# Subtraction Game

Facilitator guide

**About this activity:** the team lays out a real, heavy process — one Process card per part — then counts how it grew (almost all additions). Then it runs one round where the only move allowed is taking cards off. A simpler version ends up beside the original, and the team leaves with one removal it will make this week. You are not here to redesign the process. You are here to hold one rule: this round, cards come off, nothing goes on.

**What is a Process card?** One card for one part of the process — a step, check, meeting, report or sign-off. Write the process as it really runs, one part per card, and the pile becomes the board. That pile is the complexity made physical — and it is almost always bigger than the team expects.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

## The right moment

Picture this: a process the team runs every week has quietly got heavier. It keeps gaining steps, checks and approvals and never loses any. Everyone agrees it is too complicated, but no one can say what to cut — and the reflex, every time, is to fix it by adding one more thing. That is the moment for this activity.

### USE IT WHEN

A real process, plan or workflow has built up over time and now feels heavy — it keeps gaining steps and never loses any. Bring one the team actually runs and finds painful.

### DO NOT USE IT WHEN

A brand-new process with nothing built up to remove. Or a simple overloaded to-do list — that's a prioritisation problem, not a removal one (use One-Card Cut).

**The one test before you start:** can the team name a process that has more steps now than it used to? If yes, this is the tool. If there's nothing built up to strip, pick a different one.

· WHAT WILL THE TEAM LEAVE WITH?

## What you'll leave with

### WHAT YOU GET

A count of how the process actually grew — additions versus removals, on one board. A simpler, removal-only version of the process, tested against the original. One thing the team will take out this week, with an owner.

### WHY IT MATTERS

The team sees that the complexity was its own doing — built, not inherited — and that removing a few things beat adding ten. "What can we remove?" becomes a question it can actually ask.

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# PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

## Your job

Run the activity so the team sees how its process grew, then strips it back using removals only. Do not redesign the process yourself. Do not let the team replace cards. Your job is to:

- name the one real process and write it at the top of the board
- get the team to lay it out honestly — one Process card per part
- run the add/remove count and read the total out loud
- hold the no-adding rule through the strip round
- keep time, and protect the last step — one owned removal

> **The one thing the team should learn:** the complexity was mostly self-built — every problem got solved by adding something, and almost nobody ever removed anything afterwards. Removing a few things beats all the adding.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

## Roles

| Who | What they do |
|---|---|
| You (facilitator) | Run the flow. Name the process and write it up. Hold the no-adding rule. Draw removal-prompt cards when the team is unsure. Capture the count and the one owned removal. Stay neutral — you don't decide what comes off. |
| The team (3–6) | Write the process down honestly — one part per card. Mark each card as Added or Removed. Propose what to take off, one at a time. |

> **Say this to the team before you start (in your own words):** "Our process has got heavy. We'll lay it out, see how it grew, then improve it using only removals — no adding allowed — and compare the simpler version with the original."

3 · HOW DO I START?

## Opening script — 2 minutes

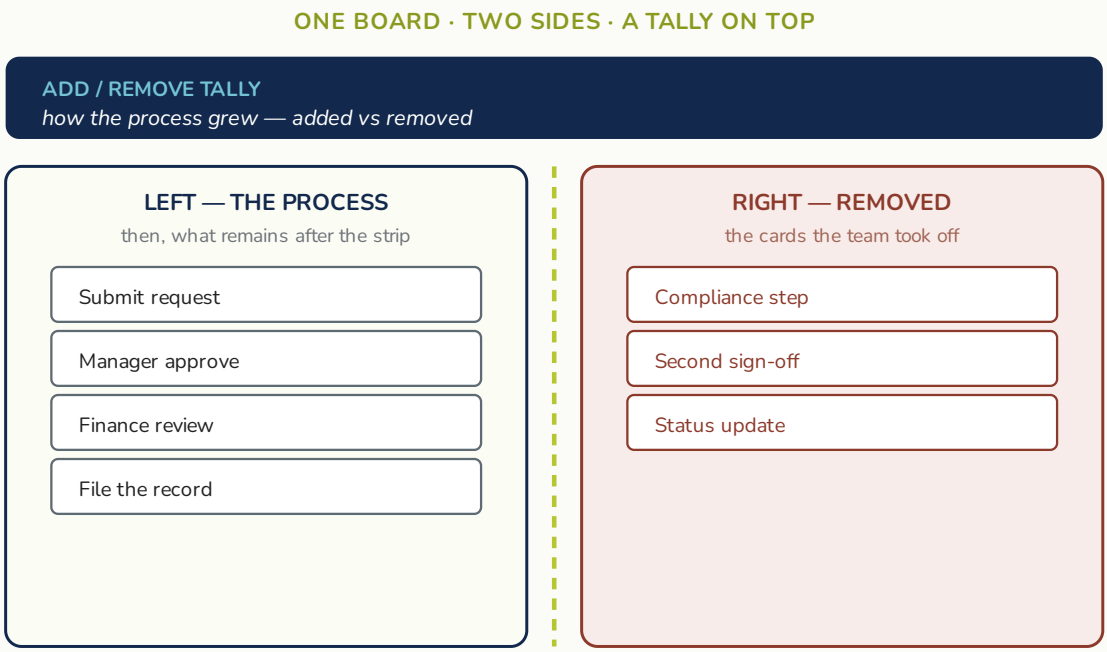
Say this in your own words before you start. Do not read the app page out loud.

