

# WHY AVOIDING CONFLICT CAN HURT YOUR CLUB — AND HOW COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS BUILD STRONGER TEAMS



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Every day, I deal with leadership issues.

When I talk with general managers, department heads, and boards through my work at DENEHY Club Thinking Partners, I hear the same concerns over and over. Performance issues stick around. Tension quietly grows. **Everyone notices, but few people address it directly.**

On a recent visit to a private club, a senior leader pulled me aside during a walkthrough. Everything felt fine on the surface. Service was polished, and the team acted professionally. Still, something didn't feel right.

As we talked, it became clear that a long-standing issue was quietly affecting daily operations. The staff had worked around the problem rather than face it. High performers were taking on more work. Frustration was there, even if no one said it out loud.

I've seen this happen at clubs all over the country. I suspect you have too.



Private clubs are people-centered organizations. Members, staff, vendors, and leadership interact constantly in high-expectation environments. That closeness creates connection. It also creates tension. Wherever there are people, there will be conflict.

Most leaders know this, but many still avoid conflict.

Avoidance often feels like the responsible choice. You don't want to disrupt morale. You don't want to create discomfort. You hope the issue resolves itself. But in a club environment, where teams are lean and expectations are high, avoidance carries a real cost.

I see this pattern again and again in club operations.

A team member underperforms despite repeated coaching, and others quietly absorb the workload.

A vendor consistently misses expectations, and the staff adjusts instead of starting a bid and recruitment process for a new vendor.

A high performer begins to disengage, and leadership hesitates to ask why.

In these moments, it's not about poor leadership or bad intentions. It's just a natural human reaction to soften expectations and avoid conflict. Those of us in hospitality don't like conflict.

## **The good news is this. Conflict does not need to be combative.**

Handled well, it strengthens trust, reinforces standards, and builds respect. Some of the most unified teams I've worked with operate in environments where leaders address issues early, clearly, and professionally.

It begins by reframing conflict. It is not a personal attack. It is a shared commitment to better outcomes.



## What You Can Do

### 1. Bring the conversation forward, not down.

Waiting until emotions run high rarely leads to productive outcomes. Strong leaders engage early and speak with clarity and care.

“I want you to succeed here, and I’ve noticed something that may be getting in your way. Let’s talk about it.”

The goal is alignment, not winning.

### 2. Model the courage you want to see.

Teams watch what leaders do. When leaders handle feedback calmly and constructively, it shows that accountability is part of the culture, not just a punishment from HR or senior management.

### 3. Establish a clear, safe process.

Clubs with strong communication systems set up simple ways for people to talk. They have regular check-ins, clear expectations, and room for issues to come up before they get bigger.

### 4. Hold the line when emotions rise.

Some people use strong emotions to avoid accountability. Staying steady in your response makes a difference.

“Take the time you need. This conversation is important, and we will continue it.”

This way, you protect people’s dignity while maintaining high standards.

### 5. Practice builds confidence.

Conflict resolution is a leadership skill. Like any skill, it gets better with practice and preparation. Clubs that help leaders build this skill see stronger teams and better results.

## A Final Word

If you’re an emerging leader, don’t shy away from tough conversations. Face them with empathy, preparation, and clarity. Those who can lead through discomfort with respect and determination move forward.

For boards and general managers, ongoing underperformance and unresolved tension often mean people have learned to avoid problems. Changing how leaders communicate can improve performance faster than any policy change.

## Strong club cultures grow from courageous leadership.

At DENEHY Club Thinking Partners, we work with clubs to find great leaders and support teams during important times. When accountability and respect go hand in hand, organizations thrive.

