Execution Pacing System

Facilitator guide · set a pace your team can repeat, cycle after cycle

Your job: make the team see that the "temporary" pace became permanent — then set a sustainable line and a trip-wire so it can't creep back unnoticed. You build a timeline from the crunch signals the team remembers, ask a question no one can answer, and let the silence do the work. Land the recognition first: the system only holds if the reveal lands.

The one line: the temporary pace became permanent — and nobody chose it.

THE ONE LINE YOU MUST HOLD

The reveal is **the question, not the chart.** Build the timeline, then ask "which cycle was the temporary one — and when exactly were we going to slow down?" The silence that follows is the whole tool. If you skip to "let's set a sustainable pace", this becomes advice no one acts on.

This is a system, not a one-off. Most tools end in a decision or an insight. This one ends in a working rhythm the team keeps using: run the reveal once; the sustainable line and the trip-wire stay in place after.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

- A team in crunch for **several cycles running**, each explained as temporary — "just this quarter / release / milestone"
- Working at an unsustainable pace — **running hot** — has become the unexamined normal
- The team keeps saying it'll slow down "after" a milestone that keeps moving
- Weekend work, late nights and escalations have become routine

USE ANOTHER TOOL

- One cycle is sagging **right now** and needs recovering → **Mid-Sprint Reset** (acute, in-cycle)
- Time is lost to refining work that's already good enough → **Good Enough Line**
- The list is simply too long; something must be cut now → **Capacity Triage**

Rule of thumb: this tool is long-running and preventive — it sets a repeatable rhythm across cycles *after* revealing that "temporary" became permanent. It pairs naturally with Mid-Sprint Reset: reset the sagging cycle now, then re-pace here so it doesn't recur. It isn't an acute recovery, a one-time cut, or a polishing fix.

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PART 1 LAND THE REVEAL

the timeline, and the question

1 · WHAT IS THIS REALLY DOING?

The one idea

THE ONE IDEA

An unsustainable pace rarely feels dangerous while work is still shipping. Every push is explained as temporary, so nobody notices that temporary has become normal. Seeing several cycles side by side makes the pattern undeniable — and the question exposes the contradiction the team has been living inside. **It wasn't a bad decision. It was no decision at all.**

WHICH CYCLE WAS THE TEMPORARY ONE?

every cycle, the same signals — built from what the team remembers, not a load metric



every single cycle is identical — there is no "normal" one to point to

"Which one was temporary? When exactly were we going to slow down?"

— the room goes quiet. Nobody can answer. That silence is the reveal.

2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

What	Why it's there
The last 5–6 cycles, from memory	Sprints, months, releases — whatever the team runs in. You're working from what people remember, not load data they don't have.
One facilitator	Builds the timeline, asks the unanswerable question, **holds the silence**, and helps set the line and trip-wire.
Crunch-signal cards	One card for each signal the team remembers in every cycle — weekend work, late nights, escalations, emergency meetings, carry-over and missed commitments.
The line and trip-wire sheet	To set the sustainable rhythm and the named signal — the trip-wire (an early warning sign) — that flags when the pace creeps back above it.

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3 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

The run sheet

Run these in order. Land the reveal (steps 2–3) **before** you set the system (steps 4–5).

1 · Name the cycles	**3 min**	"Let's lay out the last five or six cycles — sprints, months, releases, whatever we run in." Draw a timeline, one slot per cycle. *Use the team's real unit of work — the timeline only works if the cycles are recognisable to them.* Don't discuss pace yet.
2 · Fill in the crunch signals	**8 min**	"For each cycle, what actually happened? Weekend work? Late nights? Escalations? Carry-over? Missed commitments?" *Don't chase precise numbers — the signals people recall are the data.*
3 · Ask the question no one can answer	**4 min**	Stand back from the full timeline. "Looking at all of it — which cycle was the temporary one? And when, exactly, were we planning to slow down?" *Then stop talking. Let the silence sit.*
4 · Set the sustainable line	**7 min**	"What pace could we actually repeat — cycle after cycle — with real recovery in it?" *Something you could actually repeat, not your ideal pace.* Define the load per cycle and the recovery that must be protected.
5 · Install the trip-wire	**5 min**	"What's the signal that tells us the pace has crept back above the line — and who calls it?" *One concrete, early crunch signal, and a named watcher.* That's what stops "temporary" creeping back in (gradually returning).

THE SILENCE IS THE REVEAL — DO NOT FILL IT

When every cycle shows crunch, the question has no answer — and the team hears itself unable to point to the "normal" cycle or the planned slow-down. Don't rescue the room; let someone say it.

Watch for these — the reveal is landing:

- a pause — no one can name the "temporary" cycle or the planned slow-down
- someone says a version of "…this is just how we work now, isn't it"
- nervous laughter, or "we've been saying 'after this one' for a year"
- the framing flips from "temporary push" to "our actual baseline"

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When the team starts asking “so what pace *could* we hold?”, the reveal has become the system — move to the line.

PART 2 INSTALL THE SYSTEM

the line, the trip-wire, and what protects them

4 · WHAT MAKES A STRONG LINE?

