Prioritise Under Pressure

Facilitator guide

About this activity: a team is under pressure with too many competing priorities, and it can't agree what comes first. This activity tests why. Each person privately writes the team's most important tasks and draws their own now-line — what happens now, what waits. The lists go up side by side, and the differences become impossible to miss: people aren't disagreeing about priority, they're looking at different pictures of the work. The team then builds one shared order, one now-line, and commits. You are not here to rank the tasks for them. You are here to make the differences visible, then close them.

The one idea: when a team can't agree what comes first, the problem usually isn't disagreement — it's that people are looking at different work, different risks, and different consequences. Make the pictures visible first, and the order becomes easy.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

The right moment

Picture this: the team has capacity for three initiatives, but seven urgent requests are pending. Every request sounds important, and the conversation keeps going in circles — because each person is quietly weighing a different risk. This activity gets those different pictures of the work onto the wall in twenty-five minutes, before the team commits to a plan.

USE IT WHEN

A real, live pressure has the team split on what comes first — a project breakdown, a deadline pulled in, an escalation, a sev-1 with six things to do at once. Best when the goal is agreed but the order is not.

DO NOT USE IT WHEN

The team can't agree the goal itself (settle that first). The real problem is capacity — too much for the people available, and nothing can be parked (that's a load problem, not an order one). A routine plan with no live pressure.

The one test before you start: is the problem priority or capacity? If everyone already agrees what comes first but still can't cope with the workload, this activity won't help — have a capacity conversation instead.

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· WHAT WILL THE TEAM LEAVE WITH?

What you'll leave with

WHAT YOU GET

One shared, ordered list of tasks. One now-line — what gets done now, what waits. An owner and a timeline on every task above the line, and the work that is postponed named. A clear view of where the team agreed, and where it didn't.

WHY IT MATTERS

The team sees, on the wall, how differently each person read the same situation — and that they weren't really disagreeing, just looking at different work. Once they're looking at the same picture, agreeing the order becomes surprisingly easy.

PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

Your job

Run the activity so the different pictures of the work surface, then close them into one shared order. Don't rank the tasks yourself, and don't let the loudest voice set the order. Your job is to:

- protect the silent writing — everyone builds their own list before anyone speaks
- put every list up at once, side by side, so no one list sets the direction for the others
- read the differences out loud — tasks on only one list, different top priorities, now-lines in different places
- hold the team to one shared order and one now-line — no ties
- protect the commit — owners, timelines, and the parked work named

What the team should notice: they weren't really disagreeing about priority. They were looking at different work, different risks, different consequences — different pictures of the same situation. Once the pictures line up, the order is easy.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

Roles

Who	What they do
You (facilitator)	Keep time. Protect the silent writing. Put the lists up together and surface the differences. Hold the team to one shared order and one now-line. You don't rank the tasks — you draw the final shared line, photograph the board, and send it round.
The team (3–6)	Each person privately writes the team's 3–5 most important tasks and draws their own now-line, then helps merge them into one shared order.

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Say this to the team before you start (in your own words): “We’re under pressure and we can’t agree what comes first. Before we argue it out, each of us will write the team’s top tasks privately and draw our own now-line. Then we’ll put them up together and see how differently we’re reading this — and build one order from there.”

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

“We’ve got more urgent things than we can do at once, and we’re going round in circles. So before we decide anything, each of you — alone and silent — writes the three-to-five most important things the team must do, one per note, in your own order. Then draw a line where ‘now’ ends and ‘later’ begins. We’ll put them all up at the same time. I think we’ll find we’re not disagreeing so much as looking at different work.”

4 · HOW DO I PREPARE?

Setup and materials



Same goal, four different pictures — and four now-lines (rust) in different places.

Clear a wall or whiteboard wide enough for **every list side by side** — one column per person, highest task at the top. Each person draws their own **now-line** across their column; you draw the single shared line at the end. Have sticky notes and markers ready before the team arrives.

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Material	What it is, and when you use it
A board or wall	Any whiteboard or wall with room for several task lists side by side, and a line drawn across them. Set the space before you start. Steps 3, 6.
Sticky notes	A pad for each person — one task per note, so notes can be re-ordered and merged. Steps 2, 3, 6.
A few markers	Everyone writes their own notes and draws their own now-line; you draw the final shared one. Steps 2–6.
Capture sheet	One sheet. You record each person's list, the differences that showed, and the shared order — as the activity runs.

