Strategic Trade-off Lab

Facilitation guide · team, one facilitator

What this is: a short, facilitated lab you run when two of the team's goals genuinely collide and you keep trying to have both. Instead of choosing, teams defer — "we'll optimise both for now" — and the trade-off gets made anyway, later, by whatever pressure wins. This tool forces the choice now: the team stands on a physical line, commits which principle governs when the two conflict, names what it costs, and leaves with a reusable rule. It takes about 30–45 minutes for one trade-off.

The one line to hold: your job isn't to help the team like the decision — it's to stop them deferring it. The line will not let them sit in the middle claiming both. **If you don't choose the trade-off, reality will choose it for you.**

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

Two goals keep pulling against each other and the team keeps saying "let's do both"; the same conflict resolves differently every week depending on who pushes hardest; you need a reusable rule, not a one-off call. Especially when letting circumstance decide would be costly, and when people keep optimising both objectives and quietly missing both. It extends naturally beyond delivery to leadership teams making strategic choices.

WRONG TOOL

You need to rank a list and keep every item › Prioritise Under Pressure. You need one fast call on the facts › Decide Under Pressure. The team simply can't decide › Analysis Paralysis Lab. You're unsure how confident to be › How-Sure Line or Calibration Trap.

The sharpest boundary: this is not prioritisation. Ranking keeps every item on the list, in order; a governing line makes one goal actually *lose* whenever the two collide. If nothing has to be governed down, you want Prioritise Under Pressure — not this.

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PART 1 RUNNING THE LAB

team, one facilitator

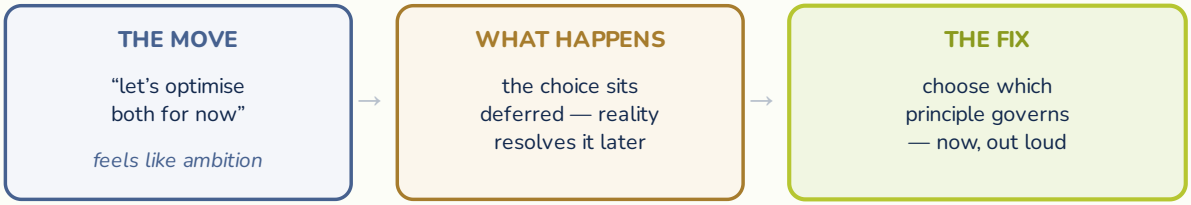
1 · WHAT IS THIS REALLY DOING?

The one idea

THE ONE IDEA

When two goals genuinely conflict, “satisfy both” isn’t ambition — it’s a decision postponed. And a postponed trade-off doesn’t disappear; it gets made later by whatever pressure happens to win, worse than if you’d chosen it. This lab forces the choice into the present: the team stands on a line between the two goals, commits which one governs when they collide, and states what that costs. Deferral is the thing to defeat; the physical line defeats it, because you cannot stand in the middle claiming both.

THE DEFERRAL TRAP



If you don’t choose the trade-off, reality will choose it for you.

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2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

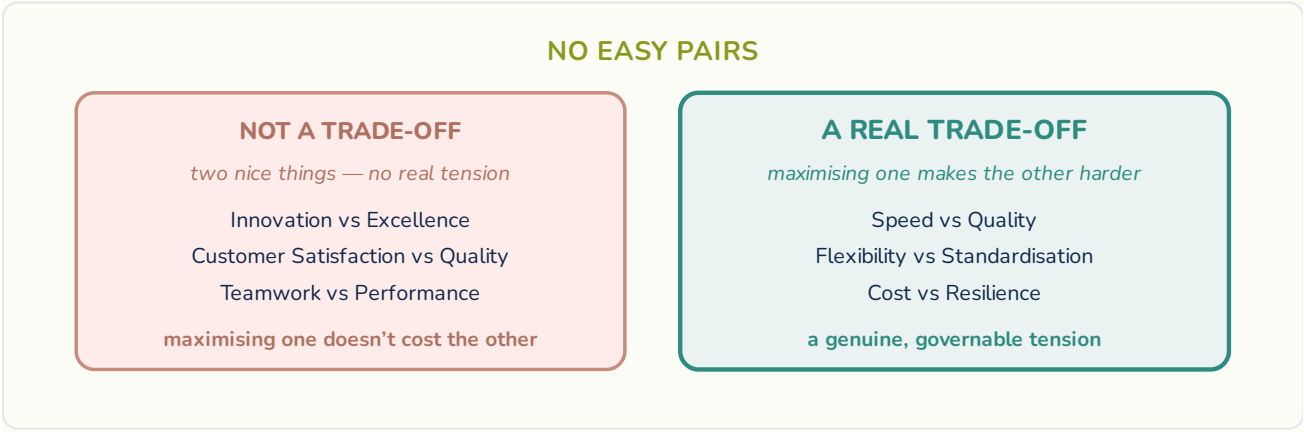
What	Why it's there
A genuine trade-off (core)	Two goals that really pull against each other — maximising one has to make the other specifically harder. Verify this before anything else (section 3). If it fails the test, it's two nice things, not a trade-off.
The physical Governing Line (core)	A real line the team stands on — on the floor or the board — with a goal at each end. Standing on the line is the mechanism: a slider on a worksheet will not produce the same commitment. Built from the Build Spec and Card & Board Content.
Goal cards & consequence cards	The two goals in the team's real language, and prompts for naming the cost of each governing choice.
A facilitator	Verifies the pair is genuine, runs the line, holds "commitment, not voting," and makes sure the consequence is named. The single most important guard against the lab degrading into a preference poll.
The capture sheet (supplied)	Records the governing principle, its consequence, and the "from this point forward…" rule — the reusable output.

