



# Conflict and communication

Building a high-performing team in engineering

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## ABSTRACT

This white paper explores the application of Gallup's CliftonStrengths® based on our work with the Women in Brunel Engineering and Computing (WiBEC) Mentoring Programme at Brunel University London. The study investigates the experiences of 20 engineering managers, Mentors in the scheme, focusing on observed/experienced team conflicts and their resolution strategies, often through a strengths-based approach. The high cost of conflict, both at an organisational level and in terms of individual wellbeing, underscores the importance of this exploration. The paper highlights how understanding personal motivators related to CliftonStrengths® can offer fresh perspectives and strategies to manage disagreements. The aim is to help individuals recognise their potential role in conflicts and learn from these Mentors to transform unhealthy conflict into constructive engagement, ultimately building high performing teams. The paper concludes with a summary of the 34 CliftonStrengths® to aid individuals in understanding how their CliftonStrengths® profile might contribute to conflicts and offers ideas for shifting perspectives.

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### Disclaimer

These views and the interpretations of the interviews undertaken to inform the work are solely those of the author. The views expressed in this paper are separate and independent of Gallup. CliftonStrengths® is the chosen instrument to support the WiBEC mentoring programme at Brunel University London and none of the study participants works for or is reimbursed by Gallup.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this white paper we explore the experiences of 20 engineering managers, the interpersonal conflicts they have seen, and how they take steps to build inclusion and engagement, often through strengths. The paper summarises their experiences of conflict at work, common areas of conflict in teams, and offers strategies for resolution using a strengths-based approach.

The aim is to help an individual consider how and where conflict may arise and the ways in which they might be complicit in a disagreement that could lead to conflict. We explore how to mitigate friction and move from a place of unhealthy conflict to one that is constructive.

Having used CliftonStrengths® from Gallup to support the Women in Brunel Engineering and Computing (WiBEC) Mentoring Programme for ten years, we wondered what we could learn from Mentors' experiences at work to help Mentees benefit more from the programme. We were also keen to align the value of the WiBEC programme and our involvement to the Engineering Council's core professional attributes outlined in UKSPEC 4.0 and the associated Accreditation of Higher Education Programmes (AHEP) guidelines.



## 2 BACKGROUND

Over the years, both Mentors and Mentees have mentioned (mis)communication as a cause of conflict or friction. Because communication is listed by the UK Engineering Council as a core engineering professional skill, we wanted to make sure our work supported this.

Being a good communicator is vital for an engineer, because rarely, if ever, does an engineer work in total isolation without interacting with a colleague or client/customer. Indeed, an engineer is likely to fulfil multiple roles of client/customer/leader and need to interact with many different people over the course of a project. If we are to lessen the impact of conflict on individuals, businesses, or indeed the economy, then it needs to be addressed at the earliest part of training. Mentors were emphatic that student engineers need to learn how to manage conflict early.

CliftonStrengths® is an online assessment tool, created from 40 years of research with 2 million people across the globe, led by Don Clifton. Rooted in positive psychology that focuses on what people do right, rather than their deficits, the assessment helps create a personalised insight into how someone thinks, feels, and gets things done. Essentially, it provides a new vocabulary to describe what motivates and energises each person.

We have found that by helping people deepen their understanding of CliftonStrengths® related motivators, this can provide a different perspective and offer ideas to take some ownership of a disagreement. This clarified the line of exploration for this study.

### Our study

We invited 80 Mentors from the Brunel University WiBEC Mentoring Programme to participate in short, semi-structured interviews. Our aim was to gather examples of the challenges engineers face in their working lives to use in our workshops with WiBEC students. We also asked: "Why is greater self-awareness important for early career engineers?" The time frame for the interviews was August and September 2023, and 20 Mentors were able to participate. None of the interviewees work for, or are reimbursed by, Gallup.

We were interested in the challenges Mentors face/have seen, their experiences of team conflict, and the tools/strategies they use to address these. We were also curious about how they benefit from participating in the WiBEC Mentoring Programme and using CliftonStrengths®.

### 3 WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT?

In the UK, around 38% of employees experience interpersonal conflict each year. In the U.S., employees spend almost three hours involved in conflict every week. According to research in the *Harvard Business Review*, conflict can consume up to 40% of a manager's time.

The personal, project, and organisational cost of conflict is substantial and can ripple across organisations. ACAS (ACAS, 2021) estimate that the annual cost to a business is £28.5 billion (Saunders and Unwin, 2021). The wider cost to the individual and their family is much greater in terms of individual wellbeing. The data is summarised in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 The impact of conflict on time, people's energy, and businesses, summarised from Laker and Pereira, 2021 and ACAS, 2021**

### The challenges facing engineers and engineering

Handling conflicts can be very stressful. While some people thrive on higher emotion, stressful situations, such as in the film and television industry or disaster mitigation, for others it can be a challenge to maintain inner calm:

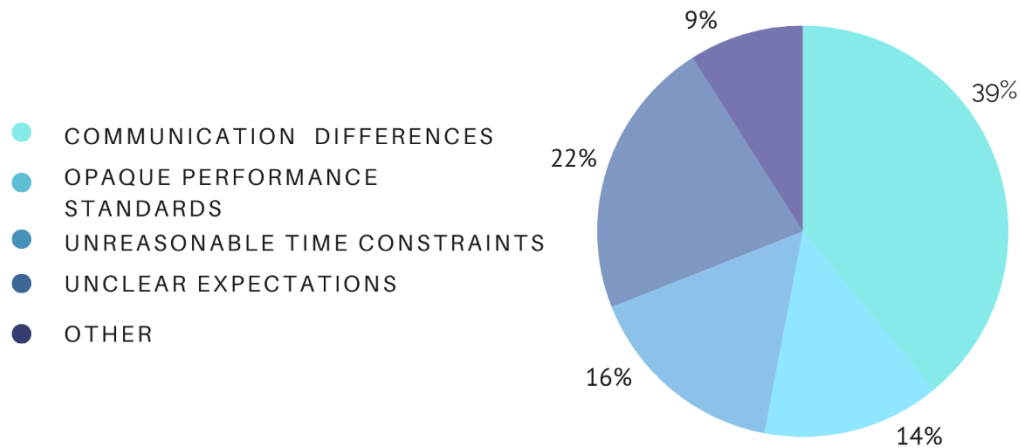
*"Being prepared for stressful times is especially important for engineers who think logically most of the time. Because when conflict hits them, it really does stress them out." (Mentor NE)*

Being more self-aware, knowing how you respond to certain situations and having strategies for facilitating conversations to reduce stress or emotion are vital for individuals' success and wellbeing. An example of a Mentor's strategy is:

*"That moment of conflict, you know, and keeping your inner self-calm and keeping the level of your speech low to try and disarm [the situation]." (Mentor NE)*

Within undergraduate engineering programmes the focus tends to be on technical communication in the form of writing and presentation, occasionally video, but not much beyond this, and certainly not on interpersonal dispute resolution. In some cases, students are introduced to active listening skills, though rarely have we seen mention of listening models or tools for analysing team conflicts and strategies for understanding others. A structured approach to project and people management within the undergraduate programme of study might start with an appreciation of the self – looking at individual perspectives then appreciating that others most likely see things from a different point of view. Alongside this we should be

introducing ways to ask better questions, and models for learning how to listen to the responses in greater depth, see for example the Otto Scharmer<sup>1</sup> or Oscar Trimboli<sup>2</sup> frameworks.



Source: Benjamin Laker and Vijay Pereira, May 2022, Harvard Business Review

**Figure 2 The main sources of conflict from a study by Laker and Pereira, 2021**

While conflict is an inherent part of team dynamics, it is mostly viewed as disruptive or negative. However, the Mentors stressed that it can also lead to growth and improved teamwork when handled effectively, but rarely is this achieved. According to Laker and Pereira (HBR 2022), communication differences account for nearly 40% of conflict (Figure 2). Engineers need tools, help and support to become better communicators.

## 4 OUR FINDINGS

Our interviews with 20 engineering managers were semi-structured, exploring challenges observed within teams: How mentors observed or had experienced conflict; their views on the main triggers; and strategies they have employed to address conflict. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. After data cleaning the responses underwent thematic analysis. The themes that emerged are summarised in this section.

### What challenges do Mentors face at work?

The most frequent challenges cited by Mentors are:

- ▶ Gaps in effective team working
- ▶ Communication conflicts
- ▶ Cultural challenges
- ▶ Pandemic-related issues, such as attitudes and staff churn
- ▶ Repeat errors, quality and consistency
- ▶ Economy related business change: businesses needing to pivot
- ▶ External [stakeholder] engagement and influence
- ▶ For consulting businesses – self-employment and workflow issues

<sup>1</sup> <https://worldofwork.io/2020/10/otto-scharmers-4-levels-of-listening-be-a-better-listener/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oscartrimboli.com/podcasts/>

## How do Mentors see conflict and disagreement?

WiBEC Mentors are experienced engineers. They shared many examples of conflict and ways of supporting their teams. One Mentor's strategy for people who don't do what they say they will is to get it in writing:

*"If I have it in writing that you're going to do ABC, then there's evidence that it hasn't happened, then I've got something to go back with.... it's hard to argue against it." (Mentor NE)*

Post-pandemic, there has been a lot of staff churn. It seems to be common to have people new to the company alongside people who have been there for 20+ years, with no-one in between. This creates a lot of scope for misunderstandings. New people are likely to challenge the way things are done, without understanding all the history. Those who've been there a long time understand very much what the impact of some of the changes might be but are not necessarily able to articulate it to someone who's not familiar with the business.

*"What triggers is the piece around the mismatch of understanding and expectation perhaps, and then a feeling that it's personal. So when they're being challenged, they feel a sense of attack." (Mentor HR)*

Many organisations operate flat structures, especially very large employers. One Mentor talked about how this has triggered conflict as people jostle to be noticed for pay rises, positions and promotion. A number of other Mentors affirmed this, describing it as "people's egos getting in the way of progress."

*"Most conflict comes from people trying to showcase themselves above others." (Mentor KR)*

*"When people think they know it all, and/or have insecurities, they're a bit more brash, because they don't want to be caught out. So I think it's very much ego driven." (Mentor GE)*

Performance management – using a once or twice-yearly cycle – is where people are calibrated against each other and everyone is placed along a curve. This has the potential for a lot of conflict. People's perceptions and expectations of each other are trigger points too:

*"Without fail, people are placed at a point they don't agree with." (Mentor KR)*

*"It's just others accepting people as they are rather than wanting to change them and mould them in certain ways." (Mentor AH)*

Conflicting priorities between individuals and teams are common causes of friction. It might be because individuals have a different approach or interpret an organisational goal differently, or one department has a set of conflicting KPIs to another. Holding on to information can also occur, and conflicting departmental timescales are common, so sharing priorities and transparency can help.