> SAY
>
> "This process of ours has quietly got heavier — more steps, more checks, more sign-offs. Today we're not going to fix it by adding one more thing. We'll write out every part as it really runs, count how it grew, then run one round where the only move allowed is taking things off — no adding at all. At the end we'll compare the simpler version with the original, and each pick one thing to remove for real this week."

4 · HOW DO I PREPARE?

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## Setup and materials




Lay the board out before the team arrives: the add/remove tally across the top, the process down the left, the right side empty. Removed cards move right during the strip, so what remains and what came off sit side by side.

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| Material | What it is, and when you use it |
|---|---|
| **Process cards (blank, write-on)** | The team writes each part of the process on its own card — one step, check, meeting, report or sign-off. They become the board. Step 2. |
| **Removal-prompt cards** | Used when the team is unsure whether a part should stay or go. Draw one, read it aloud, then the team decides. Step 4. |
| **Starter-situation cards (optional)** | A few common heavy-process examples. Use only if the team has no real process of its own to bring. |
| **The board** | Left = the process, then what remains. Right = what's removed. Add/remove tally across the top. |
| **Capture sheet** | One sheet. You write the count, the cards that came off, and the one owned removal as the activity runs. |

**The count is the first reveal — don't skip it.** The count is simply the total of Added cards versus Removed cards — it shows how the process grew. Before any removals, mark every card added or removed and read the total out loud. The difference between the two numbers is what makes the room go quiet. Skip the count, and the strip round loses its punch.

**Added vs removed:** a card is **added** if that part was introduced to solve a problem; **removed** if it simplified the process. Almost every card will be an addition.

5 · HOW DO I FRAME THE PROCESS?

## Name the process first

Pick one real process the team runs and finds painful — one that has more steps now than it used to. Write it at the top of the board, in the team's own words. Don't pick the tidy, ideal version; pick the one that actually runs.

**Rule:** one real, heavy process — not a wish-list or a brand-new one. If nothing has built up over time, there's nothing to strip, and this isn't the tool.

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## PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

**Before you begin — 30-second check**

- ✓ One real, heavy process is named and written at the top of the board
- ✓ The board is set out — tally on top, process down the left, right side empty
- ✓ The Process cards, removal-prompt cards, capture sheet and timer are ready
- ✓ The team understands the one rule: this round, cards come off, nothing goes on
- ✓ Everyone is ready to write the process as it really runs, not the tidy version

6 · WHAT DO I DO NOW?

## Run the activity

Set up › Build the process › Count how it grew › Strip it › Compare › Commit

### 1. Set up

2 min

Appoint yourself facilitator. Name the one real process and write it at the top of the board. Lay an empty board out: left side for the process, right side empty for now. Solo: just begin.

### 2. Build the process

8–10 min

The team writes each part of the process, as it really runs, on its own card — one step, check, meeting, report or sign-off per card. Lay them down the left in order they happen today.

> **Don't let them tidy it** — capture it as it actually is. This is the current process. Leave the right side empty.

### 3. Count how it grew

6–8 min

Look at each card and ask: was it ADDED to fix a past problem, or did it REMOVE something? Count both and read the total out loud, then **pause** — "We added eighteen things. We removed two." That number is the first reveal, and it lands on its own.

> **Say something like:** "Almost everything we ever changed was an addition. Every one of them once solved a real problem — we just never removed anything afterwards."

### 4. Strip it — adding is banned

10–12 min

The only legal move now is to take a card OFF. Starting with the cards that feel least necessary, the team proposes removals one at a time. If they're unsure about a card, draw one removal-prompt card and read it exactly as written — let everyone answer before anyone discusses — then they decide stay or off. Removed cards go to the right.