Problem Solving · Make Decisions · about 30–45 minutes for one trade-off, depending on how hard the pair is and how much the consequence is debated.

3 · THE FIRST CHECK

No easy pairs

The quality of the whole session is decided by the quality of the pair. Before you draw the line, run the genuine-trade-off test: **"if we maximise goal A, what specifically becomes harder about goal B?"** If the team can't name what gets harder, it's two nice things — swap the pair. And use the team's real, specific language: "ship before quarter-end" vs "eliminate every Sev-2," not the generic "speed vs quality." The more specific the goals, the harder and truer the line.



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4 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

The run-sheet

Verify the pair first (section 3), then run the line. The whole lab turns on one discipline: this is a commitment, not a vote. You name the decision; the team doesn't poll its preferences.

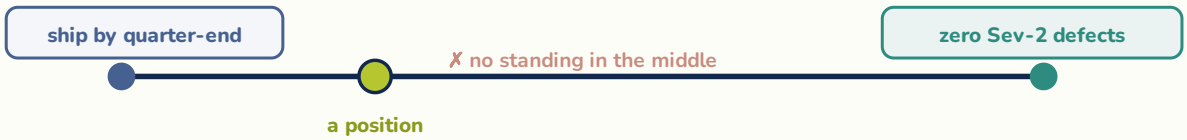
Before you begin

- ✓ Everyone understands both goals
- ✓ The pair passed the genuine trade-off test (section 3)
- ✓ Everyone understands this is a commitment, not a vote

1. Define the trade-off	**3 min**	*Write the two colliding goals at opposite ends of the line, in the team's real language.* Specific, not generic. Run the No Easy Pairs test before you continue.
2. Set up the line	**2 min**	*Lay a real line across the room, one goal at each end.* Explain that a position anywhere on it is legitimate — but the middle, claiming both, is not.
3. Take a position	**5 min**	*One at a time, each person physically stands where they believe the project must be governed* — not where they'd personally prefer. Standing, one at a time, makes the commitment real and visible. Wait until everyone has chosen before beginning any discussion.
4. Name what you're giving up	**5 min**	*Ask people at each position: "what are you willing to give up by standing there?" — or "if we choose this side, what becomes harder?"* The trade-off stays abstract until the cost is said out loud.
5. Commit the governing principle	**8 min**	*State it as a decision, not a vote: "Today, _____ becomes the governing principle," with its explicit consequence.* If the room is divided, say: "we're split — let's discuss the consequences of each position, what we'd give up. We're not voting; we're deciding what governs." Discuss until one principle is agreed — it is not settled by majority, and the facilitator must not reveal their own preferred outcome while the team decides.
6. Close as a rule	**5 min**	*"From this point forward, when these two conflict, _____ wins unless we deliberately reconvene."* Record it on the capture sheet and display it in the team's workspace.

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THE GOVERNING LINE



Move toward one goal and you visibly give up the other. "What will you give up by standing there?"

Commit a governing principle — not a vote.