*"I think (not) sharing of information is probably the biggest thing that causes conflict. Also, different departments have different priorities. So, one thing is urgent for one department, but not for another. And the context of it can be left out of delivering something. So, if you don't have the context, you don't know how important it is." (Mentor KM)*

## Observations from Mentors on conflict triggers

We asked Mentors where they saw conflict and heard many examples of the triggers, summarised in section 5. The themes that emerged are:

- ▶ People's differing perceptions of a situation and their differing responses
- ▶ Mismatch in risks and actions of long-term employees and new intakes
- ▶ People's self-management, self-awareness, ego
- ▶ Misalignment of expectations between manager and team member through perceptions of style and commitment to deliver, bad planning or poor communication
- ▶ Being given tasks rather than ownership of a role or project
- ▶ People not feeling useful, valued or able to progress because of performance reviews, forced comparison to others and flat corporate structures
- ▶ Corporate goals and leadership actions and (apparent lack of) relevance to teams and individuals
- ▶ Silos and information sharing (or not)

These triggers fall into two broad categories: relational and structural (Lee, Shin, Kim, Park, 2018), Figure 4.

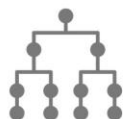
While much of the focus was on the negative aspect of conflict, Mentors were keen to point out that given the right environment and skillset, conflict could be constructive and a positive driver of change. These responses referenced psychological safety, training in the tools for managing constructive conversations, or capability to have open and candid conversations. All too often though, according to the Mentors, people simply don't have the skills to manage challenging conversations. Some Mentors used CliftonStrengths®, others used Insights and alternative tools within their organisations, to help people communicate better.

*"We are performance-managed, so we go through a twice-year performance management cycle. So it can create some conflict if you know everybody is rated. Sometimes people aren't rated to the level they think they should be, which can trigger conflict. Yeah, that's tricky....you're rated against what you do, but it's not just about what you do. Equally important is how you do it." (Mentor CK)*



### RELATIONAL

People can have widely different perceptions of a conversation, a situation, different values or beliefs. And levels of self-awareness and self-management mean personal filters and egos can interact, explosively at times.



### STRUCTURAL

Caused by misaligned performance indicators, sub-cultures, lack of, or controlled, information sharing, poor communication and alignment of organizational goals and leadership actions, and internal competition fuelled by performance management systems.

**Figure 4 Causes of conflict described by Mentors fit into these two categories. Interpersonal (relational) and organisational systems and processes (structural) (Lee, Shin, Kim, Park, 2018).**



Our focus in this paper is more on the relational aspects of conflict. However, through understanding strengths more, we can see how structural misalignment can affect people differently. And how, if organisations become strengths-based, they can reflect on how to address the Gallup 12<sup>3</sup> engagement questions and enable everyone to have a great day at work and boost engagement.

## What are the dynamics within teams that cause problems?

We asked Mentors about the personalities in teams and the strategies they use to help people fit in and feel like they belong. We heard about ‘loud’ and ‘brash’ characters. Others referred to ‘strong egos’ that can ‘get greater airtime than their quieter colleagues’. Of people whose confidence spills out and intimidates others, making them feel less worthy, less noticed, and even less heard. These behaviours aren’t conducive to building an inclusive, high-performing team. People are simply not being allowed to be their best.

The nature of being a Mentor of itself means they are likely to be sensitive to differences in their teams; they talked about how they work hard to help everybody to contribute, especially quieter colleagues. The Mentors are resourceful in finding ways to enable these quieter people to contribute. They are very aware that if they can’t, these contributions are lost – and that’s to the detriment of the team and the organisation. Mentors mentioned strategies including building confidence, helping team members appreciate other perspectives, and making sure people feel valued:

*“What I would do is just take the person aside, understand and work with them to build that confidence.” (Mentor GE)*

*“It’s all about getting that balance and making sure that everybody still feels valued.” (Mentor KR)*

*“I’ll stand up for the ‘weaker’ person and say, look, you can’t, that’s OK. But you gotta understand there’s also this other view and that this other person has their opinion.” (Mentor KG)*

Mentors definitely see their roles as building the skillset of their teams, for example:

*“I can make it about what his strength is and say, “James, I’d really value your thoughts. Given your particular perspective on the detail that we need to get right here.” So, I can shut the rest of the team down very quickly as well and focus in on one person.” (Mentor EH)*

This latter example was specifically about appreciating the person’s capacity for deep-thinking and noticing when things need fixing.

## 5 DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Reflecting on the interviews, research, and the tools we use in workshops to build inclusive, high-performing teams, Figure 3 emerged to help understand the many filters through which an individual sees the world: Our innate talents and values (strengths filters), the cultural norms and values of our formative years, and our personal attributes, neurological tendencies/or experiences. These shape how we show up. And in turn, how others perceive the emotions and behaviours that we show up with.

### WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Conflict is a fact of life. It isn’t inherently good or bad, but it can be uncomfortable. On an individual level it’s how we respond to, are irritated by, or disagree with others, and the way we are ‘wired’ that dictates

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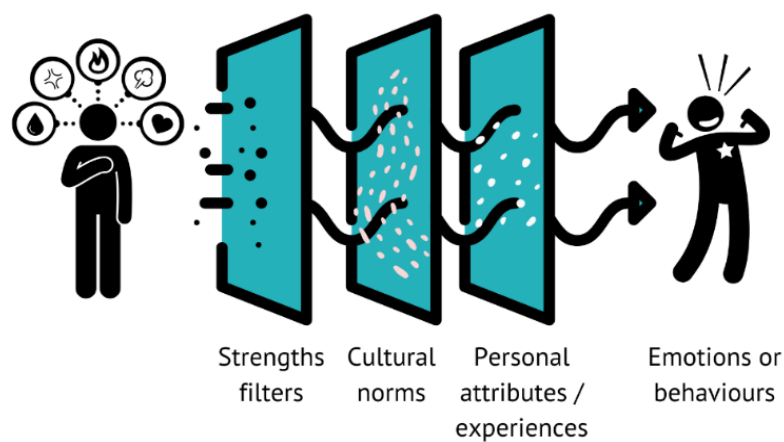
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/q12/>

how much we're impacted in a positive or negative way. Being mindful of ourselves and how we respond to others means we're more likely to be able to use disagreements constructively. It is, however, a journey. As each of us is unique, there can be no magic formula to define how we should respond when faced with things we don't agree with or that interfere with getting things done.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers the following definition of conflict, noun:

A: competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons) - *for example 'a conflict of principles.'*

B: mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands - *for example 'His conscience was in conflict with his duty.'*



**Figure 3 Our strengths, ways of thinking, feeling, and getting things done affect our emotions and behaviours. These are also influenced by our cultural values and norms and our personal attributes/experiences. Collectively, these shape how we show up to others.**

The negative emotions we experience when we're in unhealthy disagreements or conflict include: Anger, emptiness, frustration, inadequacy, helplessness, fear, guilt, loneliness, depression, overwhelm, resentment, failure, sadness, jealousy. These emotions tend to surface in situations that feel personal. When we aren't aware of what has triggered them, or get taken by surprise when they surface, our emotions can take over and we lose the capacity to be objective.

As one mentor mentioned, for engineers who are used to being logical and objective, being caught in this situation can be very uncomfortable.

## What triggers conflict?

According to Simon Hurry of Play Nicely, your personal boundaries are a fundamental part of who you are: when these are breached, conflict occurs. Hurry explains that your CliftonStrengths® and the coloured groupings of these, referred to as the Domains®, are ways of describing these boundaries. These work as our filters that affect how we see the world and respond to challenges. Depending on our unique combination of CliftonStrengths®, we will respond differently to a situation or disagreement. Some will be intrigued and curious while others will feel threatened. In turn, these are affected by the status of your self-esteem.

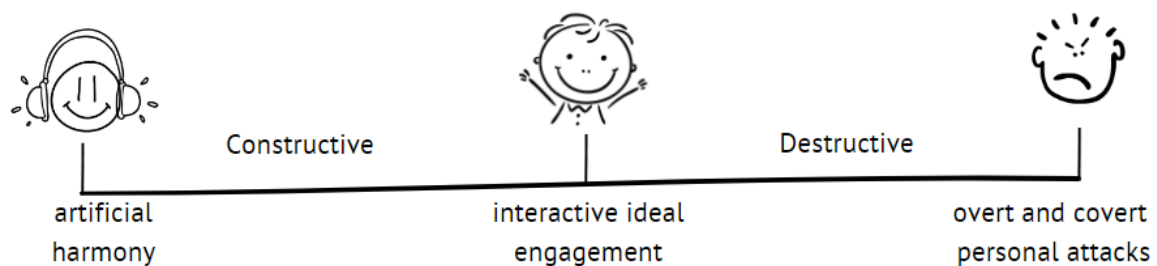
CliftonStrengths® helps us understand what's important, what drives us, and how we're likely to view or interpret a situation – and how this differs from someone else. CliftonStrengths® as a tool though has more to offer. It helps us build rapport and understanding and grow each other's self-esteem.

As soon as you are in a relationship with low self-esteem you are always looking for validation, and it becomes a major issue.

Simon Hurry, Play Nicely

*"If we have low self-esteem we allow others to inflate or deflate us" (Mentor, PJ)*

When people avoid conflict because they are unsure of where it will lead or how they will respond, it creates an artificial, tense harmony. It is this fear that can lead to the negative consequences of conflict; a place where overt or covert personal attacks can take place. Consider productive conflict as a true workout for the team! It is attention to this as a specific endeavour that will build team strength, flexibility, and ultimately success.



**Figure 5 Healthy, constructive conflict is needed for teams to learn from past mistakes and can be a great time saver. Building on trust and overcoming the fear of conflict is a vital part of a strong team. (Lencioni, 2002)**

Many of us step around conflict. This can create a tense undercurrent as things are left unsaid. Applying caution, pausing before responding makes way for constructive exchanges to emerge. However, when emotion is exposed, a more destructive result can be irreparable damage caused by any combination of overt and covert personal attacks (Figure 5). Therefore, it's vital that people have a tool set for self awareness and self mastery that can facilitate positive interactions and healthy conflict.

It's no wonder that so much has been written about conflict, given the huge costs to individuals, managers and businesses. Common triggers between individuals include:

1. **Conflicting objectives:** When team members have different goals, it can lead to conflicts over resource allocation and decision-making.
2. **Decision-making:** Disagreements arise from how decisions are made within the team, resulting in power struggles and dissatisfaction.
3. **Influence and authority:** When team members feel their input is not valued or when some members exert undue influence.
4. **Role ambiguity:** When people are unsure of their responsibilities, leading to overlaps, neglect or disputes over tasks.
5. **Personal differences:** Issues such as introversion vs. extroversion can hinder collaboration.

Understanding what triggers a disagreement or conflict, and why, helps us manage our response – ultimately improving the outcome for all.

## Trust and healthy conflict

Trust and healthy conflict are two fundamental and interdependent pillars of any successful relationship, be it personal or professional. Trust is the bedrock of all relationships. It fosters a safe environment where individuals feel comfortable being open and honest. This openness paves the way for healthy conflict, which is essential for growth and innovation (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2012).

