Trade-off Conflict Resolver

Facilitator guide · end a stuck technical disagreement by taking blame off the table so a trade becomes possible

Your job: get two dug-in sides to **one decision they both accept**. Your first move is not to solve the problem — it's to find out whether they're even trying to. You ask one question, the gateway, and it decides everything after it: if the deadlock is really about blame, you take blame off the table before anything else; if it's a genuine clash of interests, you go straight to the swap. You stay neutral throughout — no preferred outcome — and you hold one rule: no trade until the positions have actually loosened.

The one line: they're not arguing — they're proving innocence.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

- Two people or two sides are **stuck on a decision** and neither will move
- The same argument keeps repeating without getting closer
- The disagreement turned personal after something went wrong
- People seem to be defending themselves more than their option

USE ANOTHER TOOL

- The goal is to keep the team whole through the disagreement, not settle the decision → **Alignment Under Conflict Lab** (protects the relationship)
- There's no actual decision on the table — just tension → a relationship tool, not this one
- One person simply needs to decide — there aren't two dug-in sides → a decision tool, not a conflict one

The test question: "Is there one real decision that has to be made, and two sides who won't move?" If it's really about the relationship, not the decision, use Alignment Under Conflict Lab instead. This tool resolves the decision; that one protects the relationship.

PART 1 RUN IT

everything you need to start

1 · WHAT IS THIS REALLY DOING?

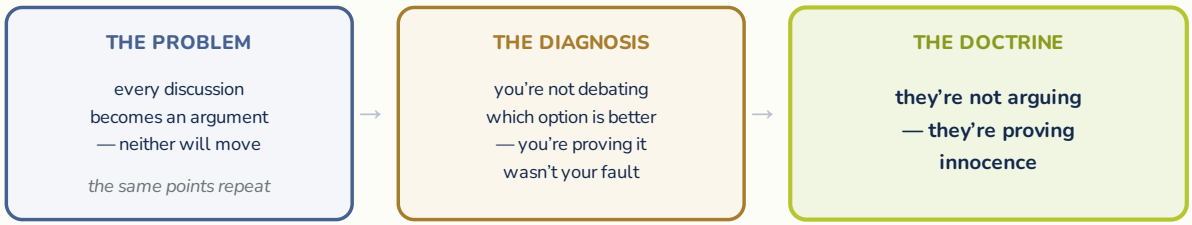
The one idea

THE ONE IDEA

People can't negotiate while they still feel they're defending themselves. When a decision is tangled up with blame, conceding feels like admitting fault — so you **take blame off the table first**, then trade. But only when blame is actually the block: the gateway tells you which. **Until blame is off the table, no trade is possible.**

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WHY LOGIC ISN'T BREAKING THE DEADLOCK



Until blame is off the table, no trade is possible.

2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

Item	What it is, and when it's used
The capture sheet (core)	Records the whole flow on one sheet: the gateway decision, any parked blame, the role swap, and the final trade. The blame box is skippable by design — a plain disagreement leaves it empty.
One live decision deadlock (core)	A real decision between two sides that keeps stalling and needs settling today — not a hypothetical, and not a general tension with no decision attached.
A neutral facilitator	Not on either side, and with **no preferred outcome**. Runs the flow, asks the gateway question, parks blame if needed, writes the trade. Does not take a position.
The two sides	The people holding the two positions. They argue the other's case, then trade.

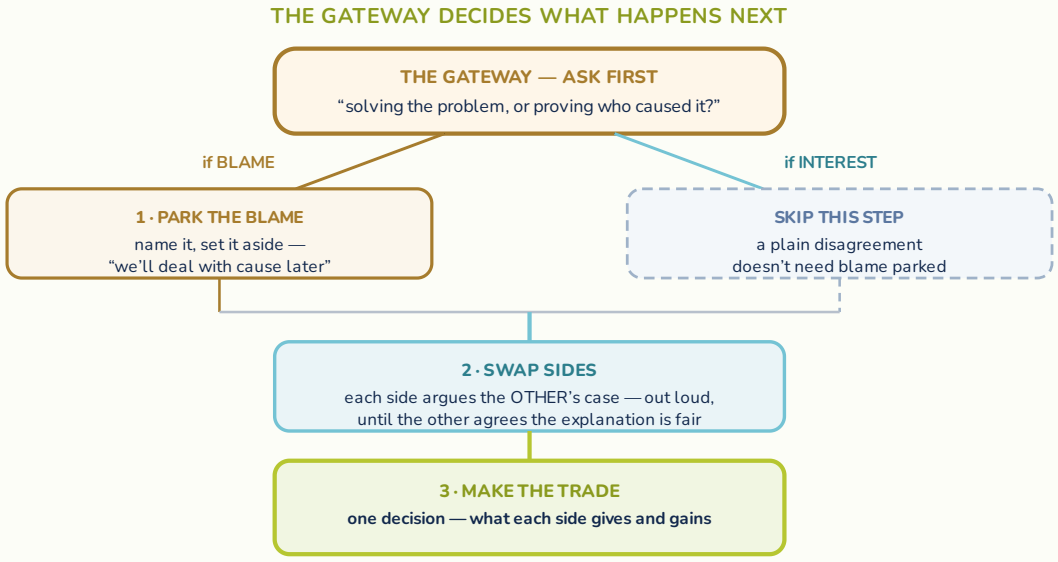
3 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

