Execution Alignment Lab

Facilitator guide

Your job: get each leader's real priority order out into the open under a hard constraint, show how far apart they are, and help the group commit to one shared order it will actually follow when priorities collide.

The one idea: most leadership teams agree on the goals. They rarely agree on what comes first when those goals compete. The disagreement stays invisible until a trade-off forces it — so this activity forces it, on purpose, in the room, before the next real conflict does.

WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

Leaders agree on the goals but pull apart when those goals conflict. The same trade-off keeps getting re-fought because it was never settled, and teams below get conflicting messages on what comes first. You can name four to six competing priorities that genuinely pull against each other under a limited resource.

WRONG TOOL

You just need to surface that hidden differences exist, fast › The Reveal. You need to align on what matters right now, in the moment › Prioritise Under Pressure. You suspect people heard the brief differently › Echo Test. You're ordering a project backlog › this is for priorities in tension, not tasks.

The one test before you start: can you name four to six priorities that pull against each other when the resource is limited? If they don't genuinely conflict, there's no order to align — pick sharper ones. If every leader would rank them the same, the priorities probably don't really compete.

WHAT WILL THE GROUP LEAVE WITH?

What you'll leave with

WHAT YOU GET

One committed priority order the whole group will follow under pressure — with the trade-off named at each position, and the next real decision forum where the order will be used, with an owner who carries it.

WHY IT MATTERS

The group sees that its "agreement" was hiding several different orders — and that the conflict was never about what matters, only about what comes first. Decisions below get cleaner the moment the order is shared.

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PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

Your job

You are running this to one outcome: a single committed order, with a trade-off named at each position, that every leader will act on next time. Your job is to:

- hold the group to **an order, not a list** — if everything can be "important", there is no order and no alignment
- keep the ranking **private and silent until the reveal** — the divergence is only honest if no one influenced the room first
- make the constraint **bite** — force a real choice, so leaders rank rather than rate everything highly
- settle **one position at a time** and **lock it** — don't let the group reopen a settled position or debate all the priorities at once
- name the **trade-off at every position** — an order with no losers named is just a list in a different shape

THE ONE RULE

Alignment isn't agreeing on the list — it's agreeing on the order when you can't do it all. The entire tool turns on ranking under a real constraint. Allow "everything is important" and it becomes a restated list. Force the ranking, and hold it.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

Roles

Role	What they do
You (facilitator)	Run the flow, keep the ranking private until the reveal, hold the group to an order (not a list), and capture the committed order, the trade-offs, and who carries it. Stay neutral; let the negotiation run.
Participants (3–6 leaders)	The leaders whose priorities actually collide — the people who set the priorities. They rank independently, surface their order, and converge on one. 60–90 minutes.

3 · HOW DO I OPEN?

Opening script — 2–3 minutes

In your own words, never read aloud. It frames the day without giving away the reveal.

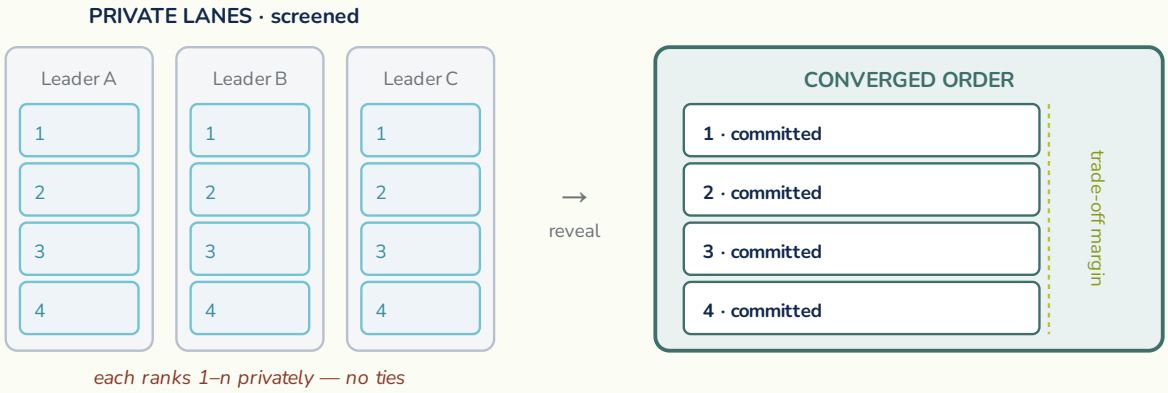
> SAY — IN YOUR OWN WORDS
>
> "We already agree on what matters — quality, speed, growth, all of it. Today we're settling something we've never actually settled: what comes first when these collide and we can't protect them all. Right now, I'd bet we each answer that differently — and our teams feel it. So each of us is going to rank the same priorities, privately, under a real constraint. Then we'll put the orders side by side and see."

