# Roles, Recognition, and Conflict in Groups

**How stabilised coping strategies shape team behaviour and why conflict arises**

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**Abstract**

As groups grow, the complexity of interactions between their members increases rapidly. In response, individuals adopt stable patterns of behaviour that simplify how they participate in the group. Over time, these patterns become recognisable as *roles*. This article explores roles not as job titles or personality traits, but as stabilised coping strategies that allow individuals to function within complex interaction fields. It shows how the recognition, duplication, overextension, or absence of such roles can lead to frustration, competition, resistance, and dysfunction within teams, and explains how making roles explicit can prevent many common forms of group conflict.

## 1. Why Roles Become Necessary

As groups increase in size, the nature of interaction changes. Individuals are no longer responding only to those with whom they directly interact, but to the consequences of what others are doing with each other. The group becomes what can be described as an *interaction field*, within which each person must continually interpret exchanges, infer intentions, and anticipate outcomes. This creates a rising cognitive and interpretive load for everyone involved.

In response to this increasing complexity, individuals do not continually reinvent how they participate. Instead, they settle into consistent patterns of behaviour that make participation easier and more predictable. Some people naturally take on the task of keeping discussion organised. Others mediate tension. Some challenge ideas. Others observe carefully and contribute selectively. These patterns reduce the effort required to decide how to act in each situation.
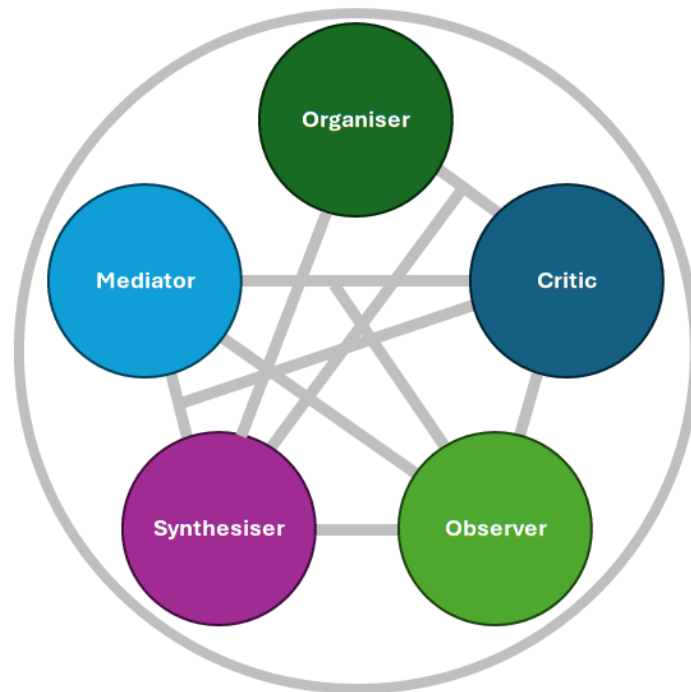
Over time, these consistent patterns stabilise into what we recognise as *roles*. In this sense, a role is not primarily a formal title or assigned responsibility, but a stabilised coping strategy that allows an individual to function effectively within a complex interaction field.

## 2. What a Role Really Is

A role can therefore be understood as a predictable pattern of behaviour adopted by an individual to reduce interaction load and maintain effective participation in a group. Roles are not simply reflections of personality, nor are they necessarily imposed by formal structure. They emerge because they help both the individual and the group manage complexity.

Within most groups, familiar roles can be observed. There may be someone who naturally takes the lead in organising activity, another who focuses on maintaining harmony, another who questions and critiques ideas, another who contributes specialist knowledge, and another who listens carefully and speaks when necessary to integrate perspectives. These roles make the interaction field more manageable by distributing different coping functions across participants.

# Interaction Field



Roles are stabilised coping strategies adopted to reduce interaction load within the interaction field.