The flow, step by step

1 · Set up & brief	**2 min**	Name yourself the neutral facilitator and explain the flow in a minute: *we're going to find out what this is really about, take blame off the table if it's there, then trade to one decision.* Name the single decision that has to be made.
2 · Ask the gateway	**3 min**	Ask it plainly: *"Before we solve this, one question: are we trying to solve the problem — or prove who caused it?"* Don't let them debate solutions yet — answer only this, and stay with it until everyone agrees which path you're taking. This is the fork: **if blame → Step 3; if genuine interest → skip to Step 4.** (See the tip below on reading this honestly.)

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3 · Park the blame only if blame is the block	**5 min**	Name the blame out loud and agree to set it aside: *"we'll deal with the cause separately, after we've fixed the problem."* Parking it isn't ignoring it — agree when you'll return to it. Write it in the parked-blame box so it's held, not lost.
4 · Swap sides	**10–15 min**	Set it up in your words: *"Now we swap. Each of you argues the other person's position — as convincingly as you can. You're not giving up your own view; you're showing you understand theirs."* Keep going until each side explains the other's position accurately enough that the other agrees the explanation is fair. That agreement is your signal the positions have loosened.
5 · Make the trade	**10–15 min**	Turn the loosened positions into *one decision — not two compromises.* Name what each side gives and what each side gains. Write the trade both accept.
6 · Confirm	**3 min**	Each side says, in their own words, what they traded. If it holds, you're done. If blame was parked, confirm when you'll deal with it.



The gateway decides the path — only park blame when blame is the block.

FACILITATOR — READING THE GATEWAY HONESTLY

Don't decide it's about blame before asking the gateway. Ask first; then use behaviour to check whether the answer matches what's happening. The room will sometimes answer "we're solving the problem" when everyone can see they're defending themselves — so don't take the answer at face value. Three tells that it's really blame-defence, whatever they say:

- **Run Blame Separation if blame is driving the conversation — even if nobody explicitly says they're blaming anyone.**
- Watch **behaviour**, not just words: if every suggestion is met with "that's not my fault,"

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you're already in blame-defence.
- **If people keep defending past decisions instead of weighing future options,** treat that as blame-defence and park it.

PART 2 MAKE IT LAND & MAKE IT STICK

why it works, and what to watch

4 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

People struggle to negotiate when agreeing feels like admitting fault. Separating the blame from the decision removes that threat. Once people stop defending themselves, arguing the opposing case loosens the stuck positions — and a trade both sides can support becomes possible. The gateway is what keeps this honest: it stops you forcing a blame frame onto a disagreement that was only ever about competing interests.

5 · WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes

What you'll see	The fix
Blame forced onto a clean disagreement	The gateway exists to prevent this. If the room genuinely says "this isn't about fault" and their behaviour agrees, skip Step 3 — don't manufacture blame that isn't there.
The room says "we're solving it" but keeps defending	Trust behaviour over words (see the tip). If "that's not my fault" keeps surfacing, name it gently and park the blame anyway.
Each side argues its own case in the swap	Stop and reset. The swap only works if they argue the OTHER's position — test it by asking the other side if the explanation is fair.
The "trade" is really two compromises	Push for one decision. A compromise where both half-lose isn't a trade — name the single choice and what each side gives and gains.
The facilitator answers the gateway question for the group	Ask the question and let the participants answer first. Use behaviour only to test whether their answer matches what's actually happening — don't pre-judge it.

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The facilitator has a stake in the outcome	Then they can't run it. Find someone with no preferred outcome; a facilitator who wants one option will steer the trade.