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4 · HOW DO I PREPARE THE SPACE?

Setup and materials

THE RANKING BOARD — PRIVATE LANES, THEN ONE COMMITTED ORDER



Private lanes keep the divergence honest; the reveal shows the gap; the group converges on one order.

The committed column, read top to bottom, is the alignment they never had.

Component	What it is, and when you use it
Priority cards (blank)	The competing priorities, one per card — the group writes its own, four to six of them. Identical sets, one per leader. Step 2: these are what each leader ranks.
Ranking board	Private lanes where each leader lays out their order unseen; then a reveal area where all orders sit side by side. Steps 3–4.
Constraint cards	Impose a real resource limit (e.g. “fully fund only two”). They force leaders to choose rather than rank everything highly. Step 3.
Trade-off prompt cards	Prompts for naming what each position gives up. Step 5: used at convergence to keep the trade-offs explicit.

Keep priority cards plain and identical. No card should look weighted before the ranking — the only difference between leaders’ boards must be the order, which is exactly what the reveal compares.

PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

Before you begin — 30-second check

- ✓ The leaders whose decisions set the priorities are in the room
- ✓ Four to six competing priorities that genuinely conflict are ready to write
- ✓ The board’s private lanes are screened, so no one sees another’s order early
- ✓ You’re ready to hold the constraint — and to hold an order, not a list

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5 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

How to run it

Brief the group (2–3 min), then run these in order. The bold part is what you say or do; the note under it is where you earn your keep.

1. Set up	**6 min**	*"What are the priorities we keep colliding on?"* Appoint yourself facilitator. Name the competing priorities — ones that have genuinely collided in the last six months, not theoretical ones. Hold them to competing goals, not tasks.
2. Name the priorities	**10–11 min**	*"Let's agree only the names — not the order."* Agree four to six priorities in tension; one per card. Do not discuss their order yet — that starts the aligning before the ranking. Keep it to the real ones, not a project backlog.
3. Rank under constraint	**9–11 min**	*"Under this constraint, rank them 1 to n — privately."* Apply the constraint (e.g. "protect only two"). Each leader ranks in the order they'd actually fund or protect. No ties — every priority takes a different position. Private and silent; if they confer now, you lose the real divergence.
4. Reveal the divergence	**11–13 min**	*"Let's put every order up, side by side."* Show them together. Don't let anyone explain or defend their ranking yet — just reveal it. Let the gap land before it's explained away; the surprise is the point.
5. Converge on one order	**17–21 min**	*"Which position are we settling right now?"* Work to a single committed order using the convergence algorithm below — settle one position at a time, lock it, then move on. At each position name the trade-off — what the group is choosing not to put first. Don't settle for a list everyone likes; settle the order.
6. Commit	**7–8 min**	*"Where will this order be used next — and who carries it?"* Lock the order and the named trade-offs. Record the next real decision forum where it will be used — a planning meeting, steering committee or release review. Photograph the board.

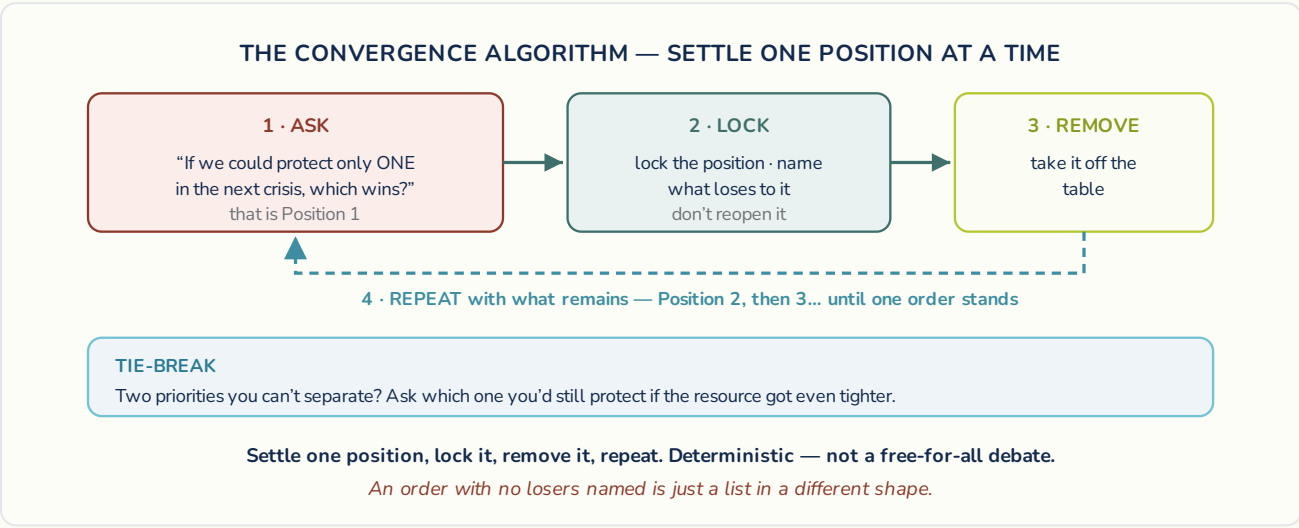
These times are indicative and will depend on the nature of the problem and the size of the team; the whole activity runs 60–90 minutes. The step that overruns is converge (step 5) — the real negotiation. The step that gets squeezed is commit (step 6); protect it. An agreed order no one wrote down or owns won't survive the next conflict.