In his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni wrote: “Teams that trust each other are not afraid to engage in passionate dialogue around issues and decisions that are key to the organization’s success. They do not hesitate to disagree with, challenge, and question one another, all in the spirit of finding the best answers, discovering the truth, and making great decisions.” Fear of conflict he says, is the second dysfunction that prevents teams from reaching their true potential. Healthy conflict, contrary to common perception, is not destructive. It allows for the exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives, leading to better decision-making and problem-solving. It encourages individuals to challenge the status quo, fostering creativity and innovation.

For conflict to be healthy, trust is crucial. When there is trust, individuals are not afraid to express differing opinions, knowing they will be respected and considered. Trust ensures that conflicts are resolved constructively, strengthening the relationship rather than damaging it.

As the Mentors attested, healthy conflict creates a dynamic environment that promotes growth, innovation, and mutual respect.

## Strategies for moving to healthy conflict

The Mentors we interviewed offered tips for managing conflict and lessening the cognitive burden of experiencing conflict. These are summarised in the four steps below, as tips for colleagues and students.

### 1 Connect with who you are and your CliftonStrengths®

Knowing who you are, understanding your core values and beliefs alongside your strengths, creates a filter of how you see the world and how the world affects you. This is central to growing your confidence and self-esteem. (Figure 3).

- ▶ If you are a deep thinker, you might navigate potential conflicts with fascination and questions
- ▶ When you enjoy time with others you may avoid or become upset by conflict – your likely strategy is to want to talk it through
- ▶ If getting things done is your focus, the things that might ruffle you could be time wasting or blocking. Perhaps you keep a mental score sheet of other’s lack of contribution

Knowing what frustrates you, and appreciating what frustrates others, can help you to develop great management skills. It helps move you to that position of healthy conflict, see further detail in section 6.

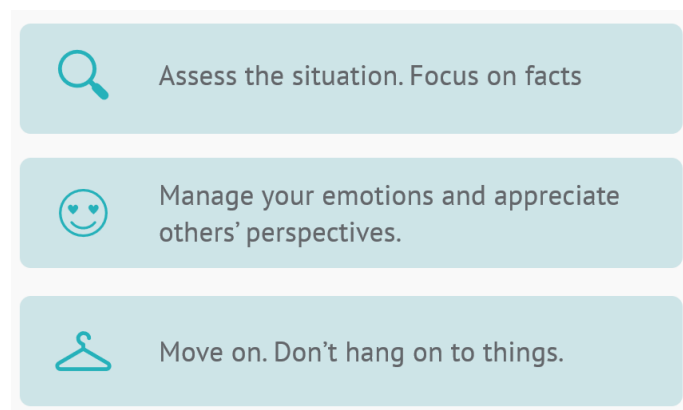
### 2 In engineering be aware of emotion

Conflict takes a turn for the worse when negative emotions are triggered. This happens more for some people than for others (refer to self-esteem and your CliftonStrengths®). For example, it can be hard to dissociate the person from the position of a viewpoint. When someone feels personally attacked, they are likely to fight back or flee. Keeping focused on facts and ideas is essential to staying objective.

One Mentor talked about engineers and how typically the profession sees itself as one of logical and analytical beings. How when a disagreement is taken personally, emotions come into play, so it can be harder to remain dispassionate. Advice from Mentors included:

*"We'll revisit when everyone's calmed down. And .... in some cases, it takes the personnel (individual) out of it. Then we focus on the facts of the situation." (Mentor GM)*

The Wheel of Complete Communication<sup>4</sup> is a useful tool in this case to help two people navigate a disagreement. Another is to take the disagreement or conflict and explore with an impartial view how each person's CliftonStrengths® affect their positions. When the conflict is between more than two people, and is intergroup, it's more likely to be around goals, resources, or values. One Mentor had a process to tackle conflict – illustrated below – summarising the advice into three steps:



### 3 Introverts and extroverts – let everyone have a voice

Mentors mentioned that tensions in teams can arise when some people are quiet and reflective, others are pushier, noisier and perhaps more outward facing. When people are communicating on different wavelengths, there can be a mismatch in how things are both delivered and received.

Some Mentors talked about how the pandemic, and increased remote working, has exacerbated this:

*"People do calls without cameras on, making it harder to gauge their sense of wellbeing." (Mentor GE)*

*"The pressure and high volume of work can mean people only check in at a superficial level." (Mentor SP)*

*"I believe people who are quiet have some great ideas, too. They're just too shy (or maybe deep thinkers) to ask the question." (Mentor GE)*

Several Mentors invite people to contribute by name, saying: "XXX, it would be really interesting to hear your point of view". Indeed, these people may be deep thinkers and taking the time they need to formulate an answer or question they feel is right, is important.

*"I have a colleague who asks a question and then proceeds to talk over my answers. I hate them. I am not heard. (Katalytik webinar on conflict, 2024 anonymous)*

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<sup>4</sup> Wheel of Complete Communication <https://bit.ly/4cFjrrq>

Some Mentors enjoy using CliftonStrengths® with their teams at work, but also use other tools. Insights, for example, was mentioned by some.

*"We use Insights across the board in the business. It is a way in which we can openly call out different behaviours. We can tell each other to dial up or dial down particular behaviours. So, it's like a safe way to say: "That's a great red response. Has anyone got a green response?" This allows us to call each other out." (Mentor EH)*

And using CliftonStrengths®:

*"I can make it about what his strength is and say, for example: "James, I'd really value your thoughts. Yeah, given your particular perspective on the detail that we need to get right here." (Mentor EH)*

*"Some CliftonStrengths® (or combinations of) demonstrate behaviours that come across as very direct, overbearing, and assertive. Having the language of strengths really helps to de-personalise the situation and shift the directness into dialogue. I try: "Hey, that's really interesting, are you sure it's that way?... Or "nice idea. What might the consequences be?" (Katalytik online seminar on conflict, anonymous)*

Essentially, Insights can provide an overarching position of how someone might be oriented, while Strengths gives a finer level of detail about how someone might behave at a granular level.

