

What You're Seeing: Conflict that isn't loud or quiet — it's strategic. These individuals influence outcomes through expertise, alliances, or image management.

Your Leadership Goal: Bring transparency and fairness to the process. Anchor decisions in shared values and visible systems instead of hidden influence.

The Sage

Goal: Control through expertise.

Method: Positions themselves as the "most informed" voice in the room.

Signature Move: "Let me explain how this really works..."

Impact: Others defer; discussion narrows around their authority.

Why It Matters: Expertise becomes a weapon when it silences contribution.

✓ What Works

- Acknowledge knowledge, then widen the lens: "That's helpful — what other perspectives do we see?"
- Reinforce shared decision-making and collective ownership.
- Use data or process as neutral ground.

✗ Avoid

- Competing to prove you're "smarter."
- Ignoring their expertise completely — it escalates defensiveness.

💡 Leadership Cue

- Respect expertise but redistribute voice.

The Divider

Goal: Maintain influence through relationships.

Method: Builds alliances, spreads selective information, shapes narratives behind the scenes.

Signature Move: "Just between us..."

Impact: Creates factions and mistrust; collaboration becomes political.

Why It Matters: Hidden alliances fracture transparency and waste emotional energy.

✓ What Works

- Address patterns privately and factually: "I'm hearing different messages — can we align on one shared communication?"
- Emphasize open communication and shared accountability.
- Keep decisions visible and documented.

✗ Avoid

- Gossiping or sharing frustrations with their allies.
- Publicly calling them out — it feeds their narrative.

💡 Leadership Cue

- Transparency disarms manipulation.

The Politician

Goal: Control through image.

Method: Manages upward beautifully; aligns with whoever currently holds influence.

Signature Move: Performs leadership instead of practicing it.

Impact: Decisions favor appearances over outcomes.

Why It Matters: The culture shifts from substance to optics — progress looks good on paper but lacks depth.

✓ What Works

- Keep discussions outcome-focused, not performative.
- Ask data-driven questions that reveal real results.
- Praise genuine follow-through, not performative effort.

✗ Avoid

- Joining the optics game — stay grounded in mission and integrity.
- Rewarding visibility over value.

💡 Leadership Cue

- Lead for integrity, not applause.



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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.