When roles are recognised and complementary
→ stability
When duplicated, ignored, overextended, or absent
→ conflict

**Figure 1 – A Typical Interaction Field**

### 3. Why Recognition of Role Matters

Once an individual has settled into a role, that role becomes closely tied to how they contribute to the group and understand their own usefulness within it. Role recognition provides predictability, a sense of belonging, and a sense that one's contribution is valued. In this way, recognition of role acts as a satisfier.

When a role is not recognised or is disregarded, the opposite occurs. Individuals may feel that they are not being heard, not appreciated, or being sidelined. These reactions are often interpreted as emotional or personal responses, but they can be understood more clearly as responses to the denial of a stabilised coping function within the group. Non-recognition of role acts as a contra-satisfier, undermining the individual's ability to participate comfortably in the interaction field.

## 4. Role Non-Recognition

Difficulties often arise when an individual's stabilised role is not recognised or valued by others in the group. A person who sees themselves as contributing through organisation, mediation, critique, or synthesis may find that their contributions are overlooked or dismissed. In response, they may begin to speak more in an attempt to be heard, withdraw from participation, or display visible frustration. What appears to be a personality issue or a breakdown in communication is frequently a response to the denial of a role that the individual relies upon to participate effectively.

Because roles act as coping strategies, denying or ignoring them removes a source of stability for the person concerned. The result is not simply disappointment but a genuine reduction in their ability to function comfortably within the interaction field. The group may then experience the individual's reaction as disruptive, without recognising that the underlying issue is a lack of role recognition.

## 5. Role Collision

Another common source of tension occurs when two or more individuals adopt the same role within a group. For example, there may be two people who naturally assume a leadership posture, two who attempt to organise proceedings, or two who habitually challenge and critique ideas. When this happens, subtle competition for influence can develop. Individuals may feel interrupted, undermined, or challenged, even when no personal conflict is intended.

This situation can escalate into overt disagreement or resentment, yet the underlying issue is not disagreement over ideas but duplication of coping functions. The group has more of one role than it can comfortably accommodate, while other roles may be underrepresented. The interaction field becomes unstable because the distribution of coping strategies is unbalanced.

## 6. Role Overreach

Roles can also become problematic when they extend beyond what others experience as helpful. A person who is effective at coordinating activity within the group may begin to expect compliance rather than cooperation. A critic who is valuable in challenging ideas may become persistently obstructive. A mediator who maintains harmony may suppress necessary disagreement. An organiser may become overly controlling.

In these cases, behaviour that once acted as a satisfier for the group becomes experienced as a contra-satisfier. Other members begin to resist, not because they reject the role itself, but because its scope has expanded beyond what is appropriate for the situation. Conflict arises as a response to role overreach rather than to differences in opinion.

## 7. Role Absence

Groups can also struggle when necessary roles are absent. For example, in the absence of someone who naturally organises discussion or guides decision-making, conversations may become repetitive and unfocused. Without a mediator, tensions may go unresolved. Without someone able to synthesise perspectives, ideas may remain fragmented. Without a decision closer, issues may be endlessly revisited without resolution.

In such situations, participants often attribute the problem to personality differences or lack of motivation, when the underlying issue is that a coping function required by the interaction field

is missing. The group lacks a role that would otherwise help to stabilise participation and maintain progress.

## 8. Why Role Difficulties Increase with Group Size

As groups become larger, the complexity of the interaction field increases. More roles are required to manage this complexity, and the likelihood of duplication, non-recognition, overreach, or absence increases accordingly. Minor tensions that might be easily absorbed in small groups can become persistent sources of conflict in larger ones. The group requires a greater diversity of stabilised coping strategies, and the distribution of roles becomes more critical to effective functioning.

## 9. Avoiding Role-Based Conflict

Many conflicts within groups are therefore not disagreements of opinion but consequences of hidden role dynamics. Healthy groups often avoid these difficulties, sometimes unconsciously, by recognising who performs which roles effectively, allowing complementary roles to coexist, and gently limiting role overreach. They ensure that necessary roles are present and that individuals feel their contributions are valued.