What people say — and your move

What you'll hear	Your move
"This isn't about blame, we just disagree."	Good — then we skip straight to the swap. But watch: if "that wasn't my call" keeps coming up, we'll come back to it.
"Why should I argue their side? I don't agree with it."	You're not agreeing — you're showing you understand it. It's the fastest way to get them to hear yours.
"Can't we just split the difference?"	A split where both half-lose usually reopens. We're after one decision with a clear give and gain, not two compromises.
"The real problem is who caused this."	That's the blame — and we'll deal with it, separately, at a time we'll agree now. First we fix the problem.

Before you close, check:

- ✓ You asked the gateway question before debating any solution
- ✓ You parked blame only if blame was actually the block
- ✓ Each side argued the other's case — and the other agreed it was fair
- ✓ The output is one traded decision, not two compromises
- ✓ Both sides can state what they gave and what they got

6 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

Before your next stuck disagreement, ask the gateway question out loud: "are we solving the problem, or proving who caused it?" When logic isn't moving the discussion, ask the gateway question first — most stuck disagreements are really the second one, and naming that is often enough to change the conversation.

For a returning team: notice whether the parked blame from last time was ever dealt with. Unresolved blame that never got its promised follow-up will drive the next deadlock too.

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Appendix a worked run · what good looks like · where this sits

7 · A WORKED RUN

Watch a deadlock become a trade

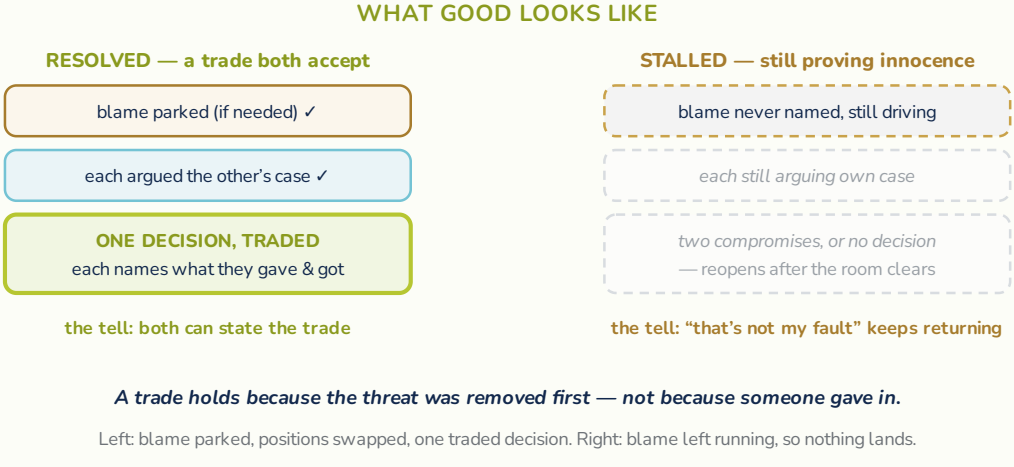
The deadlock: two senior engineers can't agree whether a performance problem should be fixed by redesigning a service or upgrading the infrastructure. It's been argued three times. Neither will move.

Stage	What happened in the room
Gateway	Facilitator: "are we solving the problem, or proving who caused it?" Both said "solving it" — but every option was met with "that wasn't my call." Behaviour said blame. *Gateway → blame.*
Park the blame	Named it: accepting the redesign feels like admitting the original architecture was wrong. Parked: "we'll review the architecture decision next sprint — separately." The threat left the room.
Swap sides	The redesign engineer argued the infra case; the infra engineer argued the redesign case. Each kept going until the other said "yes — that's my actual reasoning."
Trade	One decision: upgrade infrastructure now to stop the bleeding; schedule the redesign for the next quarter. **Gives:** redesign engineer waits a quarter; infra engineer accepts the redesign is coming. **Gains:** both get a dated plan and stop re-arguing.
Confirm	Each stated the trade in their own words. It held. Architecture review booked for the parked blame.

The lesson, not stated but felt: the fight was never really redesign-vs-infra — it was two people protecting past decisions. Once that threat was parked, the trade took fifteen minutes.

8 · WHAT DOES A GOOD RESULT LOOK LIKE?

What good looks like



Left: blame parked, positions swapped, one traded decision. Right: blame left running, so nothing lands.

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9 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

Two tools handle conflict — and they do different jobs. Reach for the one that matches what's actually at stake:

Tool	Its job — and when to reach for it
Trade-off Conflict Resolver	**Resolve the decision.** There's one call that has to be made and two sides who won't move — get to a trade both accept.
Alignment Under Conflict Lab	**Protect the relationship.** The disagreement is straining the team itself — keep the working relationship whole through it, whether or not a single decision is due.

They can work together: if a hard-won trade has left the relationship bruised, run Alignment Under Conflict Lab afterwards to repair it.

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