Alignment Under Conflict Lab

Facilitator guide · keep a heated disagreement about the work, not each other

Your job: let the team **argue as hard as it needs to** — and keep the argument from turning into "us vs them". You are not here to cool the debate or force agreement. You write the shared goal where everyone can see it, you hold one rule — every point is aimed at the goal, not the person — and you make sure anyone can stop the room the moment language turns personal, so the point gets re-routed back through the goal before the team fractures.

The one line: teams rarely break over what they're deciding — they break the moment "we disagree" quietly becomes "you're against me".

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

- A heated debate is starting to feel like **"us vs them"**
- People are arguing with each other instead of about the work
- A disagreement matters enough that the team can't afford to break apart over it
- You can feel the shared goal slipping out of view mid-argument

USE ANOTHER TOOL

- There's a specific decision that has to be settled and two sides won't move → **Trade-off Conflict Resolver** (resolves the decision)
- You need to deliver difficult feedback, not manage a live conflict → **Structured Feedback System**
- The team is aligned and just needs to decide → a decision tool, not a conflict one

The test question: "Is a real disagreement starting to damage how this team works together?" If the problem is settling the decision itself, use Trade-off Conflict Resolver. This tool protects the relationship; that one resolves the substance — and they can run on the same disagreement.

PART 1 RUN IT

everything you need to start

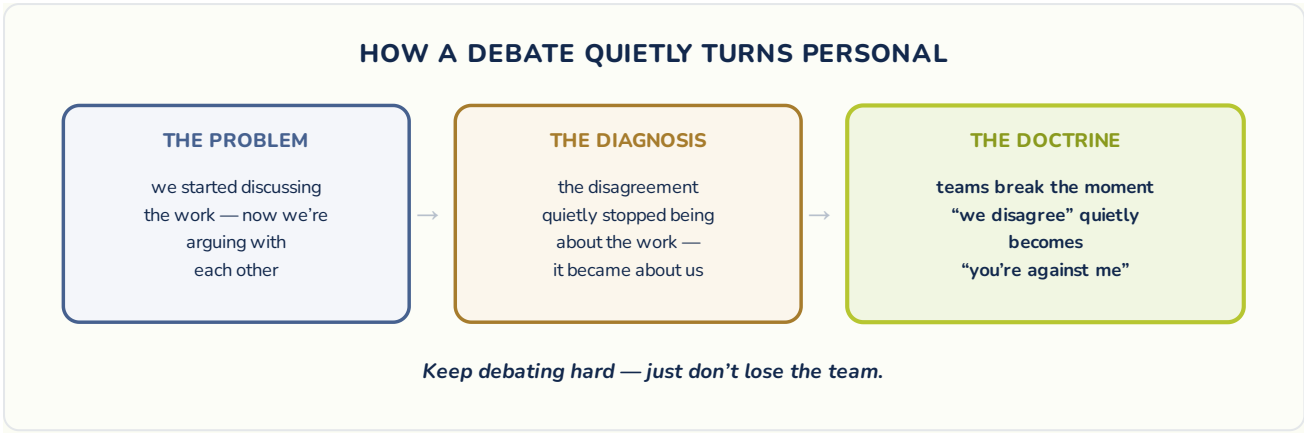
1 · WHAT IS THIS REALLY DOING?

The one idea

THE ONE IDEA

Hard disagreement is healthy — it usually means people care. The danger is the silent slide from "we disagree about the work" to "you're against me." Keep the shared goal **written and in view**, route every point through it, and catch the slide the instant language turns personal. You're protecting the team, not softening the debate.

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2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

Item	What it is, and when it's used
The capture sheet (core)	Where the shared goal is written and kept in view, with space to record each moment the anchor was called — what turned personal, and how the point was re-routed through the goal. Not a score; a record of the moments.
Somewhere to keep the goal visible	A whiteboard, a card, a shared screen — anywhere the shared goal stays in sight for the whole disagreement. If it leaves view, the drift starts.
A facilitator	Writes the goal, keeps it in view, holds the two rules. Does not cool the debate or take a side — the point is a hard, honest argument that stays about the work.
The participants	Debate hard, aim every point at the goal not the person, and call the anchor when language turns personal.

