

## ICM's Conflict Compass: The Umbrella Question *Your Team's "True North" Conflict Resolution Solution*

*Built for disputes where misalignment  
is costing time, money, focus, or morale.*

Maya runs Client Onboarding. Ethan leads Implementation. On paper, the workflow is simple: Onboarding gathers requirements, Implementation builds and tests, and the client gets the product. Everyone has a place, and there is a place for everything.

Except it doesn't go as planned. Clients ask questions Maya cannot answer. Ethan's team discovers key details are missing or changing – a detail is unclear, or a document is unsigned. Work is lost. The calendar slides again. Yet another meeting is called to restore crucial stability. The tone and body language speak volumes.

**Maya:** *"We keep missing deadlines. I'm the one on the phone with angry clients. I need visibility, not silence."*

**Ethan:** *"We're not missing deadlines. We're getting impossible dates based on incomplete intake. We can't build on guesses."*

**Maya:** *"You just don't understand how important it is to be ready for these customers."*

**Ethan:** *"It's like you're actively trying to avoid listening to how I feel."*

What neither says out loud is that the business has changed around them: staffing is down, a new compliance step was added, and the company is under pressure to promise faster timelines to improve the bottom line.

Both have examples. Both have legitimate needs. Maya needs predictability and clear updates. Ethan needs stable input and protected build time. But neither can make the first move without feeling the other will undermine their opinion.

So, the conflict stays framed as "you're the problem," instead of the more useful question: "How do we make this workflow succeed in the reality we're actually in?"

*These are the moments **the Umbrella Question** was built for!*

## The Technique That Gets Folks Unstuck

When a debate turns into a trial, the work stops, and the conflict spreads. ICMRESOLUTIONS' Conflict Compass introduces one deceptively simple tool to reverse that pattern: **the Umbrella Question**, a single, inclusive framing question that holds multiple stakeholders' needs in a single sentence, turning competing demands into a shared solution while lowering the temperature.

Instead of "Who's right?" the Umbrella Question shifts the room toward "What works?" It helps teams find overlaps and generate **O.P.T.I.O.N.S. (Only Proposals That Include Others' Needs Succeed)**. It tests ideas against shared objectives to reach a true resolution, not a grudging settlement. The result: Maya and Ethan have something concrete they can finally start working with that **respects exactly where both are coming from and need to go. It's about fixing problems – not fixing blame!**

### The Template

How can we [*meet the needs of Group A*] while at the same time [*meet the needs of Group B*], thereby meeting [*our shared/common interests*]?

**Example:** *How might we realign our production processes to ensure on-time delivery while balancing workloads and preventing team burnout, thereby achieving consistent customer satisfaction, operational excellence, and increased profits?*

Use a framing question when meetings loop, people talk in "must/never/always," priorities collide, and escalation keeps happening. In minutes, you can reflect on what you heard, brainstorm options, and convert the best answer into operational commitments surrounding the who, what, when, how, check-ins, and success measures.

It is

- **A reframe:** a move from blame and certainty to curiosity and shared problem-solving.
- **A joint agenda:** it becomes the "north star" for brainstorming and evaluation.
- **A fairness structure:** it forces both sides' needs into the criteria for success.

## It isn't

- A compromise demand ("meet in the middle").
- A disguised verdict (if it smuggles in moral judgment, it triggers defensiveness).
- A positivity exercise (it's not about superficial harmony; it's about designing a workable system).

## 5-minute quick start guide

1. Reflect what you heard (short, concrete).
2. Offer the Umbrella Question as a draft (not a decree).
3. Ask for edits until everyone accepts the framing.
4. Generate options (no evaluation yet).
5. Use it as the filter to focus on your team's True North.
6. Convert the best option into operational commitments (who, what, when, where, and how with check-ins and measurable success measures).

## Why it works

People in conflict listen for disagreement and become experts at spotting flaws. The Umbrella Question temporarily redirects their expertise toward spotting:

- Mutual interests,
- Workable tradeoffs,
- Low-cost wins,
- Creative combinations.

It changes what "good thinking" looks like. Ideas only count when they meet both sides' needs and protect shared interests. That standard makes posturing expensive and progress easier. It works because the need for intellectual honesty sets a standard that makes posturing harder. A factual and values-based answer must, by definition, reasonably satisfy everyone's interests. If the proposed answer solves only one side's needs, it simply doesn't fly. It's merely the restatement of their position.

