Time Compression Drill

Facilitation guide · team, one facilitator

What this is: a short, facilitated drill you run when a team faces a deadline that won't move and a scope that won't fit. Instead of promising to work faster, the team names the core that must ship, protects it, and runs a compressing clock in rounds that forces everything else down — until they commit to a plan that actually fits the time. It takes about 30–45 minutes and needs only a timer. Your job is to stop the room doing the natural thing — "let's work faster" — and keep it asking "what can disappear completely?"

The one line to hold: the team's instinct will be to speed up, because cutting scope feels like giving up. Your whole job is to make cutting feel like the decision it is, not the defeat it feels like. **You can't compress time. You can only compress scope.**

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

A deadline that won't move and a full scope that genuinely won't fit; a team whose plan is "work faster," and you can feel it won't be enough; you'd rather ship something real than miss with everything half-done. Bring a live deadline, not a hypothetical.

WRONG TOOL

The team can't *begin* — paralysis, not a deadline › Start Before Ready. Too much load across everything for the team's capacity › Capacity Triage. This one is for a specific deadline that's too short for the work.

The boundary that matters most: this shares its compressing-clock feel with **Start Before Ready** — but they do opposite jobs. **Start Before Ready shrinks the clock until you begin. Time Compression Drill shrinks the work until you finish.** One gets you moving; this one gets you finished within the deadline.

THREE TOOLS THAT SHRINK SOMETHING

TIME COMPRESSION DRILL
shrinks the **work** until you **finish** — cuts deliverables to fit the deadline

START BEFORE READY
shrinks the **clock** until you **begin** — cuts prep and polish to force the start

CAPACITY TRIAGE
shrinks the **load** to fit **capacity** — cuts commitments, not deliverables

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PART 1 RUNNING THE DRILL

team, one facilitator

1 · WHAT IS THIS REALLY DOING?

The one idea

Under a tight deadline the instinct is to work faster, because cutting scope feels like giving up while trying harder feels virtuous. So the team keeps the whole scope and quietly misses. The compressing clock removes the illusion: each round gives so much less time that "do it all faster" visibly runs out, and the only move left is to decide what *not* to do at all. A shorter deadline is a smaller scope in disguise — and once the team feels that, cutting stops looking like defeat and starts looking like the job.

TWO WAYS TO MEET A DEADLINE THAT WON'T FIT

WORK FASTER AT EVERYTHING

effort spreads thin — nothing reaches done

miss with everything half-done ✗

CUT TO THE CORE THAT SHIPS

protect the core, let the clock cut the rest

ship something real ✓

You can't compress time. You can only compress scope.

2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

A real deadline and scope (core)	A live situation where the timeline is genuinely too short for the full scope. The drill works on a specific deadline, not time management in general.
A named, protected core (core)	What "shipped" actually means — the non-negotiable core, named *before* any cutting. This is the safeguard the whole drill rests on.
A timer	A phone timer is enough. It runs the shrinking rounds and makes the compression felt — the amplifier, not the method.
A facilitator who holds the line	One person keeps the room cutting scope rather than promising speed, and protects the core from the clock. The capture sheet carries the compressed plan.

Constraints · Manage Time · about 30–45 minutes. Genuinely quick and light — set a timer, run the rounds, protect the core.

3 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

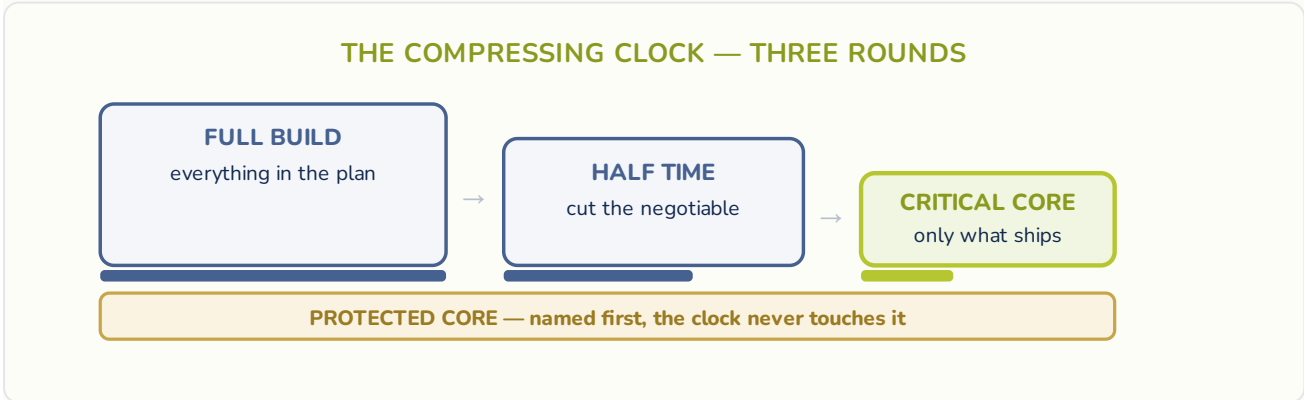
The run-sheet

One rule sits above all the others: protect the core before you cut. Name the non-negotiable core first, set it aside, and never let the clock touch it. Everything else is negotiable and gets compressed. Skip this and the drill becomes rushed decisions made under pressure; hold it and the drill becomes intentional delivery.

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Testing the core. Teams often name a core that's still too big. One question fixes it: *"If this was the only thing delivered by the deadline, would the customer still receive meaningful value?"* If the answer is no, the core is still too large — keep narrowing.

