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Stop Conflict Before It Starts: The Game-Changing Communication Method Every Leader Needs



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Leadership Strategy



A four-step method that will stop conflict before it happens. GETTY

There's no doubt about it: Communication can be *really* hard—especially when the topic is a difficult one to broach or when emotions are elevated. Often, we end up creating unnecessary

conflicts that cause our productivity to nosedive and our issues to become even more tangled and unresolved.

Alexandra Jamieson and Bob Gower are here to change that with their book, *Radical Alignment: How to Have Game-Changing Conversations That Will Transform Your Business and Your Life*. A happily married couple and two dear friends of mine, Jamieson and Gower have developed the All-In Method (AIM), a communications framework that allows organizations, teams, couples, families and more share their thoughts and reach a common ground before conflict escalates, so everyone can move forward effectively with alignment and trust.

How does this work, and how can leaders best leverage it with their teams? I interviewed Jamieson and Gower to dig in.

Laura Garnett: The AIM methodology is a four-step process that asks each participant to express their thoughts on a topic for each step: Intentions, Concerns, Boundaries and Dreams. When should someone use AIM? Is it meant to defuse conflict or to avoid it altogether?

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Alexandra Jamison and Bob Gower: The method is meant to provide clarity and to increase the amount and quality of information you use to make decisions. We suggest using it by

yourself, as a journaling exercise, whenever you feel conflicted or unsure about a relationship or situation you find yourself in.

It is best used with others *before* tension is high. We like to use it before starting high-stakes projects or making significant decisions. The power of the method is that it forces us to have difficult conversations before conflict develops. It identifies potential relational landmines and helps us create rules to avoid them altogether or to detonate them in a controlled environment without a sense of urgency.

AIM is also a powerful way to lead with empathy, both personally and professionally. When you invite someone to have a potentially tough conversation, and provide them with this simple structure, the other people can relax because there is a map you're both following.

Garnett: Are there any best practices for what to do after you go through the steps with someone? Do you take notes or use the information to reference at a later date?

Jamieson and Gower: AIM is all about the process, not about the artifact, so we don't emphasize taking or preserving notes. We want participants to be fully present and listening to each other so an overemphasis on note-taking can get in the way.

That said, one of our favorite ways to run the process with teams is to give everyone a few minutes to sit with each prompt and put their responses on Post-it notes—one idea per note and as many notes per question as they like. In this age of remote work, a tool like [Mural](#) is perfect for this.

We put the notes up on a wall and have each person provide some

narrative to their responses. Having all the notes on a wall like this allows us to ask questions that nudge us to deeper levels of understanding, such as: What do you notice? What themes do you see? Are there any responses that surprise you?

Garnett: What do you do when you have team members or partners who refuse to go through the AIM process with you?

Jamieson and Gower: This is good information to have and likely signals a lack of trust or psychological safety. If you are a leader and your team is not willing to be vulnerable with you, they likely have a good reason—and that reason may be you. The same goes for your partner.

We can't force anyone to engage in this kind of vulnerable dialog with us. The key is to be inviting and to make space for each person to participate at the level they feel most comfortable.

Both personally and professionally, we have seen that some people are just unwilling to enter into a high-stakes conversation “in good faith,” meaning they aren't open to truly hearing your side, or they are so combative or defensive from the start that there seems to be little opportunity for true connection.

Bringing in an outside facilitator to set the stage and keep the meeting on track and free from personal agenda can make all the difference. Also, challenging yourself to go first and set an example for the level of vulnerability can be helpful.

Garnett: In a time of increased polarization, do you feel like you can use this method to increase participants' understanding of issues like race and equality?

Jamieson and Gower: The goal of the method is to give everyone equal space to be heard and to allow for difficult conversations to happen. And many of the difficult conversations happening now are about race, gender, health and equality.

While we are neither anti-racism teachers nor diversity, equity and inclusion experts, we have heard from several people who have used the AIM method to have these conversations with family and friends.

We believe that creating a space for deep listening and empathy is vital to creating more inclusive and equitable spaces. However, understanding and empathy alone are not sufficient. We also need to make changes and take action.

Garnett: What has been one of your most powerful outcomes of using this methodology with work or your personal life?

Jamieson and Gower: For me (Bob) it has allowed me to learn how to listen without needing to change anything. Previously, when someone would offer an opinion that countered my own, I'd often get triggered and feel like I needed to fix the situation in some ways. Developing my own deep listening skills—which means seeking to understand even when you don't approve—has helped find solutions to difficult interpersonal situations that at first seemed impossible.

I (Alex) used to struggle to bring up tough conversations because I felt I had to have all the answers in advance or provide irrefutable evidence for why I was right. Using AIM has helped me relax and bravely enter conversations because I now know that I don't need to know the solutions. I only have to be willing to invite in the important person and be present to truly hear them.

Garnett: Are there certain conditions that make this tool most effective? What are those?

Jamieson and Gower: Using the method as a deliberate practice is key—much like a musician playing scales. This means making enough time, being undistracted, and not intoxicated, hungry or upset (if at all possible). Do your best to come into the process with an open mind and open heart—treat it as important but not urgent.

We talk about A-HA!, an acronym meaning Angry, Hungry, Alcohol. Put off the conversation, or any tough topic or argument, until everyone is fed, sober, calm and well-rested.

I also recommend sharing the four-step process in advance when you invite someone to the specific topic to be discussed. Give them the cheat sheet from our book, and ask them if they will schedule a specific time with you to walk through the steps together. Giving someone advanced prep time is really helpful because this is a new topic, and it feels generous rather than springing it on someone.

Garnett: If someone wanted to use this method with their executive team today, how would you suggest that they attempt this with a group larger than five?

Jamieson and Gower: It's all about how much time you have and how to optimize for effective listening. The more people you have in a group, the harder it can be for each person to be heard and the process will take longer too. We've run this effectively with as many as 15 people in a single group, but this requires a bit of forethought and effective timekeeping. Big groups are especially suited to the Post-it note process mentioned earlier. You can also save time by giving people the prompt questions ahead of time and asking that

they journal on their own before coming together.

All that said, remember that this process is the work so resist the temptation to cut it short. We've spent half a day on it with some groups who have reported back to us that it was one of the most impactful things they've done—and it actually saved time later by reducing missteps and easing planning and problem-solving.

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