

Conflict and succession

Relationships seldom evolve as planned or expected, no more so in the conflicts that arise in succession.

Whether the succession relationship is between two people, e.g. between incumbent and putative successor, or in a group like a family business, a professional partnership or an executive team, research and experience show that prevention is better than cure.

The fundamental cause of conflict in all of these situations is poor alignment of expectations and assumptions by the incumbent and/or the successor. In addition, others connected with this relationship can confound the situation by their behaviours towards the incumbent and the successor.

Examples where conflict and succession occur

Here are some examples where conflict occurs in succession situations:

- The founder remains active in the organisation after her/his successor has taken office.
- There is overlap in roles during the grooming period of *letting go* by the incumbent and *stepping up* by the successor with unspoken blurred boundaries.
- Lack of clarity about who does what, when and how because performance criteria have not been openly defined and agreed.
- The dynamic nature of the process with constant subtle changes influenced by the environment and people are not recognised.
- The players remain stuck in the past and fail to understand what is needed going forward.
- There is asymmetry of information between the leader/s and the successor, raising concerns about hidden agendas and power plays.
- It is unclear how power and designated authority are to be shared.
- When the parties hold different views about the direction of the organisation and pull apart instead of together.
- Life-career stage issues such as responsibilities for children or parents or health-related challenges have not been acknowledged and the processes for dealing with remain unresolved.
- A lack of trust and transparency.
- An unexpected crisis.
- Lack of confidence and or competence in the one or both of the parties.

Consequences

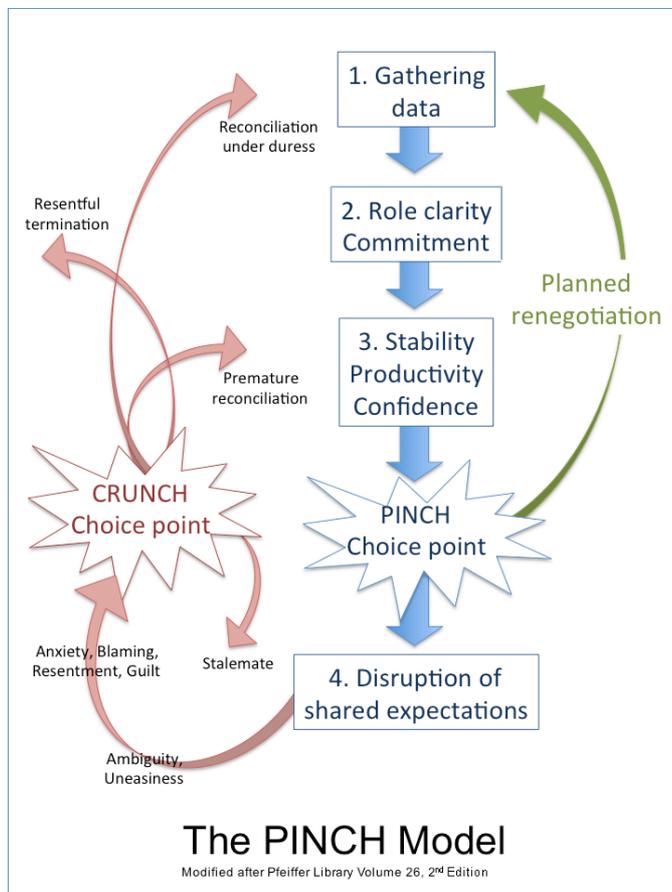
The consequences are often dire: Conflict with breakdown in the relationship, political posturing, team and family members get drawn in and take sides – the conflict spreads, eyes are taken off the business, stress, falling job satisfaction and defections, competitive instead of cooperative behaviours, lack of accountability, and confusion and uncertainty for staff.

These consequences are a recipe for disaster in any organisation, especially when they continue over a protracted period. Which is why prevention is better than cure when it comes to conflict and succession.

The Pinch Model

The Pinch Model (1) helps us understand why conflict occurs, how to prevent it, and what to do when conflict occurs.

The diagram on the next page sets out the essence of the Pinch Model. It describes the cycle of relationships and points to a strategy for anticipating and controlling conflict. The cycle has four stages.



Four stages of the Pinch Model

1 > Gathering data refers the two people in the succession situation exchanging information about themselves. From this information, they start to predict—usually subconsciously—what they can expect from one another and how the succession process will unfold. Uncertainty is reduced by these implicit or explicit negotiations.

2 > As the parties grow in their understanding of each other, their roles become clearer and their commitment to each other strengthens. Expectations of each other become explicit.

3 > With commitment in place, the relationship becomes stable and productive. Each person performs in accordance with the expectations of them.

4 > Eventually, for reasons internal or external to the relationship, disruption occurs. Causes include the parties failure to perform up to expectations (internal) and other being added, e.g. new shareholders (external). The Pinch Model posits—and experience bears this out—that disruption is inevitable because of the dynamic nature of the environment.

Be prepared

The Pinch Model suggests how to anticipate disruption before or as soon as the PINCH Choice point occurs (see diagram). A pinch is a signal of the possibility of impending disruption: One party senses a loss of freedom, a reduction in trust, a lowering of performance. Something is not going as well as expected.

If not addressed, as the diagram shows, a Pinch becomes a Crunch—a major disruption that follows a period of ambiguity, unease, anxiety, blaming and resentment.

The time to act is as soon a Pinch is sensed; don't wait. And the way to act is to enter into Planned renegotiation by the parties of their expectations of each other. At this stage, emotions haven't been raised to anger and anxiety levels, the parties are able to talk with each other—often with skilled facilitation—to resolve the issues and re-commit in a positive way.

It is the responsibility of both parties to be alert to Pinch signals— in themselves or given out by the other.

Stay out of trouble

The Pinch model offers a way of staying out of trouble, rather than getting out of trouble once it occurs.

The skills can be learned. And skilled facilitators are available. Don't hesitate to use one. The damage of a Crunch can be very large and irreversible.

(1) John Sherwood and John Glidewell first described the Pinch Model in *Planned renegotiation: A norm-setting OD intervention*. In J. E. Jones & J. W. Pfeiffer (Eds.) *The 1973 annual handbook for group facilitators*.