

Power in Conflict

A Coaching Lens

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Power is always present in conflict. It is not an optional feature, and it is rarely distributed evenly. Power lives in job titles, decision rights, expertise, tenure, social credibility, access to information, race, gender, status, and the simple fact of who can leave a conversation without fear and who cannot.

In that sense, power is not merely something people have. It is something that is done in relationships. It shows up in whose voice is treated as reasonable, whose frustration is read as emotional, whose silence is interpreted as agreement, and whose concern becomes the topic of a meeting while someone else's concern becomes the reason for it.

A coach sees this immediately. A leader says, "I just want honesty from my direct report." The direct report says, quietly, "Honesty is risky here." The same conflict conversation contains two very different realities. One person is practicing authority; the other is managing consequences.

What is power?

Power is the capacity to shape outcomes, define meaning, and influence what is possible without paying the same cost as others. In conflict, power determines not only who gets heard, but what can safely be said.

A manager can say, "I'm frustrated by your performance," and it is called feedback. An employee can say, "I'm frustrated by your management," and it may be called insubordination. That difference is not accidental. It is power.

Coaching example: A senior leader invites “open dialogue” after a team conflict. In the room, a junior team member stays careful and vague. The leader later complains that the employee is not being direct. The coach notices the contradiction: the invitation was open in form, but not equal in risk. Power shapes the speech before the speech even begins.

How does power manifest itself in conflicts?

Power often appears as asymmetry in speech, risk, and interpretation.

One common form is speech asymmetry. The person with greater power speaks first, speaks last, or speaks as if their account is the neutral one. The person with less power may hedge, apologize, soften, or remain silent. Their restraint is sometimes mistaken for lack of interest, when in fact it may be prudence.

Another form is narrative dominance. The powerful person’s version of events becomes the official version. A conflict that could be understood as a clash of expectations is reframed as a problem of attitude. A complaint about workload becomes a question of resilience. A concern about exclusion becomes a question of fit.

A third form is risk asymmetry. The higher-power person can be wrong without immediate penalty. The lower-power person may be wrong once and pay for it repeatedly.

Coaching example: A department head and an analyst are in conflict over deadlines. The head says the analyst is “not proactive.” The analyst says the deadlines are impossible because project scope changes weekly. On the surface, this looks like a performance issue. But in the coaching conversation, it becomes clear that the analyst has been absorbing scope changes without being able to challenge them. The conflict is not only about time. It is about whose reality gets to set the terms.

How does power show up in conflict conversations?

In conflict conversations, power shows up in the structure of the conversation itself.

Who invited whom? Who set the agenda? Who controls the location, the timing, the notes, and the follow-up? Who is allowed to interrupt? Who is expected to stay calm? Who is judged as “professional” and who is judged as “difficult”?

These details are not minor. They are the conflict.

A coached leader may say, “I asked for candor.” The coach may ask, “Did you also make candor safe?” That question often changes everything.

Because people do not speak only from intention. They speak from anticipated consequence. If a person believes disagreement will damage their reputation, career, or belonging, then the conversation is already unequal before it begins.

Coaching example: In a team mediation, a manager says, “I want everyone to speak freely.” The coach notices that the manager has already signaled a preferred conclusion and has been correcting people throughout the meeting. The less powerful team members have gone quiet. The issue is not simply whether they are speaking. It is whether the conversation is organized so that speaking is worth the cost.

Can power imbalances be addressed? Can they be leveled?

They can be addressed. They can sometimes be reduced. They can occasionally be partially leveled. But they cannot usually be erased by goodwill alone.

A common mistake is to treat fairness as sameness. Put everyone in the same room, give them equal time, and assume the field has been leveled. It has not. The person with greater authority still carries more weight, even in silence.

Power imbalances are addressed by changing the conditions of the conversation, not just the tone.

That means:

- separating evaluation from dialogue when needed
- clarifying that retaliation is not acceptable
- giving the less powerful party preparation time and support
- using a neutral facilitator when trust is low
- naming the asymmetry instead of pretending it is absent
- and making decisions transparent enough that authority is accountable.

A coach can help a leader ask not, “How do I get them to open up?” but, “What am I doing that makes openness costly?”

Coaching example: A supervisor wants to “level the room” before a difficult conversation with a long-tenured employee. The coach helps the supervisor start by stating, “I have authority here, and I know that affects how this conversation lands. My goal is not to win but to understand what has been difficult and what needs to change.” That statement does not eliminate power, but it reduces its hidden pressure.

What ethical responsibility does the one with greater power have?

The one with greater power has a responsibility to do more than speak well. They have a responsibility to make the relationship safer, truer, and more just.

That means the powerful person must not use the ambiguity of conflict to protect themselves while exposing others. They must not demand honesty while punishing candor. They must not ask for feedback and then treat it as disloyalty. They must not define the problem in a way that shields their own influence from scrutiny.

The ethical responsibility of power is stewardship. Greater power requires greater care.

That care includes:

- listening without immediate defense
- checking whether the other person can speak safely
- distinguishing discomfort from danger
- taking account of unequal stakes
- and accepting that accountability is part of authority.

Coaching example: A senior partner receives repeated concerns that associates feel dismissed in meetings. The ethical response is not to say, “I’m just direct.” It is to ask, “What is the experience of my directness for people who cannot afford to contradict me?” That question is the beginning of responsibility.

Power does not disappear in conflict. It becomes visible. And once visible, it can be used either to dominate or to repair.

The best conflict conversations do not pretend power is absent. They name it, work with it, and make it answerable. In that way, conflict becomes not only a site of tension, but a site of ethical leadership.

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