CONFLICT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

a different conversation starts here

A FREE TOOLKIT FOR HR PROFESSIONALS, WITH OUR THANKS

TEAM HOUSE RULES

For the team that's stuck, and the HR professional who cares enough to help. How to see what's happening, invite a different conversation, and help people write the rules they want to work by.

CHECK
Listen before you change anything.

PREPARE
Set up a conversation people can trust.

RUN
Sixty minutes, minute by minute.

KEEP
Help the rules outlast the meeting.

YOURS TO SHARE

Print it, copy it, adapt it, and pass it to anyone in your organization who could use it. No strings attached.

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

THANK YOU FOR RAISING YOUR HAND

Dear colleague,

Joining the House Rules list was a small thing to do. We didn't want to answer it with a small thing back.

Some of the most important conversations I've had as a mediator didn't start with an answer. They started with a better question, one that let people stop guarding their corner long enough to see the whole room. Teams work the same way. A team in trouble rarely needs another policy handed down. It needs permission to have a different conversation about how its people want to work together.

That's what this toolkit is for. It helps a team say out loud the rules it has been living by without ever agreeing to them, and then choose better ones together. It's built for HR to lead, and a manager with a little support can lead it too.

Use what helps. Change what doesn't fit. Pass it to someone who needs it. And thank you for the work you do, most of which no one ever sees.

With gratitude,

Faith Knight

Founder and Course Director, Conflict Management Institute

HOW TO USE IT

Walk through the four steps in order the first time. After that, every page works on its own. The colored tabs on the edge help you find your place.

ALSO INCLUDED

The team agreement as an editable Word file, ready to fill in and send.

WHEN TO USE SOMETHING ELSE

Complaints of harassment, discrimination, or retaliation, threats or safety concerns, and anything under investigation follow your organization's policies and go to the right people. Never to a group meeting.

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THE IDEA BEHIND THIS TOOLKIT

A DIFFERENT CONVERSATION

When a team is stuck, the usual tools are flat ones: a memo, a reminder about policy, a talk with the two people at the center. But team conflict has more sides than that. It reaches the people who take sides, the people who go quiet, the manager caught in the middle, and the customers who feel it without knowing why. A problem with that many sides needs a conversation with room for all of them.

01 START WITH WHAT HOLDS PEOPLE TOGETHER

Before naming what's broken, name what's worth protecting. Care is the thread that keeps people in a hard conversation long enough to get somewhere.

02 ASK QUESTIONS THAT OPEN DOORS

A good question doesn't corner anyone. It gives people a way to see the situation, and each other, a little differently.

03 AGREE ON THE DIRECTION BEFORE THE SPEED

Teams rush to fix how they work before agreeing on where they're headed. Slow down at the start and the rest moves faster.

04 EVERYONE WRITES THE RULES

Rules handed down get followed when someone is watching. Rules a team writes together get followed when nobody is.

Work is changing fast, and teams will keep running into situations no handbook saw coming. The teams that do well won't be the ones with the most rules. They'll be the ones that know how to sit down together and decide how to handle what's next.

The goal isn't a quieter team. It's a team that can disagree well and still want to work together.

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WHAT'S INSIDE

YOUR TOOLKIT

Four steps, each with its own color. Follow them in order the first time, then reach for whichever page you need.

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01

CHECK

> *What is this team trying to say that no one has said out loud?*

Before you change anything, listen. These pages help you see the team clearly, and kindly.

IN THIS STEP

Ten signs a team needs a reset	6
Team temperature check	7
Reading the results with care	8

TEN SIGNS A TEAM NEEDS A RESET

2 minutes | Share with the manager | Decide if it's time

If three or more ring true, the team will likely welcome the chance to talk.

1. **Meetings got quieter, and the hallway got louder.**
   Real opinions show up after the meeting, in side conversations and private messages.

2. **The same disagreement keeps coming back.**
   Every few weeks, with new details and the same people.

3. **The manager gets copied on everything.**
   Things teammates used to settle themselves arrive with the boss on the thread.

