BOARD AGENDA

GOVERNANCE | STRATEGY | RISK | ETHICS

4 patterns of boardroom conflict

by RANDALL PETERSON

Conflict between members of the board nearly always takes one of four common types—here's how to manage each of them.

February, 2026

Image: hvostik/Shutterstock.com

The number and complexity of issues facing organisations have risen exponentially, making the job of chairing a board harder than ever. With an increasingly diverse group of stakeholders and often conflicting demands to manage, today's Chairs can find that complexity tips over into conflict. Good governance requires healthy debate—what I call 'task conflict'—but it's a mistake to assume such debate needs no special attention. Task debate can easily turn into relationship conflict, and overmanaging it by stifling discussion is equally risky. Effectively managing conflict, therefore, is a core task for the Chair.

Consider Sarah, a Chair who set aside time at her annual away day to discuss boardroom dynamics, prompted by tough trading and struggling financials. She hoped for agreement on actions to get the board back on track. Instead, directors quickly started blaming each other and the executive. Within minutes, she realised her planned approach would not work and needed to change tactics or risk the meeting spiralling out of control.

Sarah's situation is not unique. Over three decades, I have helped manage boardroom conflicts across family businesses, charities, and listed company boards. In doing so, I have identified four common patterns that account for virtually all boardroom conflict. Here's how to recognise these four patterns and my tips for what Chairs can do to manage them for positive results.

The Lone Wolf: Conflict Surrounds One Individual

Sometimes, conflict centres on a single director—perhaps the "odd one out," or a self-appointed devil's advocate who pushes others to reconsider comfortable assumptions. Whether due to personality, perspective, or behaviour, tension attributable to one person is common, accounting for about 20-25% of board conflicts.

When this happens, resist the temptation to scapegoat or silence the individual by quickly voting and moving on. This approach risks missing underlying issues, such as personal challenges or overlooked insights. Instead, practice perspective-taking: ask sincere questions to understand their viewpoint and build empathy, which can reveal new insights for the whole board.

Avoid making this individual the focus of a group retreat. Instead, intervene one-on-one as a Chair or valued colleague. Openness, understanding, and coaching can go a long way toward building bridges and, if needed, addressing unhelpful behaviours in a constructive manner.

The Boxing Match: Two Directors Disagree

The most common pattern—about 35% of board conflicts—is a dyadic dispute between two directors. Contrary to what one might expect, such conflicts rarely draw in others; most directors avoid taking sides, leaving the pair to "box" until someone intervenes.

If the conflict is personal or rooted in past animosity, tread carefully. Private mediation, with separate and then joint conversations, can help both parties air their perspectives. Consider whether both should serve on the same committee, or if their interactions can be minimised.

However, if the disagreement is about tasks or ideas, it can be healthy—provided it remains civil. Informal debates, such as those at the watercooler or before meetings, allow directors to vet ideas, reconsider positions, and bring well-developed thoughts to the formal board discussion. My research has found that boards with multiple pairs of directors informally debating outperform those with only one such dyad.

Chairs may wonder about assigning a devil's advocate to spark debate, but research shows that manufactured conflict does not produce the same psychological engagement or decision quality as authentic differences of opinion. The better strategy is to build a diverse board and foster an environment where genuine perspectives can emerge and be debated constructively.

Warring Factions: Subgroups Disagree

The third pattern, accounting for 20-25% of board conflicts, arises when two subgroups or committees are at odds—each championing different goals, projects, or outcomes. This "us versus them" dynamic is especially dangerous because it creates near-equal opposing sides, reinforcing group loyalty and making compromise difficult. Voting rarely resolves such stand-offs; the losing side often feels ignored and may disengage from implementing the decision.

Breaking these deadlocks requires the introduction of new ideas or alternatives. By expanding the range of options, subgroups can clarify their underlying interests and negotiate trade-offs, leading to more comprehensive solutions that both sides can support. Sometimes, an external facilitator or a fresh perspective can help unlock the impasse.

The Blame Game: Whole-Board Conflict

While the stereotype is of boards where everyone argues, true all-out conflict is rare—less than 15% of boards experience it. This pattern often emerges in response to bad news, with directors assigning blame to others, who in turn deflect blame elsewhere. This was Sarah's experience when her board meeting quickly turned to finger-pointing.

Assigning blame rarely resolves anything and usually escalates conflict. Instead, the Chair must refocus the board on collective responsibility and the organisation's goals. This might mean clarifying vision, or in the aftermath of failure, debriefing as a group and discussing how everyone can contribute to improvement—without singling out individuals.

In Sarah's case, shifting the conversation from blame to collaborative problem-solving changed the meeting's tone and led to more constructive outcomes.

Tailor Your Approach

By handling conflict proactively and with respect for the business's interests, outcomes can be positive—building trust and leading to better, more effectively implemented decisions.

Every board's conflict is unique, but almost all fit one of the four patterns I've highlighted. Recognising the pattern provides valuable information about who is involved and where to focus your attention.

There are two key lessons for Chairs and CEOs. First, tackle conflict at its source—don't default to whole-board retreats unless unity is truly needed. Second, manage the "sides" of conflict: don't allow a majority to silence a minority with a vote, and when two sides are entrenched, seek new options to break the deadlock. The closer your intervention is to the origin of the conflict, the more likely you are to prevent long-term damage and improve board performance.

By understanding and addressing these patterns, Chairs can turn conflict from a threat into a tool for better governance and stronger organisations.