#### 4 Check that communication is taking place

Effective communication is fundamental to team success, but it is also a common source of conflict.

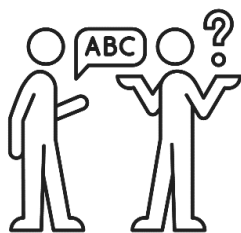
*"Perception of people, people's perception of things in general, it's when people perceive certain things, because of lack of communication." [Mentor AH]*

Understanding how people communicate is important, as is helping colleagues to develop a more sophisticated way of asking questions, such as: "Tell me, I'm curious....", "I'd love your perspective on x...". This really helps to build a sense of alignment, working towards that 'we' that Simon Hurry refers to.

THERE IS NO "WE" BEFORE AN "I" - A "WE" IS TWO "I'S" IN AGREEMENT.  
OTHERWISE, THERE IS NO WE.

SIMON HURRY, PLAY NICELY

We can all feel, at times, that simply by telling someone something, we have completed the task of communicating it. George Bernard Shaw alludes to this fact in his quote: "The problem with communication is the illusion it has taken place."



"THE PROBLEM WITH COMMUNICATION IS THE ILLUSION  
THAT IT HAS TAKEN PLACE"

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

In summary, when two people come together, unless they both have a clear sense of who they are, what they bring, and what they need, if they don't both align the goals of their work to their inner values and ways of being, there will most likely be disagreement, frustration, and ultimately conflict.

## 6 A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO CONFLICT

If there is conflict in a relationship or team, it behoves everyone to step forward and find a way to break-through. Sometimes the individual, personal shifts need only be modest. In the Appendix (Tables 1-4) the 34 CliftonStrengths® are presented with a breakdown of how each may show up. In the second column, suggestions are presented for doing things differently. Often these are minor adjustments such as pausing, asking different questions or listening more deeply. By taking these small steps you may show up better for other people in your team.

*"I found myself wondering if I frustrate others by perhaps not necessarily looking or behaving as though I am in conflict with them, even though we are clearly not on the same page. I think I tend to just try to identify and articulate different viewpoints and listen to others and try not to rise to things emotionally, even when at times I suspect I am being bated!" (Mentor HR).*

Each CliftonStrength® can cause frustration that can breed friction when its needs are not satisfied. This then leads to conflict. Insights gained from knowing the "blindspots" of our CliftonStrengths® can help us shape strategies to avoid frustrating others, offending them, or even brushing aside their thoughts, ideas, and contributions. These shifts, for example, might be in how we communicate through practising deeper listening and asking better questions, so we stay more curious in a conversation.

A strengths-based approach to addressing conflict means acknowledging others have a different perspective to you. CliftonStrengths® helps you to understand your own perspective shaped by your leading talent themes and offers insight into the perspective of others. Clues and strategies for addressing conflict are suggested to help readers reflect on how they may come across to others.

Understanding someone's perspective and gaining insights into what drives them helps to unlock a stalemate situation. Being able to self-reflect and come to an appreciation of why you may have upset someone is enabled by having your full 34 CliftonStrengths®, and an appreciation of the coloured groupings of these, referred to as the Domains®. We have created an interpretation of the 34 CliftonStrengths® (Appendix) and suggestions for individuals to try to modify their interactions with others. Considering the four Domains:

- ▶ Broadly, if you have a lot of the green thinking® themes, you are likely to feel challenged when others with few or no thinking themes doggedly critique your ideas, opinions or thoughts. Your motivation is to explore ideas and challenge information. Others though, may perceive this behaviour as being critical of their values or belief systems. They are likely to push back at you. In moments of conflict these themes can present objective viewpoints for others if you deliver them objectively and with sensitivity.
- ▶ For those with orange influencing® themes at the top of their profile, you bring energy and emotion to a group or relationship. Typically, you wear your heart on your sleeve, and others are in no doubt of your feelings/emotions because they flash across your face. So even if your words do not convey your irritation, your expression will.
- ▶ The purple executing® themes drive you to get things done. This does not leave time to waste on pointless, emotional discussions and disagreements. These themes in your profile enable you to be a pragmatic resolver.
- ▶ The blue relationship building® themes will drive you to be more economical with the way you allow your emotions to get involved. You see talking as a way forward and invest time in helping others resolve conflict with sensitivity towards each person.

## Take ownership of who you are

None of us is driven by just one of these Gallup CliftonStrengths®. The colour groupings, known as Domains®, provide deep insights into personal motivators and individual psychology. Gaining an insight into your own drivers helps you figure out when you are the immovable elephant. And what you can do to shift forwards to listen to those you disagree with.

*“On occasion I do find it insulting that someone would challenge me on certain things, when they ought to know me better, since I tend to take my tasks quite seriously. But normally I can let it go without getting emotional (or at least save it for home!!)” (Mentor HR)*

Aside from this macro perspective of your domain dynamics, CliftonStrengths® brings the added value of theme dynamics. Because of the high personalisation of CliftonStrengths® profiles, you have unique insights into yourself and a way to broaden conversations to address areas of frustration or conflict.

CliftonStrengths® do not exist in isolation, ever. By understanding the way your CliftonStrengths® power your psychology, you can help colleagues to understand your perspective. The language of strengths opens a whole new conversation. As you get to know each other better, you can grow your mutual alignment and start to know about both the “I’s” and connect to become a “we.”