4. **New hires hear different answers.**
   Ask "how does this team work?" and each person describes a slightly different team.

5. **Decisions come undone after the meeting.**
   Someone goes around the group, and the decision quietly changes.

6. **Two people talk, everyone else waits it out.**
   The same voices fill every discussion.

7. **After-hours messages are building resentment.**
   Some send them, some feel they must answer, and nobody has said what's expected.

8. **The team has split into camps.**
   By shift, location, tenure, or remote and in-office.

9. **Small things turn into HR complaints.**
   A missed handoff or the tone of a message becomes a formal concern.

10. **"They're adults. They should figure it out."**
    They might, once someone gives them a way to.

TEAM TEMPERATURE CHECK

5 minutes | Whole team, anonymous | Online form or printed page

Rate each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Copy it into Google Forms or Microsoft Forms, or hand out this page.

#	STATEMENT	1	2	3	4	5
1	I can disagree with a teammate without it turning personal.	○	○	○	○	○
2	When there's a problem between people here, it gets talked about directly.	○	○	○	○	○
3	Our meetings end with clear decisions and clear owners.	○	○	○	○	○
4	What gets said after a meeting matches what got said in it.	○	○	○	○	○
5	I know how quickly I'm expected to answer messages, and when I'm not.	○	○	○	○	○
6	I hear about decisions that affect my work before they happen.	○	○	○	○	○
7	Feedback here is given to people, not about them.	○	○	○	○	○
8	I can raise a concern with my manager without worrying it will be held against me.	○	○	○	○	○
9	Work is shared in a way most of us would call fair.	○	○	○	○	○
10	When someone makes a mistake, we focus on fixing it more than on blame.	○	○	○	○	○
11	Handoffs between people or shifts happen without things getting lost.	○	○	○	○	○
12	I'd recommend this team to a friend looking for a job.	○	○	○	○	○

SOMETHING YOU'D KEEP NO MATTER WHAT

SOMETHING YOU'D CHANGE

READING THE RESULTS WITH CARE

15 minutes | HR | Turns into the meeting agenda

Add up each person's twelve ratings, then average the totals across the team. Behind every number is someone who trusted you with an honest answer.

48–60 STEADY	WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS: The team works well and mostly knows it. Some habits are unspoken, which is fine until someone new joins.	WHAT TO DO: Run a shorter version: skip "where we get stuck" and write down what already works.
36–47 STRAINED	WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS: Friction is real but not personal yet. People want it fixed and will take part.	WHAT TO DO: Run the full 60-minute meeting within 30 days, while people still have the energy for it.
12–35 HURTING	WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS: Trust is low. A group meeting could turn into a complaint session or go silent.	WHAT TO DO: Talk with HR leadership first. One-on-one conversations, or mediation between specific people, may need to come before a group meeting.

LOOK PAST THE TOTAL

Any statement averaging 2 or lower is your starting point, whatever the total. A team can score 50 overall and still be hurting on item 8.

PROTECT ANONYMITY

Wait for at least five responses before sharing. On smaller teams, share themes instead of numbers, and never try to work out who said what.

> **SAY IT LIKE THIS, SHARING RESULTS BACK**
>
> *"Here's what you told us. Most of you agree this team is good at fixing mistakes without blame. Fewer of you feel decisions hold once a meeting ends. Let's talk about that together."*

02

PREPARE

> *What would it take for everyone to walk in willing to be surprised?*

A good conversation is set up long before anyone sits down. These pages help you build the trust it needs.

IN THIS STEP

The prep talk with the manager	10
Three invitation emails	11
Setting the room	12

THE PREP TALK WITH THE MANAGER

20 minutes · HR and the manager · A shared plan

If the manager walks in defensive, the team stays quiet. If the manager walks in curious, the team follows.

ASK THE MANAGER

1. **What would you like to be different in 90 days?**
   One concrete answer, not "better communication."
2. **What are you willing to change yourself?**
   The team will watch for this more than anything.
3. **Is anything off the table?**
   Pay, policy, staffing. Name it up front so no one feels misled.
4. **Who will keep the rules visible afterward?**
   It doesn't have to be the manager.

