn More

Explore additional research, white papers, and resources on building cultures of conflict competence.

Visit Lowe Insights