

LEADING THROUGH CONFLICT

The Indirect Types: Conflict You Can't See

What You're Seeing: Conflict that hides beneath the surface — polite in public, resistant in private. The Indirect Types don't raise their voice; they withdraw, delay, or reframe. What looks like calm is often discomfort — or quiet opposition.

Your Leadership Goal: Surface what's hidden. Create safe, structured ways for people to voice concerns directly so tension doesn't fester in silence.

The Avoider

Goal: Influence indirectly.

Method: Stays quiet in meetings, then critiques privately.

Signature Move: "Some of us are concerned..." after the meeting ends.

Impact: Erodes trust and fuels side conversations.

Why It Matters: Private resistance weakens public collaboration.

✓ What Works

- Invite input early and by name.
- Model openness to disagreement by asking for dissenting views.
- Use structured feedback tools (anonymous forms, etc.).

✗ Avoid

- Letting hallway talk go unaddressed.
- Rewarding indirect feedback with private attention.

💡 Leadership Cue

- They don't vanish, they whisper. Bring their voice into the open.

The Victim

Goal: Gain sympathy or deflect responsibility.

Method: Frames change as unfair or personal.

Signature Move: "This always happens to me."

Impact: Drains morale and diverts focus from solutions.

Why It Matters: Victim narratives spread faster than facts.

✓ What Works

- Acknowledge emotion, not the storyline.
- Reframe around fairness and consistency.
- Pair empathy with accountability.

✗ Avoid

- Overexplaining or softening clear expectations.
- Offering exceptions to ease discomfort.

💡 Leadership Cue

- Empathy isn't agreement — it's respectful accountability.

The Ghost

Goal: Stay invisible and dodge discomfort.

Method: Withdraws, skips meetings, avoids topics that cause tension.

Signature Move: "I didn't get the email."

Impact: Progress stalls; others pick up their slack.

Why It Matters: Avoidance teaches that showing up is optional.

✓ What Works

- Clarify expectations for engagement.
- Follow up privately when patterns emerge.
- Link participation to outcomes and ownership.

✗ Avoid

- Ignoring silence because it's convenient.
- Doing their part "to keep things moving."

💡 Leadership Cue

- Avoidance thrives on ambiguity — clarity is the antidote.

The Historian

Goal: Anchor the group in past failures.

Method: References old examples to block new ideas.

Signature Move: "We tried that before — it didn't work."

Impact: Keeps innovation stuck in nostalgia.

Why It Matters: When the past leads, progress stalls.

✓ What Works

- Acknowledge past lessons, then shift to "what's different now."
- Invite them to help define success this time.
- Use their experience as context, not control.

✗ Avoid

- Debating history or dismissing it entirely.
- Letting old wounds dictate new priorities.

💡 Leadership Cue

- Respect experience — but don't let it write today's script.



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This guide is part of The Academic Leader's Playbook: *Conflict Series* — a three-part toolkit on Direct, Indirect, and Controlling conflict styles found in higher ed. Designed to help leaders recognize, navigate, and reduce tension before it derails their work.