Making roles explicit can significantly reduce interaction load and improve cooperation. When group members understand the different ways in which each person contributes, and when those contributions are seen as complementary rather than competitive, the interaction field becomes more stable and more productive.

## 10. Past Work and Theoretical Context

A number of researchers across sociology, psychology, management, and organisational theory have identified recurring roles, patterns of behaviour, and stages of development within groups. This work provides strong support for the observations made here, even though the underlying mechanism has not been framed in terms of interaction load and coping strategies.

Over a century ago, Georg Simmel (1950, Wolff, Trans.) demonstrated that the addition of a third person fundamentally changes group dynamics by enabling coalitions, mediation, and exclusion. This insight laid the groundwork for understanding why group interaction cannot be reduced to simple pairwise relationships. Later, Kurt Lewin (1936) proposed that behaviour is best understood as a function of the person within a field (B = f(P, E)), an idea closely aligned with the concept of the interaction field described here.

In the study of teams, Meredith Belbin (1981) identified recurring team roles and showed that balanced teams outperform those lacking role diversity. Similarly, Bruce Tuckman (1965) described the stages of group development, including a "storming" phase characterised by conflict before norms and roles stabilise. Both accounts describe the phenomena addressed here, though they do not explain why such roles reliably emerge.

From a sociological perspective, Erving Goffman (1959) showed that individuals adopt consistent patterns of behaviour in social settings to maintain order and predictability. In organisational studies, Henry Mintzberg (1973) identified recurring managerial roles necessary for coordinating complex activity, while Ralph Stacey (2001) emphasised that organisations are patterns of ongoing interaction rather than static structures.

Together, these contributions demonstrate that roles, role conflict, and role stabilisation are well-recognised features of group life. What has been less clearly articulated is why such roles

arise so consistently across contexts. The account offered here proposes that roles emerge as stabilised coping strategies adopted by individuals to manage the cognitive and interpretive demands of complex interaction fields.

## 11. Groups Within Larger Groups: Representation and Role Fit

Roles do not exist only at the level of individuals within a group. Groups themselves occupy roles within larger groups. A project team within an organisation, a department within a university, or a committee within a society all perform functions that contribute to the viability of a wider system. In this sense, the group has a formal role within the larger organisation.

However, when members of that group interact with the wider system, their behaviour is influenced not only by the group's formal function but by the informal coping roles that individuals have stabilised into. A subgroup that operates internally through strong coordination and direction may, when represented externally by its leader, be experienced by others as controlling or inflexible. A subgroup that values internal critique may be perceived externally as obstructive. A subgroup lacking a strong organising role may appear indecisive to the larger organisation.

A common assumption is that the person who leads a subgroup should also represent it within the larger group. In practice, the coping role that makes someone effective as an internal leader is not always the role most suited to external representation. Leading a group often requires decisiveness, direction, and organisation. Representing a group within a wider forum often requires listening, synthesising perspectives, mediating between interests, and translating viewpoints. These are different interaction coping functions.

When the same individual attempts to fulfil both roles, tensions can arise in the larger group. Behaviour that is effective within the subgroup may be experienced externally as overbearing or rigid. No individual is necessarily at fault; rather, there is a mismatch between the stabilised role the person has adopted and the functional needs of the larger interaction field.

One practical response is to separate the notion of leadership from representation. Instead of assuming that the subgroup leader should act as representative, groups can ask what role the larger group most needs from them. The most suitable representative may be a mediator, a synthesiser, or a technical expert rather than the person who directs the subgroup's internal activity. In some cases, rotating representation can further reduce role-lock and allow different coping strengths to be brought to the larger forum.

Making this distinction explicit also helps preserve recognition for the subgroup leader. The issue is not that they are being sidelined, but that their strengths are best applied internally, while a different member's strengths are better suited to external interaction. In this way, representation is aligned with role fit, reducing inter-group friction and improving cooperation across organisational levels.