FACILITATOR TIP — THE ONE GUARD

Everything rests on one distinction: **commitment, not voting.** Never say "stand on the speed side" — that turns the lab into a preference poll and the result means nothing. Say "stand where the project must be governed," and name the outcome as a decision: "Today, speed becomes the governing principle." People are choosing what should win for the work, not what they personally like. Hold that line and the lab produces a real decision; lose it and it produces a popularity contest.

PART 2 GETTING IT RIGHT

why it works & common mistakes

5 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

Teams postpone hard trade-offs because "we'll optimise both" sounds like ambition rather than avoidance — but every unresolved trade-off is eventually made by reality. Standing on the line removes the way out: you cannot move toward one goal without giving up the other, and you cannot stand in the middle claiming both. So the team makes the choice deliberately, now, instead of accidentally, later.

> *Every decision gives something up. Leadership is naming it before reality does.*

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6 · WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes

What happened	The fix
The pair wasn't a real trade-off	The root cause of most failed sessions. "Innovation vs Excellence" has no tension — maximising one doesn't cost the other. Run the test: what specifically gets harder? If nothing, swap the pair.
It became a preference poll	Someone said "stand where you prefer." Reset: "stand where the **project** must be governed." The facilitator names the decision; the team doesn't vote its likes.
Everyone drifted to the middle	The middle is "both," which is the deferral you came to break. No neutral position: a partial lean is fine, dead-centre claiming both is not.
The consequence was never named	A governing choice isn't real until its cost is spoken. "This governs, so that may give." Don't close without it.
The room split and stalled	Don't break the tie by vote. Discuss the consequences of each position — the give each one accepts — until one governing principle is agreed.
You argued the exact percentage	The deliverable is the tiebreak rule for direct conflict, not the ratio. 70/30 is fine; what matters is which wins when they truly collide.
The team refuses to choose	Remind them choosing nothing is also a choice. Ask: "which outcome do you think reality will choose if we leave without deciding?" That usually restarts the conversation — if you don't choose the trade-off, reality will.

Before you close the lab

- ✓ The pair passed the genuine-trade-off test — maximising one makes the other harder
- ✓ People committed a position on the line — nobody sat in the middle claiming both
- ✓ The governing principle was named as a decision, with its consequence spoken out loud
- ✓ A "from this point forward…" rule was recorded and will be displayed where the team works

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7 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE TEST

Ask three team members to finish the sentence:

“When these two goals conflict, _____ governs.”

If all three answer immediately and consistently, the lab has worked — the team now shares a reusable principle, not a one-off call. If they hesitate or disagree, the principle wasn’t truly committed; run the close again.

Appendix · Reference

You should not need this to start. Read it before, or if a run goes sideways.

8 · A WORKED RUN

Watch a trade-off get governed

A team kept agreeing to both “ship before quarter-end” and “eliminate every Sev-2 defect” — and every sprint the tension was resolved by whoever pushed hardest that week.

Stage	What happened
Define & test	The pair passed: maximise shipping speed and known defects may remain; maximise defect-elimination and the date moves. A real tension.
Take a position	Most of the team drifted toward “ship by quarter-end” — but two stood firmly at the quality end. The split was visible, on the floor.
Name the give	Speed end: “we’d ship with known Sev-2s documented.” Quality end: “we’d let the date move.” The costs, finally spoken.
Commit	Divided, so they discussed consequences — not votes. After hearing that criticals would still block, one of the two at the quality end changed position, and they agreed: “This quarter, speed governs; known Sev-2s ship documented, criticals still block.”
The rule	“From this point forward, when ship-date and defect-count conflict, the date wins unless we reconvene.” Displayed on the team board. The weekly argument stopped.

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9 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

The real need	Use this
Choose which principle governs when two goals collide	**This tool — Strategic Trade-off Lab.** A governing principle + its consequence + a reusable rule.
Rank a list of work and keep every item	**Prioritise Under Pressure** — ranking keeps everything, in order. This governs one goal *down*. The sharpest boundary.
Make one fast call on the facts at hand	**Decide Under Pressure** — speed of a single call. This is about *which principle* wins the conflicts.
Break a “we can’t decide” deadlock	**Analysis Paralysis Lab** — for inability to decide. This is for when you know you must decide but can’t choose what governs.
Gauge how certain you are in a call	**How-Sure Line / Calibration Trap** — about confidence. This is about which goal matters most, not how sure you are.

The move underneath: force a choice into the present that circumstance would otherwise force later, and make its cost visible so it can’t be dodged. That same move — commit the position now, name what it gives up — is one of the Gym’s most powerful, wherever a team is quietly deferring a decision by calling it “both.”

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