**It aims for resolution, not grudging settlement!**

Many agreements are really just structured surrenders or “settlements” where one side feels forced into compliance, and everyone leaves with a quietly ticking resentment clock. The Umbrella Question is designed to produce a “**resolution**,” not merely a settlement – meaning:

- People can explain the logic of the outcome,
- Agreement feels legitimate (even if imperfect),
- Relationships are more workable afterward, and
- Solutions are durable enough to survive in real life.

Use the Free ICMRESOLUTIONS’ Conflict Compass AI Tool during the 60-day beta period.

<https://icm-conflict-compass.lovable.app/>



If you want more details, please read the following Conflict Compass Resource Guide for FAQs, a working template, examples, and detailed instructions you can use the next time tension shows up in a meeting.

or

Some conflicts are too expensive to DIY. If you want a steady hand, I offer a no-cost consultation to assess the situation and explore your next steps toward resolution, often in 30 days or less.

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## Conflict Compass Resource Guide

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## ICMresolutions' Conflict Compass How-To Outline

Most issues today are **debated rather than explored**. People often want to “build a case and fix blame” more than “build a relationship and fix the problem.” The **Umbrella Question** is a practical resolution technique designed to reverse that pattern.

At its core, the Umbrella Question is a **single, inclusive framing question** that encompasses multiple stakeholders' needs in a single sentence, without ranking them or pretending the tension isn't real. It does this by converting competing demands into **collaborative design constraints** for a joint solution. It points the group to their True North.

A clean Umbrella Question typically looks like this:

How can we *[meet the needs of Group A]* while at the same time *[meet the needs of Group B]*, thereby meeting *[our shared/common interests]*?

The name fits: like an umbrella, the question is meant to be **big enough for everyone to stand under willingly** while they work toward a durable solution, often in 30 days or less.

## 1) HOW TO CREATE AN UMBRELLA QUESTION

### STEP BY STEP GUIDE OVERVIEW – Your North Star

Your Umbrella Question condenses the conflict into one straightforward, neutral, future-focused question that guides every discussion and decision. It aligns stakeholders, narrows scope, and turns debate into collaborative decision-making.

Think of it as a three-part structure: **A needs + B needs + shared interests**.

#### Step 1: Separate positions from interests

Draft the first version: “What unified decision would best advance our business goals while honoring [top values] within [key constraints]?”

People speak in **positions**:

- “We need weekend coverage to be mandatory.”
- “We will not accept that contract change.”
- “Finance is blocking the business.”

Umbrella questions are built from **interests**:

- reliability and customer continuity,
- risk management and predictability,
- margins, compliance, reputation,
- workload sustainability,
- clear decision rights.

A quick translation prompt:

- “What does that request protect?”
- “What problem does that solve for you?”
- “What risk are you trying to prevent?”

Test neutrality: remove blame, include measurable context.

Define decision bounds now so the question stays inside the guardrails.

## Step 2: Write each side’s needs in neutral language

Pressure-test the question with stakeholders; reflect their core interests and shared values.

Refine wording to capture both relationship and business needs (Values → Goals → Traditions → Options).

Agree on success signals that would indicate a good answer to the question.

Neutral doesn’t mean bland. It means usable.

Instead of:

- “How can we get Operations to stop sandbagging...”

Use:

- “How can we set reliable timelines and commitments...”

Instead of:

- “How can we deal with Sales overpromising...”

Use:

- “How can we align commitments with delivery capacity...”

Your goal: a sentence both sides can repeat without choking on it.

### Step 3: Identify the shared interest (even if it's small)

Common interests are often hiding in plain sight:

- profitability and viability,
- customer trust,
- talent retention,
- operational stability,
- speed with quality,
- fairness and predictability,
- brand reputation,
- legal/compliance safety.

Even if people dislike each other, they often still share a commitment to “keeping the group healthy” or “not turning this into a bigger mess.”

### Step 4: Combine into the umbrella format

Use the template:

How can we [A's needs] while at the same time [B's needs], thereby meeting [shared/common interests]?

Use the Umbrella Question as a rubric: every option must advance a credible answer.

Score options against: Impact × Feasibility × Values-fit × ‘Moves the Umbrella Question Forward’.

