Scenario Split

Facilitation guide · team, one facilitator

What this is: a facilitated session you run at a fork you can't control — a customer's decision, a supplier's delivery, a regulator's ruling. You force the single future the team has quietly been planning for to split into two or three genuinely different branches, give each one a readiness action, and reject any branch that doesn't change what you'd actually do. It takes 45–60 minutes. Your job is to hold the gate — that's the socially hard part, and it's the whole tool.

The one line to hold: a forecast isn't a plan. When the future isn't under your control, don't bet everything on one prediction. And the tool's identity isn't "think about more scenarios" — it's **reject the branches that don't change today's action.** Without the gate, this is forecasting with extra steps.

This is a delivery tool, not a strategy workshop. The question is "what do we do *this week* if any of these happens?" — not "what does the world look like in 2035?" And don't build branches for ordinary uncertainty: use this only when different futures would genuinely change today's decisions.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

A genuine fork you don't control, where the difference matters to your plan: a pending funding approval, a supplier who could go several ways, a regulator's ruling. The team is about to commit effort against a future it's only assuming — usually the one it hopes for.

WRONG TOOL

You need to *find* the risks first › It Already Failed. You know the risks and must choose which to mitigate with a finite budget › Risk Trade-off Lab. You need a trigger to change *one* plan › Pivot Point. And if the uncertainty is ordinary project variability, don't use this at all.

THE MANAGE-RISKS TRILOGY

IT ALREADY FAILED
find the risks
one failed future

→

RISK TRADE-OFF LAB
choose which you'll carry
a finite budget

→

SCENARIO SPLIT
prepare for the futures you can't control
this tool

Risk Trade-off Lab: you choose which risk to carry.
Scenario Split: reality chooses — so be ready either way.

A forecast isn't a plan.

When the future isn't under your control, don't bet everything on one prediction.

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PART 1 RUNNING THE SESSION

team, one facilitator

1 · WHAT IS THIS REALLY DOING?

The one idea

Teams naturally plan for the future they expect to happen. Once work begins, that expectation quietly becomes *the plan* — and by the time the uncertainty resolves, the effort is already committed. Nobody decided to bet everything on one branch; it just happened. Forcing the split makes that assumption visible and gives the team permission to prepare for more than one outcome. And the gate is what keeps it honest: a branch that doesn't change what you'd do is just forecasting with extra steps.

2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

One real decision you don't control (core)	A genuine uncertainty — a pending approval, a supplier, a market move — where you can't control which way it goes, and the difference matters to your plan.
The assumed future, named out loud (core)	The one the team is quietly planning for. You can't split a future you haven't admitted you're assuming.
A whiteboard or capture sheet	With space for three branches, three readiness actions and three triggers — so the split stays visible while you work.
Sticky notes or index cards	Optional, if you're not using the capture sheet — one branch per card makes the split easier to move around and re-sort.
A facilitator who holds the gate	One person forces the split and rejects branches that don't change today's action. This is the socially hard part — and the reason the tool works.

Constraints · Manage Risks · about 45–60 minutes, depending on how many branches survive the gate.

3 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

The run-sheet

Brief the team, then run these in order. The bold part is what you say or do; the move under it is where you add the most. Step 4 is the tool — everything before it is setup.

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1. Name the assumed future	**6 min**	*"What's the fork we don't control — and which future have we quietly been planning for?"* Get the assumption on the table. You can't split a future no one has admitted to.
2. Split it into two or three branches	**12 min**	*"The customer approves funding this month, next quarter, or not at all."* Force it open. Two or three only. **Don't let the team jump to actions yet** — finish defining the branches first, or they'll start solving.
3. Give each branch a readiness action	**15 min**	*"What would we do now to be ready for this one?"* Something you could actually start this week — not a strategy. Concrete, and different per branch. **Give each action an owner immediately** — don't leave ownership to the end.
4. Run the distinctness gate	**10 min**	*Compare the actions. If two branches produce the same action, they are the same branch —* ***REJECT ONE.*** Every remaining branch must change what you'd actually do. This is the move that makes the tool work.
5. Name the trigger for each	**8 min**	***"What's the first signal we'll see?"*** The earliest observable sign that this branch has become the real one. Without a trigger, you'll prepare for three branches and never notice which one arrived.

THE DISTINCTNESS GATE

a branch earns its place only if it changes what you'd do now

THE BRANCH	WHAT WE'D DO NOW	GATE
supplier delivers on time	carry on as planned	✓ PASS
supplier delivers two weeks late	line up a contingency build now	✓ PASS
supplier withdraws	start qualifying a second supplier	✓ PASS
supplier delivers three weeks late	line up a contingency build now	✗ REJECT

Same readiness action as an existing branch — so it's the same branch. Reject it.

Plausible isn't enough. Decision-relevant is the bar.