1. Protect the core first	5 min	*Before anything else: "what must ship for this to count as delivered?"* Name the non-negotiable core, write it down, set it aside. The clock never touches it. **Ask:** "If you had to deliver only one thing by the deadline, what would it be?"
2. Lay out the Full Build	5 min	*List everything currently in the plan — what you'd deliver with unlimited time.* This is the starting scope the clock will compress. **Ask:** "What else is currently included that isn't part of the core?"
3. Round one — Half Time	8 min	*Set the timer to half the time you think you need — e.g. if the current plan needs 20 working days, Round One assumes only 10. Cut the work that can be removed until what's left could realistically be delivered in that time.* The protected core stays intact. **Ask:** "If you only had half the time, what disappears completely?" When someone says "we'll work faster," redirect straight back to that question.
4. Round two — Critical Core	8 min	*Halve the time again. Cut harder — what survives when time is genuinely scarce?* Strip to the core plus only what defends it. This is the round where "faster" finally runs out. **Ask:** "What would you remove next?"
5. Name the compressed plan	6 min	*Write the final shippable core and the explicit list of what's been cut or deferred.* **Ask:** "Read out the final plan — does everyone agree?" Commit to it: a plan that fits the time, not a full scope you'll silently miss.



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THE ONE RULE — PROTECT THE CORE BEFORE YOU CUT

This is the rule that separates a good run from a dangerous one. If you start cutting **before** the core is named and protected, the pressure produces fast, confident, wrong cuts — teams drop the essential because it's hard and keep the trivial because it's easy. Name what "shipped" means first, write it down, and hold it out of the clock's reach. Then compress everything else, hard. **Protect the core first, and the drill produces intentional delivery. Skip it, and it produces rushed decisions made under pressure.**

IF THE TEAM SAYS "EVERYTHING IS ESSENTIAL"

This is the most common stall, and it's almost never true. Two questions usually unlock it: **"If you had to remove one item today, which one creates the least damage?"** and **"Which item could wait until the following week without making the delivery fail?"** You're not asking them to abandon anything — just to rank. Once one thing moves, the rest follows.

PART 2 GETTING IT RIGHT

why it works & common mistakes

4 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

The team keeps the whole scope because cutting feels like giving up — and quietly misses. The compressing clock removes the illusion: each round gives so much less time that "do it all faster" visibly runs out, and the only move left is to decide what not to do. Protecting the core first means the pressure compresses the negotiable, never the essential — so the drill produces an intentional plan, not a panicked one. And because the *clock* makes the cut, no one has to defend their judgement: the timer did it, not a person. That's what lets a team cut deep without it turning into a fight.

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5 · WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes

What happened	The fix
The room answered "we'll work faster"	That's the instinct the drill exists to break. Redirect every time: not "how do we go faster," but "what disappears completely?" Speed is not a cut.
You cut before protecting the core	Panic cuts drop essentials and keep trivia. Stop, name what "shipped" means, protect it — then compress everything else.
The timer just created panic	The clock is the amplifier, not the method. If it's producing stress without cuts, come back to the question: what specific thing are we removing from the plan?
The cuts stayed vague	"We'll trim things" isn't a plan. Name the exact deliverables cut or deferred, so the compressed plan is something the team can see and commit to.
The room redesigns the work instead of removing it	The most common drift. Keep returning to one question: "what disappears completely?" The drill is about reducing scope, not finding cleverer ways to do the same work.
They cut the core to hit the time	The core is non-negotiable — that's the whole safeguard. If the core genuinely can't ship in the time, that's a deadline conversation, not a cut.

Before you close the drill

- ✓ The core was named and protected *before* any cutting began
- ✓ The room cut scope — it didn't just promise to work faster
- ✓ The final plan names exactly what ships and what's cut or deferred
- ✓ The team commits to a core that fits the time, not a scope it'll silently miss

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6 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

Next time a deadline won't fit, before anyone says "faster," ask:

"What's the core, and what can disappear?"

The more the team reaches for the cut instead of the sprint, the less a tight deadline feels like a threat. "A shorter deadline is a smaller scope in disguise" becomes the reflex — and shipping the core beats missing the whole.

Appendix · Reference

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

7 · A WORKED RUN

Watch "faster" run out

A team had three weeks of work and a ten-day deadline. The plan: "we'll push hard and get through it."

Stage	What happened
Protect the core	"What must ship?" The answer: the checkout flow working end-to-end. Everything else — nice, but not shipped-or-not. The core, named and set aside.
Half Time	Timer to five days' worth. The team cut two secondary features and a settings redesign — still reaching for "we'll be quick." Redirect: "what disappears?"
Critical Core	Halved again. "Faster" visibly ran out. They cut the analytics dashboard and a polish pass, kept the checkout flow and its one safeguard.
The compressed plan	Ships: checkout flow, end-to-end, tested. Cut/deferred: dashboard, settings, two features, polish. A plan that fits ten days — committed, not hoped.

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8 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

The real need	Use this
Fit the work into a deadline that's too short	**This tool — Time Compression Drill.** Shrinks the *work* until you finish. Cuts deliverables to fit the deadline.
Can't *begin* — stuck before starting	**Start Before Ready** — shrinks the *clock* until you begin. Cuts prep and polish to force the start. One gets you moving; this one gets you finished.
Too much load for the team's capacity	**Capacity Triage** — shrinks the *load* to fit capacity. Cuts commitments, not deliverables. A workload problem, not a deadline one.

The move underneath: when time is the constraint, stop trying to buy more of it and start deciding what fits. Protect the core, let the compressing clock cut the rest, and ship something real instead of missing with everything half-done. That move — from "work faster" to "work less, on purpose" — is what turns an impossible deadline into a decision you can actually make.

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