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6 · HOW DO I ACTUALLY CONVERGE?

The convergence algorithm

Step 5 is where a run lives or dies. Don't "facilitate a discussion" — run a mechanism. Settle one position at a time, in order, so the group never debates all the priorities at once.



Settle one position, lock it, remove it, repeat. Deterministic — not a free-for-all debate.

An order with no losers named is just a list in a different shape.

Move	What you say or do
1 · Ask	"If we could protect only one of these in the next crisis, which wins — every time?" The answer is Position 1. Force a single choice; don't accept "they're equal".
2 · Lock	Lock that position and name what loses to it ("putting this first means that waits"). Once locked, don't reopen it unless the whole group agrees.
3 · Remove	Take the locked priority off the table, so the next question is clean.
4 · Repeat	Ask the same question of what remains — that's Position 2, then 3, until one order stands.
Tie-break	If two priorities can't be separated, ask: "which would you still protect if the resource got even tighter?" That breaks the tie.

Keep the group on one position at a time. The natural failure is debating all four priorities at once — exhausting, and it never resolves. "Which position are we settling right now?" pulls them back to a single, answerable choice.

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When to step in — and when to stay out · a principle, not a step

STEP IN

Leaders confer during private ranking → stop it; the divergence must be real.

The group rates everything "high" instead of ordering → force the constraint.

It drifts to ranking projects, not priorities → pull it back.

Convergence becomes a list everyone likes, no trade-off named → ask what loses.

STAY OUT

The reveal is uncomfortable → that discomfort is the point.

Leaders argue for their order → that's the negotiation, let it run.

A trade-off is genuinely hard → don't protect them from it.

One leader's order is a surprise to the rest → let it land.

The clearest tell it's working: a leader looks at the revealed orders and says "I genuinely thought we'd all put the same thing first." That's the reveal landing. If every order is identical, the priorities probably don't really conflict — pick sharper ones.

PART 3 AFTER THE ACTIVITY

make it stick

7 · HOW DO I CLOSE?

Closing script — 2 minutes

Reconstruct the discovery — don't summarise it. Replay where the group started so the insight lands as something they lived.

SAY — IN YOUR OWN WORDS

"When we walked in, every one of us was sure we were aligned. Then we ranked the same priorities — and not one of us had the same order. That gap was the alignment we never had. We've now got one order: *[read it out, 1 to n]*, with the trade-offs named. This is what we hold when they collide — starting at *[the named forum]*."

8 · DID WE GET A GOOD RESULT?

What good looks like

A GOOD RUN

One committed order, top to bottom, with a trade-off named at each position — "putting quality first means growth waits a quarter." Every leader will act on this same order, and it has a named forum and owner.

A HOLLOW RUN

A list everyone "agrees" with — all "important", no order, no trade-off named. "We're aligned!" — until the next conflict, where each leader still acts on a different order. If it looks like this, go back and force the ranking.

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9 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

The idea underneath

Leaders rarely disagree on what matters — they disagree on what comes first when they can't have it all. Agreement on goals is easy, and it hides the real divide, because the order is never challenged until a trade-off forces it. Making each leader rank under a real constraint makes the hidden differences visible; converging on one order turns fragile agreement into alignment that lasts.

SAME PRIORITIES — AND NOT ONE LEADER HAD THE SAME ORDER

PRODUCT LEAD	COMMERCIAL LEAD	BUSINESS LEAD
1 Quality	1 Speed	1 Growth
2 Speed	2 Growth	2 Speed
3 Growth	3 Quality	3 Cost
4 Cost	4 Cost	4 Quality

Everyone agreed on the four priorities. No one had the same order.

Before you finish — the check

- ✓ Every leader's private order was revealed side by side — the divergence was seen
- ✓ The group converged on one committed order, top to bottom — not a list
- ✓ A trade-off is named at each position — what loses there
- ✓ The next real decision forum where the order will be used is recorded
- ✓ The order has an owner who carries it into the next conflict
- ✓ The board has been photographed before anyone leaves

10 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

Don't confirm alignment by agreeing on goals — test it by forcing a shared order under a real constraint.