Difficulties arising when subgroup leaders act as representatives in larger forums have been recognised in organisational thought. Mary Parker Follett (1924) argued that authority should arise from the requirements of the situation rather than from formal position. Henry Mintzberg (1973) showed that effective behaviour depends on context rather than title. Irving Janis demonstrated how dominant leaders can distort representative decision processes, while Edgar Schein (1985) highlighted the powerful cultural expectation that leaders should speak for their groups. Richard Hackman (2002) further emphasised that teams must align their internal

roles with the demands of the wider systems in which they operate. Together, these contributions support the view that effective representation depends on role–context fit rather than hierarchical status.

## 12. Functional Differentiation Across Levels

The roles described within groups represent a form of epistemic functional differentiation. Individuals adopt different ways of perceiving, interpreting, and responding to the interaction field. Some focus on coordination, others on critique, others on mediation, organisation, or synthesis. These differences are not simply personal traits but stabilised coping strategies that allow the group to manage interaction complexity.

A striking parallel can be seen at the level of organisations. Departments and units often perform different practical functions that mirror these same coping patterns. Finance constrains and stabilises, operations coordinates and executes, research explores and challenges, human resources mediates and supports, and governance oversees and regulates. What appears at the level of individuals as roles, appears at the level of organisations as functional departments. This represents a form of practical functional differentiation.

The pattern does not stop there. At higher levels, organisations differentiate in relation to one another. Businesses specialise in particular services, materials, or forms of expertise and exchange these through economic networks. At a broader scale still, nations specialise in particular forms of production, governance, security, knowledge, or culture. These exchanges involve matter, energy, and information, just as interactions do at smaller scales.

At each level, systems differentiate into complementary functions that allow the larger interaction field to remain manageable and viable. The same patterns of stability and dysfunction can be observed across these scales. When functions are duplicated, competition and conflict arise. When essential functions are absent, systems drift or fail. When a function extends beyond its appropriate scope, resistance emerges. When functions are not recognised or valued, dissatisfaction and disengagement follow.

What appears at the level of individuals as roles, at the level of organisations as departments, and at the level of economies and nations as specialisations, can therefore be understood as the same underlying phenomenon: the emergence of differentiated coping functions required to manage complex interaction fields across multiple layers of systems.

## 13. Past Work in Functional Differentiation Across Levels of Systems

A long tradition across sociology, organisational studies, and economics recognises that as systems grow in scale and complexity they tend to differentiate into specialised functions and that this differentiation recurs across levels. In sociology, Talcott Parsons (1951) framed societies as systems composed of interdependent subsystems that must perform distinct functions for the whole to remain stable. Niklas Luhmann (1995) later described modern society as distributed across multiple "function systems" (e.g., economy, law, politics, science), arguing that functional differentiation is a defining feature of modern complexity and that no one function system can substitute for the others. These are higher-level analogues of the same phenomenon seen in teams: differentiated roles/functions emerge to manage an expanding interaction field.

Within organisations, contingency theorists emphasised that differentiation across subunits (e.g., R&D, production, sales) is often necessary to cope with varying environmental demands,

but that increasing differentiation also creates a need for integration mechanisms, precisely because specialised units must coordinate their different functions. At the economic and inter-organisational level, the classic account of the division of labour highlights how specialisation enables higher productivity and mutual interdependence through exchange, mirroring the claim made here that functional differentiation continues upward to businesses and nations exchanging goods, services, material, energy, and information. Together, these strands support the general idea that differentiation is a recurring, multi-level solution to complexity, while also implying that duplication invites competition, and absence of a required function creates bottlenecks or failure (because the larger system loses an essential contribution).

## 14. Conclusion

Roles are not superficial features of group life. They are stabilised coping strategies that individuals adopt in order to function within complex interaction fields. When these roles are recognised, complementary, and appropriately bounded, groups operate smoothly. When roles are hidden, duplicated, denied, overextended, or absent, tension and dysfunction are almost inevitable.

