

PRAESTA

Covert Conflict: Finding A Constructive Way Forward

What do you do when dissent within a team is bubbling below the surface and needs to be acknowledged ? When we work with teams we are often conscious of underlying tensions that are ignored or regarded as too difficult to address.

We observe that in teams experiencing covert conflict

- Issues are obfuscated so they are much more difficult to resolve
- Some members do most of the talking while others stay silent
- Cliques may form, and create a sense of “us and them”
- Passive aggressive behaviour inhibits genuine dialogue
- Team members go along with conclusions while inwardly disagreeing with them and then find reasons to ignore or subvert what has been decided
- Members do not trust each other enough to surface their mistrust and name the reasons for it.

Leaders tell us that when they observe these symptoms, it is critical to find out what is really going on. There could be multiple reasons, including differing views on strategy and accountabilities, conflicting objectives within the teams’ responsibilities, or an underlying clash of personalities.

Leaders seek to create a safe space to explore questions like the following:

- What does this team exist to do and what do our stakeholders need of us?
- What are the risks to our success if underlying tensions are not addressed?
- How can we safely surface those tensions and what are they really about?
- What can we learn from teams we have known in the past who have addressed similar issues?
- How well do we understand each others’ personalities, and what can prompt each individual’s best and least constructive behaviours?
- How well do we appreciate the contribution that each of us makes to team success?
- How do we build greater trust and openness in the way we engage with each other?

Such discussions can be delicate. It often helps to start by gathering data from each team member on a confidential basis. It can be a good moment to involve outside observation or facilitation, or to bring in a team coach, so that the team can explore the different perspectives.

Our current sequence of Praesta Prompts is looking at how teams might respond to the demands of a changing environment.