Name the pattern if an option avoids the fundamental question (Clarity Partner move).

Then read it out loud. If it sounds like a courtroom question, rewrite.

## Step 5: Stress-test it with three checks

A strong umbrella question is:

1. **Balanced**

Each side would say: “Yes, that includes what I care about.”

2. **Actionable**

It points to decisions you can actually make (roles, process, schedule, standards, money, authority).

3. **Not solution-loaded**

It doesn’t sneak in the “right answer” as part of the framing.

4. **Subject to evaluation**

Close the loop in a 30 to 90-day container; re-validate the question as conditions change. If it fails any check, revise until it passes.

## 2) FACILITATOR/MEDIATOR TIPS: *How to use it in the room*

Here's a practical facilitation sequence that works for most disputes.

1) Reflect what you've heard (short and concrete)

*"Here's what I'm hearing: each of you needs."*

*Keep it brief. The goal is accuracy, not performance.*

2) Offer the umbrella question as a draft

*"I'd like to propose a framing question that holds both sets of needs at once."*

*This matters: a draft invites collaboration. A decree invites resistance.*

3) Ask for edits until both sides accept the framing

*"What would you change so you'd feel accurately represented?"*

*This step creates ownership. Ownership creates movement.*

4) Use it to generate options (no evaluation yet)

*"Let's list ideas that would answer this question. We'll judge them later."*

*You're separating creation from criticism.*

5) Use it as the filter for evaluation

For each option, ask:

- *"How does this meet A's needs?"*
- *"How does this meet B's needs?"*
- *"How does this serve the shared interest?"*
- *"What would have to be true for this to work?"*
- *"What's the failure mode, and how would we catch it early?"*

6) Convert the best option into operational commitments

Now the room is working on engineering, not accusing.

Resolution requires specificity:

- Who does what
- By when
- With what authority
- With what check-ins
- With what success measures

If the result can't be implemented, it's not a resolution – it's a hope.

## EXAMPLES YOU CAN USE (AND ADAPT)

### Workplace scheduling issue

*“How can we ensure adequate shift coverage, while also respecting the need to plan personal lives, thereby meeting our financial objectives and the fair distribution of work?”*

Why it works: it reframes “coverage vs freedom” into “coverage + fairness + planning.”

### Business dispute (internal or between partners)

*“How can we fairly and cost-effectively address Brown’s need to get its product to market, while at the same time protecting Green’s distribution rights, thereby satisfying your common need for profitability and viability?”*

Why it works: it makes “speed” and “protection” co-equal constraints, tied to a shared survival goal.

### Sales vs Operations delivery conflict

*“How can we make ambitious customer commitments, while also ensuring delivery timelines are reliable and capacity-based, thereby protecting revenue growth and customer trust?”*

## COMMON PITFALLS (AND QUICK FIXES)

The umbrella is too vague.

If it could apply to any conflict (“How can we work together better?”), It won’t guide decisions.

- Fix: add concrete constraints (coverage levels, cost limits, rights, timelines, quality, roles).

It contains a hidden accusation.

Loaded verbs (“stop,” “fix,” “deal with”) trigger defensiveness.

- Fix: rewrite as needs, standards, outcomes.

It’s premature

If people still feel unheard, they’ll experience the umbrella as “moving on too fast.”