THE MANAGER'S ROLE IN THE ROOM

Open the meeting, then take part as a member of the team, following the same rules from that day on.

WHAT THE MANAGER SHOULD AVOID

- [ ] Naming people, or "I've heard some complaints"
- [ ] Defending past decisions in the meeting
- [ ] Turning it into a performance conversation
- [ ] Promising things outside their control
- [ ] Having the last word on every rule

> **SAY IT LIKE THIS, FOR THE MANAGER'S OPENING**
> *"I asked [HR] to help us because I want this team to work well for everyone, including me. Whatever we agree on today, I'm following it too."*

AGREE BEFORE YOU LEAVE

Who facilitates (ideally HR) · the date and length · how results will be shared · who sends the invitation · the date of the 30-day check-in.

THREE INVITATION EMAILS

From the manager · About a week ahead · Make it sound like you

ROUTINE REFRESH — To: the team · From: [Manager]

An hour to agree on how we work

Hi team,

We've grown and changed a lot this year, and some of the ways we work have never been written down. I've asked [Name] from HR to help us spend an hour on [date] agreeing on a few house rules: how we handle meetings, messages, handoffs, and disagreements.

Nothing's wrong. This is care and maintenance. Come with one thing you'd keep and one thing you'd change.

AFTER A ROUGH PATCH — To: the team · From: [Manager]

Resetting how we work together

Hi team,

The last few months have been hard on us, and I know some of that has come from how we work together, not just how much work there is. I'd like us to reset. [Name] from HR will help us spend an hour on [date] agreeing on a few rules we all follow, me included.

This isn't about blame or anyone in particular. It's about what we want this team to feel like. Your answers to this week's short survey will help shape the conversation.

NEW OR MERGED TEAM — To: everyone · From: [Manager]

Building our house rules

Hi everyone,

We've brought together people from [teams or locations], and each group arrived with its own way of doing things. Rather than let that sort itself out, let's decide together. On [date], [Name] from HR will help us write our house rules: the few agreements that make a team easier to belong to. Bring what worked well on your old team. We'll keep the best of it.

SETTING THE ROOM

The day before | The facilitator | Print the rule menu

A room that feels like a disciplinary hearing gets a disciplinary-hearing conversation. A room that feels like a welcome gets honesty.

IN PERSON

- [ ] A room with no one's name on the door
- [ ] Chairs in a circle or U-shape, no head of the table
- [ ] Flip chart or whiteboard, and markers that work
- [ ] Sticky notes in two colors: "working" and "stuck"
- [ ] A printed rule menu for each person
- [ ] A visible timer
- [ ] Coffee and something good to eat. It says "your time matters."
- [ ] Phones face down, laptops closed

REMOTE OR HYBRID

- [ ] One shared document or whiteboard
- [ ] Cameras welcome, not required
- [ ] Captions on
- [ ] Breakout rooms of three, set up ahead
- [ ] A co-host watching the chat and raised hands
- [ ] If one person is remote, everyone joins from their own laptop

SO EVERYONE CAN TAKE PART

- [ ] Send the agenda and rule menu ahead for those who like to read first
- [ ] Offer a way to contribute in writing
- [ ] Check access and seating needs

BRING WITH YOU

- [ ] Temperature check results, strengths first
- [ ] The list of anything off the table
- [ ] The 30-day check-in, already on calendars

WHO SHOULD FACILITATE?

Someone the team sees as neutral, usually HR. If HR is part of the friction, bring in an outside facilitator or a mediator.

03

RUN

> *What question could you ask that this team has never been asked?*

Sixty minutes, a few sticky notes, and an invitation to talk differently. Here's how to hold the room.

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THE 60-MINUTE MEETING

60 minutes | The whole team | Sticky notes, flip chart, rule menu

0–5

WELCOME AND PURPOSE

HR opens the meeting.

> SAY IT LIKE THIS
>
> *"Thank you for giving this an hour. We're here to agree on a handful of house rules. We're not here to talk about any one person, and we're not here to fix everything. We'll leave with four to six rules we're all willing to try."*

5–10

THE MANAGER OPENS

Using the words from the prep talk, the manager names anything off the table, then sits down as a member of the team.