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DON'T PAD TO THREE

Teams often invent a "middle" branch simply because three feels like the right number — *delivers · slightly late · very late*. If "slightly late" and "very late" need the same thing from you this week, that's one branch wearing two hats. **Two strong branches are better than three weak ones.** The rule is "two or three" — not "always three."

HOLDING THE GATE — THE SOCIALLY HARD PART

Rejecting a branch feels like rejecting someone's idea, so facilitators soften it and let weak branches through. Don't. **The gate is the tool.** The test is never "could this happen?" — almost anything could. The test is: **does being ready for this require doing something different *now*?** If two branches lead to the same readiness action, they're the same branch, however different they sound. Say it plainly: "these two need the same thing from us this week, so they're one branch — let's keep the one that's more likely and free the slot." Plausible isn't enough. Decision-relevant is the bar.

PART 2 GETTING IT RIGHT

why it works & common mistakes

4 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

Holding several futures open is uncomfortable, so teams settle on the one they expect — and then start working towards it. The forecast becomes the plan without anyone deciding it should. Splitting it into a few genuinely different branches makes that assumption visible. The distinctness gate keeps the exercise honest by rejecting branches that don't change today's actions, so the session ends with concrete preparation instead of speculation — and the trigger tells you when to switch.

TREAT EVERY REMAINING BRANCH AS EQUALLY REAL

A team will often build three branches and then quietly keep hoping for one of them — putting the real effort into the preferred future and treating the others as paperwork. Watch for it: the readiness actions for the branches nobody wants are vague, or get no owner. Name it if you see it. **Don't spend more effort on the branch you prefer unless you've consciously decided to** — and if you have, say so out loud, so it's a decision rather than a drift back to the single assumed future.

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5 · WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes

What happened	The fix
Branches that don't change what you'd do	The most common failure. "Plausible" isn't the test — "does this change today's action?" is. Reject it, and free the slot.
Two branches, one readiness action	They're the same branch, however different they sound. Merge them and keep the more likely one.
The team jumped to actions before agreeing branches	People naturally start solving. Finish defining the branches first, then do actions — otherwise the actions shape the branches.
Five or six branches	More than three dilutes readiness into paralysis. Force it down to a prepared few.
Readiness actions that are strategies, not tasks	"Improve supplier relations" isn't a readiness action. "Start qualifying a second supplier this week" is.
No triggers	You've prepared for three branches and have no idea when one arrives. Every branch needs the signal that says "this is now the real one."
It became a strategy workshop	Redirect to this week. "What do we do on Monday if this branch is the one?"

Before you close the session

- ✓ Two or three branches — each one changes what you'd actually do
- ✓ No two branches share a readiness action
- ✓ Every readiness action is something you could start this week, with an owner
- ✓ Every branch has a trigger — the signal that it has become the real one

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6 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

Before committing effort against any future you don't control, ask:

"What else could happen — and would it change what we do this week?"

If the answer is yes, you have a branch worth preparing for. If it's no, carry on — that's ordinary uncertainty, not a scenario.

Appendix · Reference

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

7 · A WORKED RUN

Watch the facilitator move

The fork: "a release that depends on a supplier we don't control."

Stage	What happened
The assumed future	"They deliver on time." The team admits it — the plan, the staffing and the date all quietly assume it.
The split	On time · two weeks late · they withdraw. Three branches. Someone offers "three weeks late" as a fourth.
The actions	Carry on · line up a contingency build now · start qualifying a second supplier.
The gate	"Three weeks late" needs the same thing as "two weeks late" — the contingency build. The facilitator says it plainly: **"That doesn't change what we'd do this week, so it doesn't earn its own branch." Rejected.** Three branches remain.
The triggers	"If we don't have a shipping confirmation by the 12th, we're in branch two. If they miss the second checkpoint, we're in branch three."

The team walked in planning for one future they didn't control. They walked out ready for three — with a concrete action for each, and a signal that tells them which one has arrived. **The contingency build started that week.**

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· WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

The real need	Use this
Prepare for several futures you can't control	**This tool — Scenario Split.** Reality chooses; be ready either way. Two or three branches, each with an action and a trigger.
Find the risks in the first place	**It Already Failed** — jump to one failed future and work backwards to surface what could go wrong.
Choose which risks to mitigate with a finite budget	**Risk Trade-off Lab** — *you* choose which risk you'll carry. Here, reality chooses for you.
Set a trigger to change one plan	**Pivot Point** — a single-plan change trigger, not multi-plan readiness.

The move underneath: when you can't control which future arrives, don't pick the one you hope for and call it a plan. Split it into the two or three that would genuinely change what you do, prepare an action for each, and name the signal that tells you which one you're in. Being ready for the future that actually turns up is worth far more than being confident about the one that doesn't.

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