Repeatable, not virtuous

This is where facilitators most often go thin — the team agrees to “work more sustainably” and nothing changes. A modest line that holds beats an ambitious one abandoned in a week.

A LINE YOU CAN REPEAT — NOT ONE YOU’D LIKE

STRONG — CONCRETE, CHECKABLE

“maximum one weekend per cycle”

“recovery week protected after a release”

“no two cycles running with carry-over”

you can answer “did we hold it?” yes/no

WEAK — ASPIRATIONAL

“work more sustainably”

“reduce stress”

“protect people’s time”

needs interpretation — so it erodes

The test: at the end of next cycle, could the team answer “did we hold it?” without debate?

5 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

The choice	Why it’s load-bearing
Signals from memory, not load data	Teams don’t have reliable capacity numbers, and “we were at 117%” feels analytical. The weekend lost, the 11pm message, the escalation — those are remembered, human and undeniable.
The unanswerable question	The reveal is not the timeline — it’s being unable to name the “temporary” cycle or the planned slow-down. That silence turns a chart into a recognition. Ask it, then stop talking.
Line + trip-wire (the system)	A reveal without a system fades by next cycle. The line gives a target; the trip-wire and a named watcher stop the pace creeping back the same invisible way it did before.

THE ONE FAILURE MODE

Skipping the reveal and jumping to “let’s define a sustainable workload”. That’s advice — the team already knows it should pace itself, and ignores it. Without the silence after the question, this tool has no force. Land the recognition first.

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6 · WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes

What you'll see	The fix
Jumping to "set a sustainable pace"	That's advice; without the reveal, no one acts on it. Build the timeline and ask the question first.
Plotting load percentages	Teams don't have them, and they feel analytical rather than felt. Use remembered signals.
Filling the silence after the question	The silence is the reveal. Let it sit — however uncomfortable it gets.
Skipping the trip-wire and the watcher	Without them the line erodes the same invisible way the pace did.

What participants say — and your move

What they say	Your response
"This crunch really is temporary."	"Maybe. Which of the last six was temporary? When were we going to slow down?"
"We'll slow down after the release."	"We said that last release too. What changed since?"
"Everyone works like this."	"Possibly. Can we hold this pace for another year without losing someone?"
"We don't have the data."	"We're not using data. What do you remember about March?"

A good run leaves you with:

- ✓ **The reveal (felt):** "we kept calling it temporary — this has been our normal pace for months. Nobody chose it."
- ✓ **The line (set):** a pace the team can repeat, with recovery built in
- ✓ **The trip-wire (installed):** a named crunch signal, with a named watcher
- ✓ The timeline was built from real remembered signals — not load data
- ✓ You let the silence sit, and someone in the room named the truth

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7 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

When a crunch starts, ask: “which of the last few cycles was actually temporary — and when exactly are we planning to slow down?” If no one can answer, the temporary pace has already become the baseline. Name the sustainable line now.

Check the trip-wire at the end of each cycle: did we hold the line, yes or no? If it needs debate, the line wasn’t concrete enough — sharpen it before the next cycle.

Appendix

a worked run · edge cases · where this sits

8 · A WORKED RUN

Watch the facilitator move

Stage	What happened in the room
The timeline	Six months up. Each one: weekend work, late nights, an escalation, carry-over. Every single cycle has crunch signals.
The question	“Which of these was the temporary one? And when, exactly, were we going to slow down?”
The facilitator	Stops. Says nothing. Lets the silence stretch. *Someone half-starts an answer, then trails off.*
The recognition	“…this is just how we work now, isn’t it.” The room goes quiet again. **That’s the reveal.**
The system	Line: one weekend maximum per cycle, recovery week protected after a release. Trip-wire: a second weekend in one cycle. Watcher: the delivery lead.

The lesson, not stated but felt: nothing about the pace changed during the session — only that the team finally saw six cycles at once and heard its own silence. The line held afterwards because the recognition came first.

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9 · EDGE CASES

When the room doesn't behave

What happens	What to do
The crunch genuinely is temporary (a real end date)	Then this isn't the tool — it's a real one-off push. Check there's a concrete end date the team believes. If "the end date" keeps moving, that's the signal to run this.
The line gets set unrealistically virtuous	Pull it back to repeatable: "could you actually hold that next cycle?" A modest line that holds beats an ambitious one abandoned in a week.
No one will own the trip-wire	Then the system won't hold — the pace will creep back unwatched. Name a watcher, or accept the line is decorative. The watcher is not optional.
Leadership sets the pace, not the team	Run it anyway: the timeline becomes the evidence the team takes upward. A line the team can name is far more persuasive than "we're tired".

10 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

Tool	Its job — and when to reach for it
Execution Pacing System	**Set a repeatable rhythm across cycles** — long-running and preventive, after revealing that "temporary" became permanent.
Mid-Sprint Reset	**Acute, in-cycle recovery** — one cycle is sagging right now. Reset it, then re-pace here so it doesn't recur.
Good Enough Line	**Stop over-polishing** — set the done-standard when time is lost refining work that's already good enough.
Capacity Triage	**Force an honest cut** — when the list is simply too long and something must go now.

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