10–15

AGREEMENTS FOR THIS HOUR

Write three on the flip chart and ask for a nod.

- [ ] Speak for yourself: "I find it hard when..." rather than "people always..."
- [ ] No names in examples
- [ ] What's said here stays here, unless it's about someone's safety

15–25

WHAT'S WORKING

Each person writes one thing about this team they'd protect no matter what, then reads it aloud. Don't skip this. It reminds everyone the team is worth the effort.

> SAY IT LIKE THIS
>
> *"Before we talk about what's hard, what should we protect?"*

THE 60-MINUTE MEETING, CONTINUED

25–35

WHERE WE GET STUCK

Three minutes of quiet writing on the other color: moments when working together gets harder than it should. Then sort the notes into clusters on the wall: meetings, messages, handoffs, disagreements, workload, after hours.

> SAY IT LIKE THIS
> *"Look at where the notes piled up. That's where our unwritten rules aren't working for us."*

35–50

WRITE THE RULES

Choose the three or four biggest clusters. In groups of three, each group drafts one rule using the menu of 30, then reads it aloud. Test every rule:

- ☐ **Could we tell if someone followed it?** "Be respectful" fails. "Disagree in the meeting, not after it" passes.
- ☐ **Would a new hire understand it on day one?**
- ☐ **Does it apply to everyone, including the manager?**

50–55

AGREE

Read each rule aloud and ask for a fist-to-five. Anything at two or below gets one quick rewrite, or waits for the 30-day check-in.

> SAY IT LIKE THIS
> *"You don't have to love every rule. You have to be willing to live with it for 30 days and tell us honestly how it went."*

55–60

CLOSE

Confirm who keeps the rules visible and the date of the 30-day check-in. Then go around once, optional, with the manager answering first: *"Which of these will be hardest for you personally?"*

WITHIN 48 HOURS

Send the typed agreement with a thank-you · hang the poster or pin it in your team channel · add the rules to new-hire onboarding · follow up privately on anything set aside as "bigger than this meeting."

TWELVE QUESTIONS THAT OPEN A DOOR

Any time in the meeting | The facilitator | Ask one, then wait

The right question gives people somewhere new to stand. Silence usually means people are thinking. Let it work.

TO OPEN

- *What's one thing about this team you'd hate to lose?*
- *When has this team been at its best? What was different then?*
- *What do you appreciate about how someone here works that they might not know?*
- *What do you hope we're saying about this hour a month from now?*

TO GO DEEPER

- *What do we each need from one another that we haven't asked for?*
- *When a conversation here gets hard, what do you usually do? What would you like to do instead?*
- *What are we each protecting when we dig in?*
- *If a new hire watched us for a week, what rules would they guess we have?*

TO MOVE FORWARD

- *What would a good week on this team look like?*
- *What's one thing you're willing to try for 30 days?*
- *How will we know this is working?*
- *What do we want to be true about this team a year from now?*

RUN

People rarely change because they've been told to. They change when they've been asked, and heard.

WHEN IT GETS HEATED

In the moment · The facilitator · Keep it useful

Most reset meetings have one tense moment. It usually means people are finally being honest.

1 · SLOW IT DOWN

"Let's pause for a second. I want to make sure we hear this fully."

2 · REFLECT, DON'T RULE

"It sounds like the late handoffs leave you cleaning up afterward. Is that right?"

3 · TURN A COMPLAINT INTO A REQUEST

"What would you need to see instead?"

4 · FROM PEOPLE TO PATTERNS

"Let's leave names out and talk about what keeps happening."

5 · INVITE THE QUIET SIDE

"We haven't heard from this side of the room yet. Anything to add, even if it's 'I agree'?"

6 · POINT BACK TO THE AGREEMENT

"We agreed to speak for ourselves. Can you say that as how it affects you?"

7 · SET IT ASIDE, KINDLY

"That matters, and it's bigger than this meeting. I'll follow up with you this week."