## Conflict resolution strategies

To address and resolve conflicts, consider the following strategies:

1. Use CliftonStrengths® to develop open and effective communication. Use deep listening (the Trimboli or the Scharmer framework) and develop the practice of regularly checking-in with colleagues or your team rather than checking up on them. This will promote understanding.
2. Create alignment (with a strengths-lens) on objectives and priorities.
3. Ensure the decision-making process is transparent, by involving team members. Appreciate how different people make decisions, and how the team as a whole reaches decisions.
4. Clarify and communicate each member’s role and allow them to use their CliftonStrengths® to determine their delivery approach.
5. Generate cohesion through team-building activities. This will strengthen relationships and deepen trust using frameworks like the Trust Equation and Candid Conversations.
6. Equip team members and leaders with communication skills and conflict resolution tools.



## 7 SUMMARY

Conflict is an inevitable part of team dynamics, but it need not be detrimental. By recognising areas of potential conflict like communication, goals, decision-making, role ambiguity, and personality clashes, and importantly, having regular, open discussions about these, teams can grow stronger. They will build resilience at each stage. Being familiar with conflict mitigation and building space for healthy conflict fosters a positive team environment and contributes to overall success. Crucially, these strategies need to be understood before any conflict arises. The very first step though is to become more aware of who you are, how you interpret the world and the information you receive.

Using the CliftonStrengths® tool can help build self-esteem, self-awareness, an awareness of others, and an appreciation of how to create space for others to be themselves. The Appendix (Tables 1-4) provides an interpretation of the 34 CliftonStrengths® and how individuals may (unintentionally) come across. These tables offer strategies for individuals to be better communicators and team colleagues as each CliftonStrengths® is paired with a suggestion of how to try and shift the dynamic to a more constructive place. The table is meant not for you to interpret others, but more to help you as the reader interpolate and adjust your own behaviour and consider where the other person may be coming from. All you can do is shift your own behaviour.

If you would like more information about how we can help you build a higher performing team, or if you'd like to find out more about our work with CliftonStrengths, please scan the QR code to book a discovery call and get the conversation started.



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## 9 APPENDIX:

### CLARITY TO CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION

Being aware of your own innate talents and your way of thinking/being/getting things done, helps you adjust the filters through which others see and experience you. Don't just look at your Top 5 CliftonStrengths®. Make sure you 'dial-into' other strengths to see how you might frustrate or dismiss others and trigger conflict. Don't forget, no CliftonStrengths® operates in isolation!

#### Influencing themes

Influencing® themes bring energy and emotion to a group, or relationship. Typically, you wear your heart on your sleeve and others are left in no doubt of your feelings/emotions because they flash across your face. So even if your words don't convey your irritation, your expression will.

**Table 1 How the Gallup Influencing themes can show up and how you can moderate their impact constructively**

Theme	Can look like	Try
<b>ACTIVATOR®</b>	Impatience with others is written on your face and evident in your body language and actions.	Taking time to hear other people's ideas and concerns can mean you set out together rather than alone, and better informed.
<b>COMMAND®</b>	Disinterested if things are going well, bossy, overbearing, dismissive of others' views, stubborn, or wanting your way.	Bringing different views together for clarity on the situation and removing noise. Try saying: "How would it look if we did..."
<b>COMMUNICATION®</b>	Always wanting more airtime and often talking over others.	Listening more than you talk and learning to ask great questions.
<b>COMPETITION®</b>	Just being in it to win it, being the best. You can appear self-centred and self-interested.	Shifting your focus to help the team/product or organisation be better.
<b>MAXIMIZER®</b>	Focused on improvement, looking like you think everyone else is flawed, appearing overly critical and always messing with what has been finalised.	Seeing the value and usefulness in what others have done and realising that together you are better.
<b>SELF-ASSURANCE®</b>	An air of independent certainty and resistance to following others, purposefully undermining other's confidence.	Being humble, supporting and exploring other people's perspectives. Don't be afraid to concede you may be wrong.
<b>SIGNIFICANCE®</b>	Being needy and egotistical and enjoying standing out and shadowing your colleagues.	Offering to take on the roles others don't want to do, like presenting, or offer to mentor someone wishing to try.
<b>WOO®</b>	Being disinterested in those close to you, preferring meeting new people than supporting those you know.	Listening to others. Bring depth by sharing your confidence and enjoyment of meeting others to help colleagues connect.

The CliftonStrengths® themes are registered marks of Gallup. The descriptions and actions herein are the interpretation of Jan Peters and shall not be construed to be approved by Gallup.

## Relationship themes

Relationship® themes at the top of your profile mean you will be more economical with your emotions than other Domains. Talking is a way forward, and you will likely invest time in helping others resolve conflict, with sensitivity towards each person. Up to a point. Don't forget, no CliftonStrengths® operates in isolation!

**Table 2 How the Gallup Relationship themes can show up and cause friction, and suggestions for addressing conflict points**

