

# Small issues, big conflicts: Stop adding fuel to the fire

Adaptive module

~20 min

The most common reaction to a disagreement at work is still silence, and remote work has made it even more comfortable while cooperation quietly erodes. This module does not tackle the original problem first, but what makes it grow: Jean Poitras's distinction between the spark and the fuel, the four reasons that push people into silence, and the exact words for opening the conversation.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 01 Distinguish the original problem in a conflict from the inflation that feeds it, using Jean Poitras's distinction.
- 02 Recognize the four reasons for avoidance: denial, inhibition, fear of losing, and the illusion that time fixes things.
- 03 Open the conversation you avoid: show the cost of silence, prepare your words, and state a fact, a feeling, a request.
- 04 Defuse three forms of escalation—competition, emotional hurt, assumed bad intent—by negotiating, listening, or returning to facts.

## WHO IT'S FOR

Colleagues, managers, and project teams who want to address a disagreement early, before it harms cooperation.

- **Prerequisite:** none

## HOW THE MODULE WORKS

Self-paced, with practice tailored to each learner.

- 1 **Self-assessment:** on 9 dimensions, to gauge current habits and guide the practice.
- 2 **Expert video:** 10 minutes, with 3 pauses for reflection.
- 3 **Practice scenarios:** the first 2 chosen from the self-assessment, then 16 optional ones. Every answer gets feedback: what it leads to, and one way to improve.
- 4 **Dated commitment:** one action to try, written by the learner or picked from the suggestions.
- 5 **Memo to download:** key takeaways, questions, commitment, personal notes and checklists.

## A SAMPLE PRACTICE SCENARIO

Twice this month, Françoise took the room you had booked, forcing you to meet your clients in the open-plan office. You haven't said anything yet. Next Tuesday, another client meeting is scheduled in that room. What do you do before then?

## ASSESSMENT AND COMPLETION

Pass mark: 80%

The score takes into account your answers to the practice scenarios, your commitment and, where relevant, any additional learning activities. Passing requires a commitment and a score of at least 80%.

### METHODS & MODELS

- 4 reasons for avoidance (denial, inhibition, fear of losing, the illusion that time will help) – Afthonios method, building on Jean Poitras's framework
- Distinction between problem (spark) and buildup (fuel) – Jean Poitras (full professor, HEC Montréal)
- Fact-feeling-request method – close to Nonviolent Communication (Marshall Rosenberg)

### SOURCES & REFERENCES

- Jean Poitras (full professor, HEC Montréal, specialist in organizational conflict management) – distinction between the problem (the spark) and the buildup (the fuel that feeds it)
- Marshall Rosenberg – OFNR structure of Nonviolent Communication, which inspired the fact/feeling/request method
- Avoidance is the most common reaction to a disagreement at work – a finding documented in the conflict literature
- Weger et al. (2014) – active listening and feeling understood