

The PACT Method: Coaching Two People Through Conflict

When two people stop working together, the instinct is to step in and settle it. That instinct is the problem. Here is a four-step way to make them resolve it, and to make the resolution hold.

By Dan Allinger, PCC, MNLP | AGL Coaching | aglcoaching.com

The Signal

Two people who used to build on each other's work now route around each other. Meetings that once moved quickly stall. Emails get copied to a manager for cover. A project that should take a week takes a month, and nobody will say why out loud. You already know the two names.

The instinct is to pull them into a room and settle it. Hear both sides, decide who is right, hand down a fix, and move on. It feels like leadership. It is faster than the alternative. And it almost never holds.

When you broker the peace, you own the peace. The two people walk out with your solution, not theirs. The first time the pressure returns, the old pattern comes back, because nothing changed inside the conflict. You changed the room for an afternoon.

Resolving conflict between two people is not about being the judge. It is about creating the conditions where they resolve it themselves, then holding them to the behavior they agreed to. That is a different skill, and it has a structure.

The Science

Conflict does not make people difficult. It makes them threatened, and a threatened brain cannot do the one thing resolution requires: think clearly about another person's point of view.

Think about the last time a disagreement escalated faster than the facts justified. Voices rose. Someone went quiet and would not re-engage. A small issue turned into a referendum on respect. The facts did not change in those ninety seconds. The brains in the room did.

The amygdala is the brain's threat detector. It scans faster than conscious thought and fires before the thinking brain, the prefrontal cortex, has weighed the situation. Daniel Goleman named the result the amygdala hijack: the moment the threat response takes the wheel and deliberate thought goes offline. Joseph LeDoux's research on fear circuitry mapped how direct that pathway is. The signal reaches the amygdala and triggers a response before the cortex finishes making sense of it.

In conflict, the threat is rarely physical. It is status, fairness, being wrong in front of a peer, losing standing. The brain treats those the way it treats a physical threat. Robert Sapolsky's work on the stress response shows the body mobilizing for survival, pulling energy toward reaction and away from reflection. A hijacked brain is built to defend, not to collaborate. You can offer the most reasonable proposal in the world, and a hijacked person cannot take it in.

The signs are visible once you look for them: a raised voice, rapid or shallow breathing, defensiveness, sudden silence, widened eyes. When you see them, the content is no longer the work. Regulation is.

One move helps more than any other. Naming an emotion out loud reduces its intensity. Matthew Lieberman's research on affect labeling found that putting a feeling into words lowers activity in the amygdala. "It sounds like this has been building for a while" settles a person more than any argument about the facts. Name the emotion first. Solve the problem second.

There is also a direction to all of this. The brain moves toward a goal more effectively than it moves away from a threat. Two people negotiating from a threat state defend and posture. The same two people, oriented toward a shared outcome they both want, problem-solve. The facilitator's job is to move the room from away-from to toward, and you cannot do that while anyone is still hijacked.

KEY INSIGHT

You cannot reason with a hijacked brain.

In conflict the threat is status, fairness, or being wrong in front of a peer, and the brain treats it like a physical threat. Regulate first. Name the emotion, slow the pace, and return to the problem only once the person is back online.

The Shift

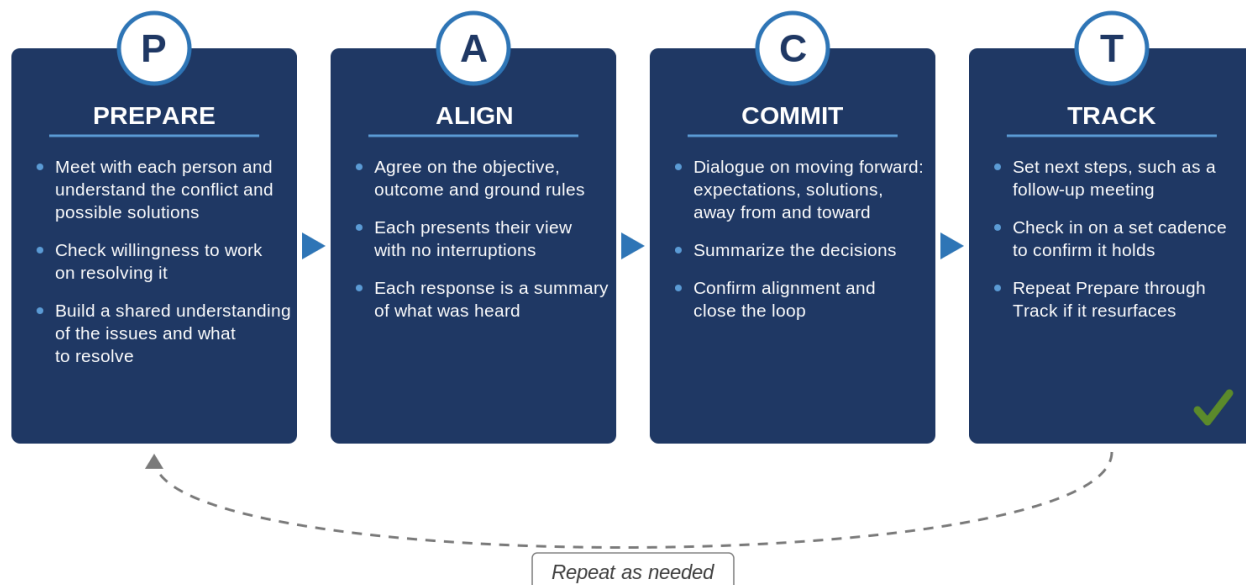
Resolution has a sequence. AGL calls it PACT: Prepare, Align, Commit, Track. It works the same whether it is two peers who have stopped speaking, a small team that has broken down, or a leader and an employee with a power gap in the room. What changes is what you watch for, not the steps.