> **Hold the no-adding line hard here** — this is where it's tested. Don't redesign; just remove.

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| | |
|---|---|
| **5. Compare**<br>5–7 min | Look at what remains on the left and what came off on the right. Ask: would the simpler version still work? Then ask everyone: “If these were your only two choices tomorrow morning, which would you run?” Name it: “removing a few things beat all the adding.” |
| **6. Commit**<br>4–6 min | Pick one thing to take out of the real process this week, with an owner and a date — check the named owner agrees to it. Write the reusable question: **before adding anything, ask first — what can we remove?** |

**These times are indicative.** A full team run is about 40–50 minutes; solo, about 15–20 minutes. The time you need will vary with the process, the size of the team, and the time available. The step that overruns is Strip (step 4). The step that gets squeezed is Commit (step 6) — protect it.

GOLDEN RULE

**This round, every fix must remove something — adding is not allowed.** No replacement, no tweak, no redesign — cards come off, nothing goes on. There’s no target number; one real removal the team commits to beats ten it talks about and never makes.

**One more thing:** the reveal is not the pile of removed cards — it’s the simpler process sitting beside the original, and the team seeing it still works. If time runs short, cut a strip round, never Commit.

## While you run — when to step in, when to wait · a principle, not a step

### STEP IN

Someone tries to add or replace during the strip. → “Removals only; park the new idea.”

The team stops at the count and won’t actually remove anything. → Start with the least necessary card and test it.

A card is defended with “we just have to” and no test. → Draw a removal prompt.

### WAIT

The team genuinely disagrees about a removal. → Let them work it.

A cut feels uncomfortable. → The discomfort is the tool working.

They keep a step after testing it honestly. → Fine; not everything has to go.

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## PART 3 AFTER THE ACTIVITY

use it again

7 · HOW DO I FINISH?

### Closing script — 2 minutes

SAY

"Look at what just happened. We didn't make this process complicated on purpose — every part of it once solved a real problem. The trouble is we kept adding and almost never removed. Today we removed a few things and it still works — it works better. Next time someone says 'let's add a step', ask the other question first: what can we remove? You're leaving with one removal to make this week. Do it."

8 · DID WE GET A GOOD RESULT?

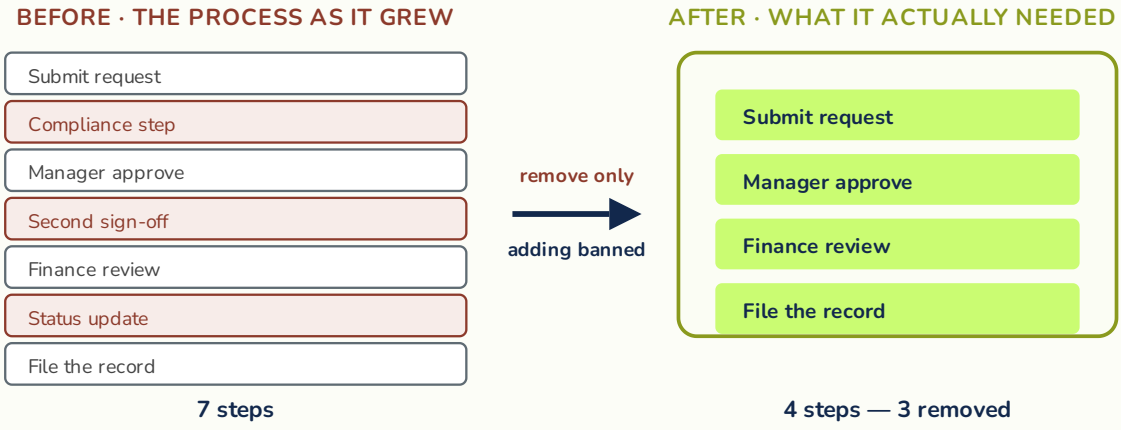
### Check your run

**GOOD RUN**

The count showed additions far outnumbering removals. At least one card the team was sure it needed came off — and the process still works. One removal is owned, with a date.

**HOLLOW RUN**

Everything was kept — "we'll tidy it later." Cards were removed and replaced (adding in disguise). No count, or no owned removal. The board looks the same as it walked in.