3 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

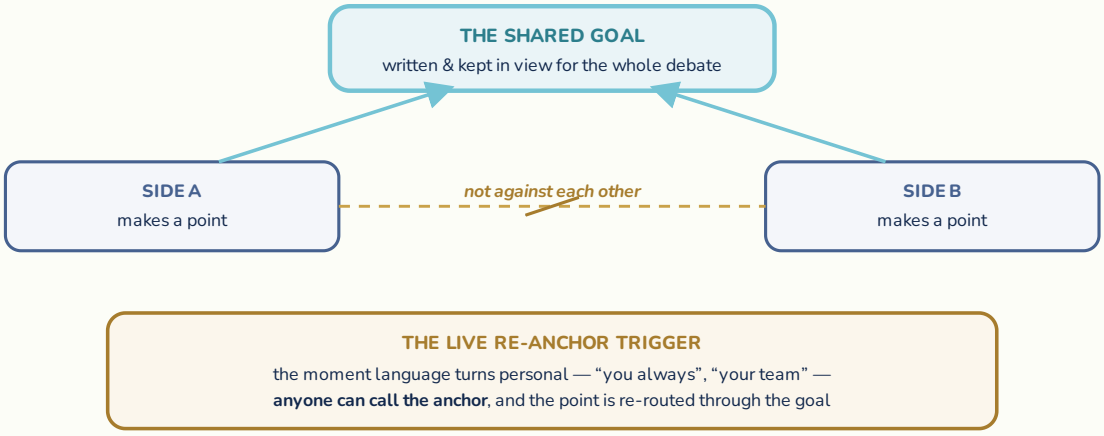
The flow, step by step

1 · Set up & brief	**2 min**	Name yourself facilitator and set the frame in a sentence: *we're going to argue this out hard — and make sure it stays about the work, not each other.* Make clear you're protecting the team, not shutting down the debate.
2 · Write the shared goal	**3 min**	Together, name the one thing everyone actually wants — the outcome behind the disagreement. *Write it down and put it where everyone can see it* for the whole debate — make it specific enough to aim points at, not a slogan. Agreeing this first is half the work.

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3 · Set the two rules	**2 min**	Say them out loud before you start: *address every point to the goal, not the person; and anyone can call the anchor the moment language turns personal.* Give the trigger examples: “you always”, “your team”.
4 · Debate hard, through the goal	**runs live**	Let them argue the substance as hard as they like — your only job is to keep each point aimed at the goal, not a colleague, and the goal in view. *Don’t soften the debate; steer its direction, not its intensity.*
5 · Call the anchor when it drifts	**runs live**	The moment someone says “you always” or “your team”, anyone calls the anchor. *Stop, name the shared goal again, and re-route that point through it.* Note the moment on the sheet — what turned personal, how it came back.
6 · Close as one team	**3 min**	When it’s worked through, check out loud: *did the goal stay visible, and do we still feel like one team?* If a decision still needs settling, follow with Trade-off Conflict Resolver.

EVERY POINT ROUTES THROUGH THE SHARED GOAL



The anchor is an interrupt, not a score — it catches the shift in real time.

FACILITATOR — CATCHING THE SLIDE EARLY

The drift is quiet — it rarely announces itself. Watch for the tells and call the anchor *before* it’s personal, not after:

- **Pronouns shift from “it” to “you”:** “the design is slow” becomes “you made it slow.” That’s the moment.
- **Absolutes appear:** “you always”, “your team never” — these are drift markers; anchor on them.
- **People stop looking at the goal and start looking at each other.** If the goal has fallen out of view, put it back before the next point.

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> Anchoring isn't a foul call — model it yourself early so the room sees it's normal, not an accusation. And you won't catch every slide before it lands — that's fine. The measure isn't whether the debate drifted; it's whether the team recovered each time it did.

PART 2 MAKE IT LAND & MAKE IT STICK

why it works, and what to watch

4 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

Under conflict, people stop experiencing "we disagree about X" and start experiencing "you're against me" — the conflict quietly moves from the task to the relationship, and the shared goal drops out of view. Keeping that goal written and visible, and routing every point through it, makes it genuinely hard to argue against a person rather than a problem. The live re-anchor call catches the shift the instant it starts, rather than after the damage is done.

5 · WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes

What you'll see	The fix
The facilitator softens the debate to keep the peace	Wrong aim. This tool protects the team, it doesn't reduce the disagreement. Let them argue hard — just keep it aimed at the goal.
The shared goal is vague, so points can't route through it	Sharpen it. "Ship good software" is too broad; "a release we can support without weekend pages" is a goal points can actually be aimed at.
Nobody calls the anchor even as it turns personal	You model it. Call the first one yourself, early and lightly, so the room learns it's a normal move, not an accusation.
The goal falls out of view and the drift goes unnoticed	Keep it physically visible the whole time. If it's off-screen or erased, the interrupt has nothing to route back to.
The decision still isn't settled at the end	That's fine — this tool protects the relationship, not the deal. Follow with Trade-off Conflict Resolver to settle the substance.

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What people say — and your move

What you'll hear	Your move
"Are you saying we can't disagree?"	The opposite — disagree as hard as you like. We're just keeping it aimed at the goal, not at each other.
"Calling the anchor feels like I'm telling people off."	It's not an accusation, it's a reset. I'll call the first one myself so it's clear it's a normal move.
"We already know what the goal is."	Then it'll take a minute to write down — and when it's in view, every point has something to aim at when things heat up.
"This is just a communication thing, not real work."	A team that fractures over a decision costs far more than the decision. Protecting how you work together is the work.