Throughout PACT you lean on a small set of communication moves: asking questions that open rather than corner, reflecting back what you hear, and naming what sits underneath the words. AGL teaches these as the Communication Trifecta inside the TacComm™ system. You can read how the [Communication Trifecta and TacComm](#) work on the AGL services page. You do not need the full method to run PACT, but the better you get at those three moves, the better every step works.

PACT

Prepare • Align • Commit • Track

From a point of view to a shared view point



PACT: a four-step sequence for facilitating conflict between two or more people.

Prepare

Meet each person one on one before anyone is in a room together. Two people in conflict, two meetings. Five people, five meetings. Your job in each is to understand the situation from that person's point of view, gauge where the emotional charge sits, and test possible solutions privately, before the group convenes.

This is where you watch hardest for a hijack. If you see one, drop the problem-solving and regulate first. Slow your own voice and pace, name what you are hearing, and give the person room to come back online. Before you leave, name the shared outcome you are working toward and get informal buy-in. Nobody should walk into the group meeting cold.

Align

Bring the parties together. Open with something human rather than the conflict: where they grew up, what was hard about it, anything that reminds them they are talking to a person. This resets the room before the hard part starts.

Then get agreement on the objective before you touch the content. This is alignment, not agreement on the facts. Both people need to nod to the same destination, not to the same story of how they got here. Offer a structure for the conversation as a draft, not a decree: "Here is what I am thinking. What works for you?" People commit to a process they helped shape.

Commit

Move the group from talking about solutions to agreeing on specific behavior. Ask what each person is moving away from and what they are moving toward. Keep it behavioral, not aspirational. Not “communicate better,” but “raise the disagreement in our one on one before the team meeting, not during it.” One to three commitments, no more.

Write them down if it helps, but the power is in the conversation, not the document. A signed page with no real conversation behind it changes nothing. For high-visibility situations, a brief signing moment can formalize the commitment without making the paper the point.

Track

Schedule the follow-up before the meeting ends. Do not leave it open. Keep the check-in short: did the behavior hold, what is still sticking, does anyone need another one on one. Then repeat Prepare through Track as many times as the situation takes. A durable resolution to a conflict that built over months rarely lands in a single pass.

When there is a power gap

When the conflict is between a leader and an employee, one rule changes everything. In Prepare, expect the employee to hold back while the leader is present, and plan the individual meeting to get the fuller picture. In Align, name the power gap out loud if it is choking candor. In Commit, hold the leader to the same behavioral commitments as the employee, not a lighter version. Nothing erodes a resolution faster than a rule that only binds the person with less power.

One caution. If only one person is in the room, an employee venting about a colleague, or a leader asking how to handle friction on the team, you are coaching an individual, not running PACT. That conversation matters, and it uses the same communication moves, but it is not the same work. PACT is for when you personally sit two or more people down together and facilitate.

BEFORE THE ROOM

The one on one is where the work happens.

Meet every party individually before you bring anyone together. Understand each point of view, watch for the hijack and regulate first, then name the shared outcome and get informal buy-in. Nobody should walk into the group conversation cold.

The Practice

Facilitating conflict is a skill, and skills build the same way every behavior does: through reps, not reading. You cannot prepare your way to competence here. The conversation is the practice.

Start with Prepare, because most of the real work happens in the one on ones, and they are the easiest to rehearse. Run a short individual conversation with a colleague playing one of the parties. Feel the difference between the private mode and the group mode before you are in a live one.

Practice the regulation move before you need it. Under a hijack, yours or theirs, you default to whatever you have rehearsed. If naming an emotion and slowing your pace are not automatic, they will not show up the moment the room heats up. Drill them when the stakes are low: a tense meeting, a hard call at home, anywhere the pattern can fire. By the time you are facilitating two people in real conflict, the move should run on its own.

Then track yourself the way you track them. After each facilitation, take two minutes. Where did I want to jump in and solve it for them? Where did I catch it? What would I do differently next time? That short reflection, done within a few hours, is where the skill encodes.

The next article in this series, “The Accountability Gap: Why Your Team Nods and Then Does Nothing,” picks up where Commit and Track leave off: the moment a conversation produces agreement but not ownership. If this article is about resolving conflict so it holds, that one is about why agreements come apart, and how to build the kind that does not.

Related Articles

The Accountability Gap: Why Your Team Nods and Then Does Nothing

Accountability failures are usually clarity failures. Here is how to tell the difference and what to do about it.

The 4 META Questions: How to Plan Any Difficult Conversation in 10 Minutes

A four-question framework that turns the hardest conversations into the most productive ones.

Practice Makes Permanent: How Leaders Rewire Behavior That Sticks Under Pressure

Knowing what to do differently is not the problem. Here is what actually makes new leadership behavior permanent.

The Real Reason Employee Engagement Is Dropping, and What Leaders Can Do About It This Week

Your people still care. What has changed is how much they have left to give, and how you lead them through it determines what comes next.

About the Author



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Dan began his career as a military criminal investigator, learning the behavioral science of interview and interrogation, and making decisions under pressure with incomplete information and real consequences. He went on to serve as a global Chief Human Resources Officer and international board member before founding AGL Coaching in 2017. He has studied Neuroscience for Business at MIT, holds his ICF Professional Certified Coach credential (PCC), and is a Master Practitioner of Neurolinguistic Programming (MNLP). Dan is also the author of TacComm™, a practical communication system built on behavioral science to increase influence and sharpen decision-making under pressure.

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About AGL Coaching



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Ready to resolve conflict in a way that holds?

AGL Coaching works with leaders, HR teams, and leadership teams globally to turn conflict into durable working relationships, not temporary truces. Start a conversation.

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