

CONFRONTING CONFLICT: HANDLING AN EMOTIONAL STANDOFF

Does your team sometimes find itself in an emotional standoff and distracted from their core purpose? When we work with teams, we can notice team members bogged down in ongoing disagreements, or caught up with “winning” an argument.

Emotions can hijack what is supposed to be a logical discussion, for example:

- A team member criticises a colleague’s planned actions in a tone which is received as aggressive or patronising (even if not intended that way)
- The colleague perceives the comments as a personal attack and either escalates the aggression, or goes on the defensive and lays themselves open to more criticism
- Someone may intervene to shut down the conversation but the stand-off remains, and others may find themselves taking sides
- Suboptimal decisions may be taken as a way of deflecting emotions and moving on.

Leaders tell us their first step in addressing conflict is to bring awareness of what is happening. They may do this themselves or invite an observer to comment. They may comment in the moment or after the meeting, depending on circumstances and the level of trust in the room. They aim to role model a belief that:

- Everyone should practise noticing when their feelings are getting in the way of a rational discussion, and have strategies to pause, share and regroup
- It always pays to be curious about where others are coming from and to listen carefully when they speak. They may have spotted something which would make your proposal even better, or which you will need to anticipate when you go public.
- Open questions help to uncover others’ perspectives. Statements close things down.
- It is vital to have clarity about shared purpose, and ideally a shared set of values, so that the team can bring debate back to the outcomes they need to achieve.

Sometimes, conflict may be unresolvable, or behaviours unacceptable, with the leader needing to use their authority to impose solutions. But a team with sufficient trust can often resolve their differences by standing back and taking a look at themselves.

Our current sequence of Praesta Prompts looks at how teams can respond to the demands of a changing environment.