8 · TAKE A BREAK

"Let's take five minutes and come back to this."

WHEN TO STOP THE GROUP CONVERSATION

If someone raises harassment, discrimination, a threat, or a safety concern, thank them, stop that line of discussion in the group, and follow up privately the same day under your organization's policies. A team meeting is the wrong place to work through it, and the right place to show that HR takes it seriously.

A MENU OF 30 HOUSE RULES

During "write the rules" | Groups of three | One copy each

Starting points, not a script. Teams usually keep the idea and rewrite the words, which is exactly right.

MEETINGS

- Every meeting has an agenda the day before, or it moves.
- We end by saying who owns what, and by when.
- If you disagree, say it in the meeting, not after.
- Cameras are optional. Taking part isn't.
- We start on time and end five minutes early.

MESSAGES

- Urgent means a call or text. Everything else goes in [channel].
- We reply within one business day, or say when we can.
- No work messages after [7 p.m.] unless it's urgent.
- Past three replies in a thread, pick up the phone.
- If you'd be annoyed to receive it, rewrite it.

DISAGREEMENT

- Disagree with the idea, not the person.
- Go to the person first, then the manager.
- Assume a mistake before you assume a motive.
- Once we decide, we all back it outside the room.
- Anyone can call a pause when it heats up.

DEADLINES AND HANDOFFS

- If a deadline is at risk, say so the day you know.
- Handoffs cover what's done, what isn't, and what's odd.
- Nobody gets assigned work in a meeting they missed.
- Ask for help before you're underwater.
- Shared work lives in one place: [tool].

FEEDBACK AND CREDIT

- Credit goes to people by name, in public.
- Corrections happen in private.
- Feedback names what happened, its effect, and what's next.
- We thank people for raising problems.
- "What got in the way?" before "who dropped it?"

TIME OFF AND AFTER HOURS

- Time off is off. We cover for each other.
- Out-of-office replies are set, and respected.
- Shift swaps go through [process], not side deals.
- Lunch breaks are real breaks.
- Your own: _____

OUR TEAM AGREEMENT

Last 15 minutes | The whole team | Editable Word version included

TEAM	FACILITATOR	DATE

WHY WE'RE MAKING THESE RULES, IN ONE SENTENCE

	OUR RULE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

WHEN ONE OF US BREAKS A RULE, WE WILL	KEEPING THE RULES VISIBLE IS OWNED BY

30 DAYS	60 DAYS	90 DAYS	INITIALS OF EVERYONE

EXAMPLE 1 OF 3

A REMOTE TEAM ACROSS THREE TIME ZONES

Team 8 people, marketing **Setting** Mostly remote **Flagged** Messages, decisions that don't hold

People in the earliest time zone felt left out of decisions, and choices kept changing after meetings ended.

THEIR RULE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
Core hours are 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Eastern.	Meetings only happen in that window. Outside it, nobody is expected to be online.
Decisions get written down, or they didn't happen.	Whoever ran the meeting posts the decision and owner in the team channel the same day.
Disagree in the thread before the deadline, not after.	Drafts go out with a "comments close" date. After that, the owner decides.
Reply within one business day, in your own time zone.	If it's urgent, call. A message at 9 p.m. can wait until tomorrow.
Cameras are optional. Taking part isn't.	Everyone speaks or types at least once in team meetings.

> **WHEN ONE OF US BREAKS A RULE**
>
> *Anyone can type "house rule" in the chat, no explanation needed. The person fixes it, and nobody makes a thing of it.*

EXAMPLE 2 OF 3

A FRONTLINE TEAM THAT WORKS IN SHIFTS

Team 22 people, distribution center **Setting** Day and night shifts **Flagged** Handoffs, group-chat complaints

The two shifts blamed each other for missed handoffs, and complaints were reaching HR through the group chat.

THEIR RULE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
Every handoff covers what's done, what isn't, and what's odd.	A three-line note on the board at the end of every shift, signed by the lead.
Problems go to the person first, then the lead.	Not to the group chat. The group chat is for schedules and good news.
Safety issues get raised right away, always.	Stop and tell the lead. Nobody gets in trouble for raising one.
Shift swaps go through the scheduling app.	No side deals, so nobody is surprised by who shows up.
Breaks are covered, not skipped.	Leads post a break rotation at the start of each shift.