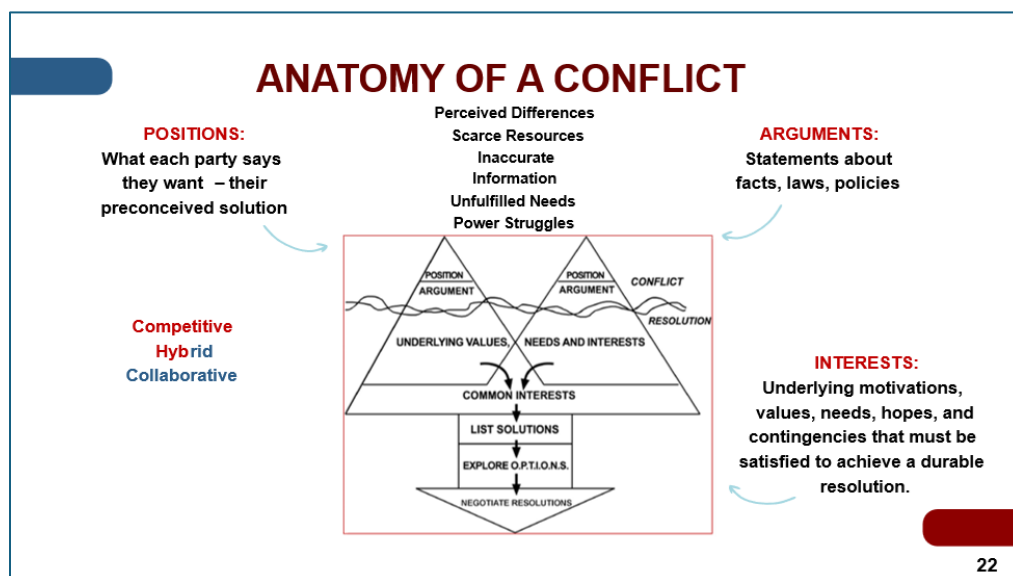
- Fix: do one more round of reflective listening, then return to the umbrella.

It becomes a slogan

If you don’t use it to evaluate options, it turns into wall art.

- Fix: make it the explicit scoring criteria for every proposed solution.

## THE ANATOMY OF A CONFLICT



## 3) FAQs

### 1) So, is this about compromise?

No. The Umbrella Question is not “meet in the middle.” It is a fairness structure that forces both sides’ needs into the criteria for success.

### 2) What if one side refuses to collaborate?

The umbrella question is offered as a draft and refined by edits to reduce resistance. This creates ownership and often reduces defensiveness.

### 3) What makes this different than a regular problem statement?

It makes posturing harder. If an option does not satisfy everyone’s interests, it does not answer the question with intellectual integrity and shared values.

### 4) Where is it appropriate?

Situations where:

- people are entrenched in positions (“must,” “never,” “always”),
- communication has become performative,
- meetings turn into trials,
- The conflict is now costing time, money, focus, or retention.

### 5) When do you use it:

Common Places:

- Early in a meeting to define the problem in a jointly acceptable way.
- When discussion becomes blame-heavy and progress stalls.
- After you’ve heard enough to identify each side’s needs and fears.
- Before brainstorming, make sure ideas are anchored to real constraints.

- In an impasse to restart exploration without letting anyone “lose face.”
- At the end, to ensure the 99% deal is a “resolution” when you need one.

## 6) What are the characteristics of an effective Umbrella Question?

It is:

- Neutral in tone (evidence-based, not accusatory).
- Non-binary (invites multiple viable options, not a yes/no trap).
- Future-oriented (aims at desired outcomes, not past grievances).
- Bounded by constraints (values, budget, risk, legal).



## 4) Complicated Multi-Party Example

**Overall Problem Statement:** Late delivery to the end customer

View from Each Department's Standpoint:

**Customer Service:** No system to capture POs (can come from email, portals, etc.), difficulty in navigating through different systems to get accurate data

**Front-end Customer-facing Team:** Dealing with angry customers, often only know we are late at the time of the scheduled ship date, lack of communication from the factory, and having to problem-solve received orders, while the main KPI is to go out and get new orders

**Management:** Dealing with issues that are escalated up the chain. Operations has a different KPI (Monthly Revenue goal) than Sales (Order intake and maintaining a healthy sales funnel). Key strategic small orders often become an issue.

**Operations:** Material shortage, complex specifications to meet, which are outside of normal product performance

**Quality:** Implementing rules that were ignored in the past, new requirements coming from customers, as business is moving upstream in the supply chain

**Supply Chain:** Conflicting priorities, limited number of suppliers, reduced inventory, orders entered late, driving the need to expedite parts, and a large number of unique part numbers

**Candidate 1 – Settlement-leaning:** How might we stabilize delivery commitments this quarter, while managing current material, system, and quality constraints, so that customer escalations and internal firefighting are reduced?

- **Aim:** Stabilize delivery performance this quarter
- **Interest protected:** Manage existing constraints without overload
- **Shared benefit:** Fewer escalations and reactive work



## 5) Need help solving the controversy?

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"I have trained this tool using my conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation, and facilitation tools developed over my career. It's simply a quick and easy place to start. Happy exploration!"

— Sam Imperati, ICMresolutions President, Conflict Resolver