This understanding also explains why difficulties often arise when subgroups interact with larger groups. The coping roles that are effective internally are not always those required for effective representation externally. Recognising the importance of role–context fit helps explain many otherwise puzzling forms of inter-group friction and suggests practical ways to avoid them.

Finally, the same pattern can be seen across levels of systems. What appears at the level of individuals as roles, at the level of organisations as functional departments, and at the level of economies and nations as specialisations reflects a common underlying principle: complex systems differentiate into complementary functions in order to manage interaction complexity and maintain viability. Across all these levels, duplication leads to competition, absence leads to dysfunction, and appropriate differentiation leads to stability.

Understanding roles in this way provides not only a clearer explanation of common sources of conflict in teams, but also a systems perspective on how cooperation can be improved within and between groups at every scale.

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**Appendix — Definitions and Propositions on Roles and Interaction**

**Definitions**

**D1 — Interaction Field**
The total set of direct and indirect interaction effects to which agents in a group are exposed.

**D2 — Interaction Load**
The cognitive and interpretive burden placed on an agent by the need to monitor, interpret, and respond within an interaction field.

**D3 — Role (systems sense)**
A stabilised pattern of behaviour adopted by an agent as a coping strategy to reduce interaction load and maintain effective participation in a group.

**D4 — Role Recognition**
The acknowledgement by other agents that an individual's stabilised coping role contributes to the functioning of the group.

**D5 — Role Non-Recognition**
The failure of other agents to acknowledge or value an individual's stabilised coping role.

**D6 — Role Collision**
A situation in which two or more agents adopt the same stabilised coping role within a group.

**D7 — Role Overreach**
A situation in which an agent extends their stabilised coping role beyond what is experienced by others as helpful within the interaction field.

**D8 — Role Absence**
The absence within a group of a stabilised coping role required to manage the interaction field effectively.

**D9 — Role–Context Fit**
The degree to which an agent's stabilised coping role matches the functional needs of a particular interaction context.

**D10 — Functional Differentiation**
The emergence of complementary specialised roles or functions within a system that allow it to manage interaction complexity and maintain viability.

**Propositions**

**P1 — Emergence of Roles**
As interaction load increases within a group, agents adopt stabilised coping strategies that become recognisable as roles.

**P2 — Role Stability**
Once established, roles provide predictability for both the individual and the group, reducing interaction load.

**P3 — Role Recognition as Satisfier**
Recognition of an individual's role acts as a satisfier by supporting their ability to participate effectively in the group.

**P4 — Role Non-Recognition as Contra-Satisfier**
Failure to recognise a role acts as a contra-satisfier, reducing the individual's ability to function comfortably within the interaction field.

**P5 — Effects of Role Collision**
When multiple agents occupy the same role, competition and instability arise within the interaction field.

**P6 — Effects of Role Overreach**
When a role extends beyond its appropriate scope, other agents experience it as a contra-satisfier, leading to resistance.

**P7 — Effects of Role Absence**
When a necessary role is absent, the group experiences drift, inefficiency, and unresolved interaction complexity.

**P8 — Growth of Role Complexity with Group Size**
As group size increases, the number and diversity of roles required to manage interaction load also increases.

**P9 — Role Explicitness Reduces Conflict**
Making roles explicit and recognising their complementary nature reduces interaction load and prevents many forms of conflict.

**P10 — Role–Context Misfit in Representation**
An agent's effectiveness in representing a subgroup depends on the fit between their stabilised role and the functional needs of the larger interaction field.

**P11 — Functional Differentiation Across Levels**
The same process by which individuals adopt roles within groups appears at higher system levels as functional differentiation between departments, organisations, and nations.

**P12 — Recurring Failure Modes Across Levels**
Across system levels, duplication of functions leads to competition, absence leads to dysfunction, overreach leads to resistance, and non-recognition leads to disengagement.