> **WHEN ONE OF US BREAKS A RULE**
>
> *The lead mentions it privately the same shift. If it keeps happening, it comes up at the 30-day check-in as a pattern, without names.*

EXAMPLE 3 OF 3

A LEADERSHIP TEAM

Team 6 department heads **Setting** One shared executive **Flagged** Mixed messages, quiet voices

Staff were hearing different versions of the same decision, and two leaders had stopped speaking up in meetings.

THEIR RULE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
Argue inside, align outside.	We disagree fully in this room. Once we decide, everyone presents it as "our decision."
No surprises.	If a decision affects another department, its leader hears it from you before their staff do.
One message, one owner.	For every decision that goes to staff, one leader drafts the message the others use.
Read the pre-reads.	Materials go out 48 hours ahead. Meeting time is for deciding, not catching up.
Every voice before a vote.	The chair asks each person for a view before any decision. Silence isn't agreement.

> **WHEN ONE OF US BREAKS A RULE**
>
> *The executive names it at the next meeting, briefly and for the whole group, as "a house rule we slipped on."*

04

KEEP

> *A year from now, what do you hope this team says about how it got here?*

Rules last when people come back to them. These pages make coming back easy.

IN THIS STEP

The poster	24
30, 60 and 90-day check-ins	25
How this team works, for new hires	26

TEAM _____

OUR HOUSE RULES

How we work together, written by all of us

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

SIGNED BY ALL OF US _____ DATE _____

30, 60 AND 90-DAY CHECK-INS

10 minutes | At 30, 60 and 90 days | Start of a team meeting

Most team agreements fade by week three. Ten minutes keeps them alive, and shows the team their words mattered.

1 MIN **Read the rules aloud.** Someone different each time.

3 MIN **Rate each rule.** Thumbs up for keeping it, sideways for slipping, down for "doesn't fit anymore."

4 MIN **Talk about one slipping rule.** What's getting in the way? Patterns only, no names.

2 MIN **Decide.** Keep it, rewrite it, or retire it. Update the poster.

30 DAYS

DATE

KEEPING

SLIPPING

CHANGED

60 DAYS

DATE

KEEPING

SLIPPING

CHANGED

90 DAYS

DATE

KEEPING

SLIPPING

CHANGED

AT 90 DAYS

Run the temperature check again. Share what improved before what didn't, and thank the team. They earned it.

HAND THIS OUT ON DAY ONE

HOW THIS TEAM WORKS

Every team has unwritten rules. Here are ours, written down, so you don't have to learn them the hard way. Ask about anything that's unclear. That's one of our rules too.

OUR TEAM

OUR HOUSE RULES

HOW WE HANDLE DISAGREEMENT HERE

THE ONE THING WE WISH WE'D KNOWN ON OUR FIRST DAY

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE WORK: ASK

QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW WE WORK: ASK

We're glad you're here.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

A LAST WORD

THANK YOU FOR THE WORK YOU DO

You may never hear about the conflict that didn't happen: the resignation that never came, the complaint that was never filed, the team that found its way back to each other. That's the quiet part of HR's work, and it matters more than most people will ever know.

We made this toolkit as a thank-you, and we hope it makes one of your hard conversations a little lighter. If it helped, pass it to someone who could use it. If you made it better, tell us. We'd love to learn from you.

COME PRACTICE WITH US

HOUSE RULES: LEADING THROUGH CONFLICT

A small-group HR conference on workplace conflict · Las Vegas · November 9–12, 2027

Three working days of practice on the conversations HR handles every week, in a room small enough that the instructor knows your name. 15 SHRM PDCs and 15 HRCI credit hours. Details and the free employer kit at conflictmanagementinstitute.org/pages/house-rules.

WE'RE GLAD TO HELP

Questions about running the meeting, the conference, or getting your employer's approval? James would love to hear from you.

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