The lasting change: the group stops mistaking "we agree on what matters" for alignment, and starts settling the order before the trade-off forces it. Alignment isn't agreeing on the list — it's agreeing on the order when you can't do it all.

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Appendix · Reference

You should not need this while you run the activity. Read it before, or use it if a run goes sideways.

11 · A WORKED RUN

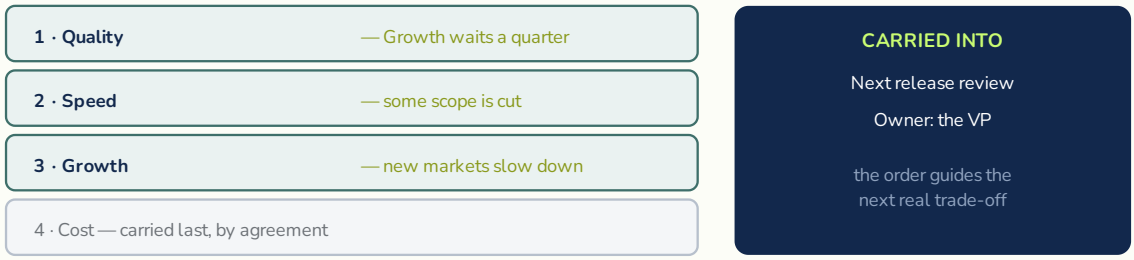
Watch the reveal land

Three leaders on a product exec team. The priorities in tension: Quality, Speed, Growth, Cost. The constraint: you can fully protect only two this quarter.

THE MOMENT THE REVEAL LANDS

Each ranks privately, then the orders go up side by side. The product lead led with Quality; the commercial lead led with Speed; the business lead led with Growth — and each had assumed the others shared their order. A leader says: **"I genuinely thought we'd all put the same thing first."** The goals never conflicted on paper, so the disagreement stayed invisible until the constraint forced a ranking.

THE COMMITTED ORDER — WITH A TRADE-OFF NAMED AT EACH POSITION



One order, top to bottom — not five vague intentions everyone nodded at.

Every leader will act on this same order when the priorities collide next.

How the facilitator made it land: forced a real constraint ("protect only two" turned a comfortable list into a real order with real losers); kept ranking private until the reveal; let the gap sit; and named the trade-off at every position. Converging on Quality · Speed · Growth · Cost — with the trade-offs named — was the alignment they'd been missing.

The question that links it to real work: before they leave, ask — "what decision in the last quarter would have gone differently if we'd agreed this order earlier?" The answer is what the order is worth.

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12 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

Common mistakes

Mistake	Why it fails the run
Ranking everything "high"	Without a real constraint there's no order. Force the choice — protect only two — until an order is forced.
Conferring before the reveal	One early opinion in the room and the real divergence vanishes. Private and silent first.
Ranking projects, not priorities	This is for competing goals in tension, not a task backlog. Pull it back to values that compete.
A list, not an order	If no trade-off is named at any position, the group converged on nothing. Name what loses.
Tied rankings	Ties defeat the mechanism — every priority must take a different position, or there's no order to align.

13 · WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

Edge cases

What happens	What to do
Every leader's order is identical	The priorities don't really conflict. Pick sharper ones that genuinely compete under a limited resource.
The group rates everything equally important	Tighten the constraint — "protect only one" — until an order is forced.
One leader dominates the convergence	Go back to the private orders on the board; let the divergence, not the most dominant person, drive the negotiation.
They converge too fast, no trade-off named	Stop: "what are we choosing not to put first here?" No position is settled until its loser is named.
The order can't be agreed	That's a real finding — capture where it splits and escalate. A named disagreement beats a fake consensus.
The discussion keeps drifting back to projects	Very common. Pull it back to competing goals and values: "that's a task — which priority does it serve?" You're ordering priorities in tension, not a backlog.
Time runs out before commit	Cut convergence discussion, never the commit. Lock the order you have and the trade-offs named so far.

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14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

If instead...	Use this
you just need to surface that hidden differences exist, fast	**The Reveal** — surface that differences exist, quickly.
you need to align on what matters right now, under live pressure	**Prioritise Under Pressure** — order what to do first, in the moment.
you suspect people also heard the brief differently	**Echo Test** — check the team shares one picture of the brief.
the resistance is to a change, not a priority order	**Surface Honest Resistance** — get the real objections to a change into the open.

Rule of thumb: The Reveal shows that hidden differences exist; Execution Alignment Lab commits the leadership priority order those differences hide. Surface the difference, then settle the order.

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