Theme	Can look like	Try
<b>ADAPTABILITY®</b>	Appearing disinterested, lethargic. Flying by the seat of your pants. And not bringing any value or delivering on time.	Explaining your love of variety and change and being able to help when specifically asked.
<b>CONNECTEDNESS®</b>	Passive, airy fairy and not focused on what needs doing now.	Helping the team connect with the bigger picture and higher organisational goals, valuing the people with executing strengths who make things happen.
<b>DEVELOPER®</b>	Always trying to teach somebody something, you can appear patronising and less interested in what actually needs doing.	Drawing on the lessons people have learned, using coaching style questions.
<b>EMPATHY®</b>	Being overly emotional and affected by others. It might look like it's all about you.	Noticing how your other themes affect this one. Having boundaries for yourself, listening to others' problems, knowing when to be practical and say no.
<b>HARMONY®</b>	Fearful of robust conversations and can seem indecisive and weak.	Learning some tools and frameworks around which to structure differences, such as polarity management.
<b>INCLUDER®</b>	Indecisive and always looking for someone else to make a decision. Shirking responsibility for getting things done.	Being specific about what roles people have and how to be efficient in getting the right people on board.
<b>INDIVIDUALIZATION®</b>	A greater focus on people's needs, rather than the tasks or knowledge.	Helping people with low relationship-building strengths to appreciate and value what others bring.
<b>POSITIVITY®</b>	Lack of depth or gravitas, not seeing the seriousness of a situation or problem.	Creating space in the team to value each other's strong points and build trust. Connect with executors and create a productive plan.
<b>RELATOR®</b>	You don't trust people and only like to work with those who you already know.	Sharing more about yourself with your team, getting to know more about them and what they bring/need. Be open about yourself.

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## Executing themes

Executing® themes are driven to get things done. This doesn't leave time to waste on pointless, emotional discussions and disagreements. The tendency is to be a pragmatic resolver and you are irritated when you cannot see a way to achieve this. Don't forget, no CliftonStrengths® operates in isolation!

**Table 3 The Gallup Executing themes and how they can cause friction, and suggestions for building stronger more powerful teams**

Theme	Can look like	Try
<b>ACHIEVER®</b>	Always driven and intense about your work, you can appear intolerant of laziness or failure to complete.	Valuing by asking for input from the team's thinkers, energisers and relationship builders to deliver shared goals.
<b>ARRANGER®</b>	It's your way or the highway. Others may not see (or share) the structure in your mind and only see your changing priorities.	Practicing your communication and sharing how you align and realign tasks to make the team most productive.
<b>BELIEF®</b>	Passionate and dogmatic views can mean you are not willing to compromise on things most important to you. Decisions are intuitive, not fact-based.	Appreciating that others need data and evidence behind your decisions. Ask for help and support.
<b>CONSISTENCY®</b>	You are bound by rules and past ways of doing things and are inflexible. Rules trump relationships.	Understanding others need to be creative and always improving, or delivering the best. Take time to talk at the expense of a small delay.
<b>DELIBERATIVE®</b>	Caution and hesitancy can frustrate others who need to move forwards.	Building in check points on projects to give you confidence and appeal to others' needs.
<b>DISCIPLINE®</b>	Demanding detail and precision and losing sight of the destination. Inflexibility can mean losing creativity.	Helping those with thinking themes to understand the value of detail and deadlines. Create order and calm, try adding in some flexibility.
<b>FOCUS®</b>	Being in the zone/ needing alone time. Total concentration can seem like inflexibility when adaptations are needed.	Giving time to build relationships and appreciating that your purposeful nature can be overwhelming to others.
<b>RESPONSIBILITY®</b>	You lack trust in others so you may micro-manage and take on too much. Taking over to get things done.	Staying focused on what you want and need as much as the team. Appreciate others have different priorities and ask for clarity if they cannot do something.
<b>RESTORATIVE®</b>	Over critical and focus on systemic and/or people's weaknesses.	Being discriminating about which problems need fixing. Notice what people do right. Collaborate with Discipline, Arrangers, Strategic or Maximisers to implement fixes.

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## Strategic Thinking themes

Strategic Thinking® themes mean you are likely to feel challenged when others, with few or no thinking themes, doggedly critique your ideas, opinions, or thoughts. Your motivation is to explore ideas and challenge information. Others though may perceive this as being critical of their values or belief systems. They are likely to push back at you. Don't forget, no CliftonStrengths® operates in isolation!

**Table 4 How the Gallup Strategic Thinking themes can show up and ideas to help lessen any negative impacts, to boost team productivity**

Theme	Can look like	Try
<b>ANALYTICAL®</b>	Over demanding for facts. Terse and rude in your quest for information. You ask challenging questions and don't get things done.	Prefacing your questions with a sense of curiosity, not criticism. Keep an eye on the need to get on with doing. Try starting with 'tell me I'm curious...'
<b>CONTEXT®</b>	Slow and closed minded, focusing on the past not the future. Dismissive of colleagues' efforts.	Joining the dots between what has been and what might be through thoughtful conversations.
<b>FUTURISTIC®</b>	Disconnected, dreaming about tomorrow. And you may have an overly idealistic view.	Introducing your thinking with: "Wouldn't it be great if we could...?" "Just imagine what the world will be like when..."
<b>IDEATION®</b>	Critical of others by always coming up with something brand new and disconnected from practicalities or risk.	Appreciating there are times when practicality trumps creativity. Sometimes deeper, more reflective thinking is needed. Also, people want to get things done to enable more fun.
<b>INPUT®</b>	Dissatisfied with the equipment or materials that are presently available. You want more. You may be overwhelmed with stuff or information.	Connecting with colleagues with Strategic or Discipline, or those interested in exploring what is needed. Let them help you to prioritise actions.
<b>INTELLECTION®</b>	Certainty that theory must precede practice. Unable to participate in fast-paced discussions and slow to act.	Sharing your need for solo time to think and reflect. Creating space to provide feedback at a later time.
<b>LEARNER®</b>	Frustration with fixed mindsets, but spend too much time learning a new skill, not calling on an expert.	Knowing that sometimes others are the expert and enjoying your adaptability.
<b>STRATEGIC®</b>	Jumping to conclusions too quickly. Over simplifying things and your fast thinking leaves others behind.	Checking in with your colleagues and asking for their input. Avoid reinventing the wheel to pander to your own need for variety and speed.

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