**You had seven steps. You needed four. Nothing was added to fix it.**

*The best improvement is often a removal, not an addition.*

**Before people leave — the finish check**

- ✓ The process was laid out on the board as it really runs
- ✓ Every card was marked Added or Removed, and the count read out loud
- ✓ The strip round ran on removals only — nothing was replaced
- ✓ A simpler version sits on the left, the removed cards on the right
- ✓ One removal is committed for this week, with an owner named
- ✓ A photo of the board has been taken and shared

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9 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

## Build the habit — 30 seconds

THE HABIT

“Before adding anything — what can we remove?”

A team that has run this once tends to catch itself mid-fix: someone proposes another step, and another asks “what could come out instead?” That catch, in normal work, is the lasting change — not the session itself.

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**Appendix · Reference**

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

10 · WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

## Recovery guide

| What happens | What to do |
|---|---|
| The team wants to remove and replace | Stop: “removals only this round.” Write the replacement idea on a parked card for later — it doesn’t go on the board now. |
| The team starts redesigning instead of removing | Say: “That’s probably a good idea — but not yet. Park it. First finish the removal round.” Redesign is the next conversation, not this one. |
| Nothing feels removable — every card “has to stay” | Usually fear, not necessity. Draw a removal prompt on the most-defended card and test what would really break. |
| Everyone agrees instantly on what to cut | Ask “what would we lose if this went?” before it comes off, so the removal is tested, not casual. |
| One person defends every step | Often the person who added them. Keep it about the step: “if you weren’t the one who built this, would you keep it?” |
| A step is defended as “we just have to” | Test it with a prompt card. If you’ve tested it twice and it still looks necessary, keep it and move on. |
| “We can’t remove this — Compliance requires it” | Say: “Great — let’s test whether Compliance requires this exact step, or just the outcome.” Often the outcome is already covered elsewhere; the step is not the requirement. |
| The team stops at the count | “Wow, we add a lot” with no removal is a wasted session. Always run the strip and the compare. |
| The simpler version looks worse | That’s okay. Put one or two cards back. The goal isn’t to remove everything — it’s to test whether removing could help. |
| Time runs out mid-strip | Cut a strip round, never Commit. One owned removal beats a half-finished board with no action. |

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11 · WHAT DO I WRITE DOWN?

## The capture sheet — what you fill in

One sheet runs the whole activity. You write on it throughout (or a nominated scribe does). It carries the count, the cards that came off, and the one owned removal — the evidence — on a single page the team keeps.

**1 · HOW IT GREW** — the add/remove count from Step 3

Added: 18 · Removed: 2 · the evidence the process was built, not inherited

2 · WHAT CAME OFF

| Card removed |
| --- |
| Compliance step |
| Second sign-off |
| Status update |

**3 · THE ONE REMOVAL** (what the team commits to this week — owner + date)

Drop the second sign-off on expense claims · **Owner:** Sam · **By:** Friday

*Box 1 holds the count — the evidence the process was mostly built, not inherited. Box 2 lists the cards the team removed. Box 3 is what leaves the room: the single removal the team owns this week, with a name and a date.*

12 · WHAT DOES A GOOD RUN LOOK LIKE?

## Worked example

The process: a team's expense-approval workflow. It began as "submit, approve" and gained more and more steps — now seven. The team writes each on a card and tags how it arrived: six were added, only one ever removed anything. Read out, that count — "six added, one removed" — lands on its own. With adding banned, three come off: the compliance check, the second sign-off, and the status update. The one bit of tension: the second sign-off felt untouchable — "compliance needs it." One removal prompt ("what would actually break if this were gone?") showed the finance review already covers it. It came off — and the approval still works, faster. Four cards remain; the team commits to dropping the second sign-off for real this week.

13 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

## Common mistakes

- **Removing and replacing.** The single biggest failure — "take this out and add that." That's adding in disguise. Cards come off, nothing goes on.
- **Stopping at the count.** "Wow, we add a lot" with no removal is a wasted session. Always run the strip and the compare.
- **Putting the tidy version on the board.** If it's the ideal process, there's nothing to remove. Capture it as it really runs.
- **Chasing a target.** There's no "right" number to remove. One real, owned removal beats stripping the board bare.
- **Trying to justify every removal.** The point isn't consensus on every card — it's testing what would break if it were gone. Test, don't argue.
- **Leaving with the realisation, not a removal.** End with one owned removal, not just "we should simplify."

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14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

## Other tools

| If instead… | Use this |
|---|---|
| the list of work is too long, not the process too heavy | **One-Card Cut** — choose the one thing that matters most. |
| the process is roughly right but one step could be simpler | **One Rung Up** — take a single step up in simplicity. |
| the team treats a reason for the complexity as a fixed fact | **Assumption Breaker** — test whether that “because” is really fixed. |

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