Before you close, check:

- ✓ The shared goal was written and stayed in view the whole time
- ✓ Every point was aimed at the goal, not a person
- ✓ Each drift toward "you always / your team" got re-routed through the goal
- ✓ The debate stayed hard — you protected the team, not softened the argument
- ✓ The team still describes itself as one team

6 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

When a debate starts to heat up, ask one question before it turns personal: "what's the shared goal here?" Naming it out loud, early, is usually enough to keep the argument about the work — and gives anyone permission to call the anchor when it slips.

For a returning team: notice whether the anchor gets called earlier each time. A team that catches the slide at "the design is slow" instead of "you're careless" has learned the move.

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Appendix

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

7 · A WORKED RUN

Watch a debate stay whole

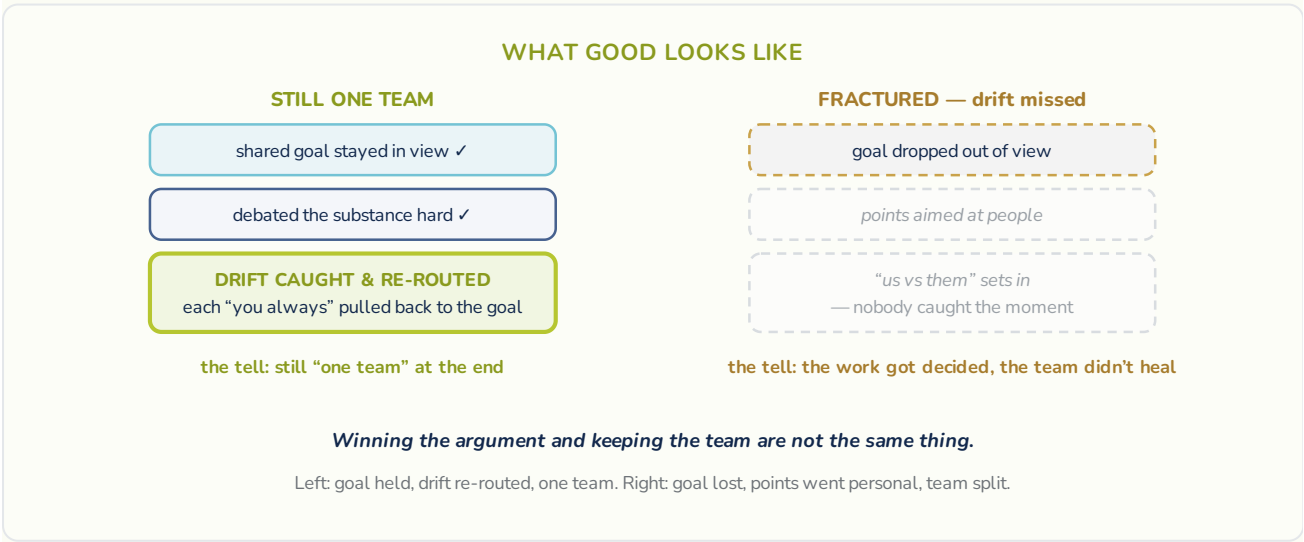
The disagreement: two engineers clash over whether to ship a feature now or hold for a rewrite. It's important, both care, and it's starting to sound like "your team always cuts corners."

Stage	What happened in the room
Shared goal	Written and posted: "a release our users trust that we can support without burning out." Both agreed that's what they actually want.
Debate, through the goal	Ship-now argued the cost of delay *against the goal*; hold argued the support burden *against the goal*. Hard, but aimed at the outcome.
Drift	"Your team always leaves us to clean up." Someone called the anchor. Stop — back to the goal: "what does 'trustworthy release' need here?" Noted on the sheet.
Re-routed	The point behind the jab — unowned support work — got re-aimed at the goal and became a real design constraint, not an accusation.
Close	Still debating hard, but as one team. The decision wasn't fully settled — so they ran Trade-off Conflict Resolver next to make the call.

The lesson, not stated but felt: the "your team always" jab was the exact moment the debate nearly went personal. Catching it there — not an hour later — is what kept the team whole.

8 · WHAT DOES A GOOD RESULT LOOK LIKE?

What good looks like



9 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

Three Alignment tools deal with hard conversations — each a different job. Reach for the one that matches what's at stake:

Tool	Its job — and when to reach for it
Alignment Under Conflict Lab	**Protect the relationship.** A real disagreement is starting to damage how the team works together — keep it about the work and hold the team whole.
Trade-off Conflict Resolver	**Resolve the substance.** There's one decision that has to be made and two sides won't move — get to a trade both accept.
Structured Feedback System	**Deliver difficult feedback.** One person needs to give another hard feedback well — not a live, two-sided conflict.

They work together: if you've protected the relationship here but the decision itself still isn't settled, follow with Trade-off Conflict Resolver — the two run on the same disagreement.

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