> **The simultaneous post is what makes it work — protect it.** If people write in the open or talk first, the loudest reading sets the direction for everyone and the differences never surface. Silent write, then every list up at once. Guard that above everything.

Words to know: a **task list** is one person's private ranking of the team's tasks. The **now-line** is the line each person draws between what happens now and what waits. The **shared order** is the one merged, ranked list — with one now-line — the team commits to at the end.

5 · HOW DO I SET THE GOAL?

Name the goal first

Before anyone writes, get the goal concrete and shared, in one line — "Restore service as fast as possible", "Hit the new date without shipping something broken." If people write toward different goals, every list diverges for the wrong reason, and the reveal is muddied. "Sort out the launch" is too vague; make it a single, sharp sentence everyone can see.

> **Rule:** one goal, on the board, before any list is written. The differences you want to surface are differences in *how to get there* — not differences in where "there" is.

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PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

Before you begin — 30-second check

- ✓ The goal is on the board, in one concrete line everyone can see
- ✓ The wall has room for every list side by side
- ✓ Every person has a sticky-note pad and a marker
- ✓ The team understands the one rule: write alone and silent, then post together
- ✓ Everyone knows to write team tasks — not personal to-dos

6 · WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Run the activity

Name the goal › Write the tasks › Post side by side › Reveal the differences › Talk the gaps › Build one order › Commit

1. Name the goal

2 min

State the live pressure and the goal in one line — “Restore service as fast as possible.” Write it where everyone can see it and leave it up for the whole activity.

2. Write the tasks

5 min

Everyone works alone and silent. Each writes the 3–5 most important team tasks needed to hit the goal — one per note — decides their own order, and where their now-line goes (but doesn’t draw it yet).

> **Watch for personal to-dos.** If someone writes “review my PRs”, redirect: “team tasks — what the team must do, not your own list.” Hold the full five minutes even if people finish early.

3. Post side by side

3 min

Everyone posts at roughly the same time, one column each, highest task at the top, and draws their own now-line where they’d decided. All lists go up together — no narrating as they post.

4. Reveal the differences

4 min

Point out tasks that appear on only one list, different top priorities, and now-lines drawn in different places. Let the team see the spread before anyone defends anything.

5. Talk through the gaps

7 min

For each difference, ask the person: why is this above your line but below theirs? What breaks if it waits? The aim is to understand the differences, not to win.

> **This is where it overruns.** Cap it at seven minutes and move on with the differences understood, even if not every one is resolved.

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6. Build one shared order 4 min	Merge duplicate tasks into one list. Rank it — no ties — settling any disagreement with “what breaks if we don’t do it now?” If two tasks depend on each other, place them next to each other rather than arguing which is first. Draw one shared now-line.
7. Commit 3 min	Assign an owner and a timeline to every task above the now-line. Say out loud what the team is *not* doing right now. Photograph the board and send it to everyone before they leave.

These times are indicative. A full run is about 25–30 minutes, for a team of 3–6. The clock is the activity: under pressure a team will spend all its time talking (step 5) and never commit. Holding time is your most important job — a decided-enough order now beats a perfect one that never arrives.

THE ONE RULE

Write alone and silent — then post together. The reveal only works if nobody sees anyone else’s list first. If people talk or write in the open, the loudest reading sets the direction for the room and the differences converge toward it. Silent write, simultaneous post — every time.

One more thing: the differences between the lists are the whole point — surface them, don’t rush past them to “just make a list.” But don’t stop at the differences either: if you don’t merge to one shared order with owners, the team leaves exactly where it started. Surfacing without committing is a hollow run.

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

STEP IN

People discuss before they’ve written privately. → Stop them; protect the silent writing.

Someone writes personal to-dos. → Redirect to team tasks.

The order is moving toward whoever spoke loudest. → Bring it back to “what breaks if it waits?”

Step 5 is overrunning. → Call time; move to building the shared order.

WAIT

People simply disagree. → That’s the raw material, not a problem.

A difference is uncomfortable to surface. → Surface it anyway; let it sit.

Someone is struggling to choose their 3–5. → Give them a moment.

The merge is slow but moving. → Let it move.

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PART 3 AFTER THE ACTIVITY

use it again

7 · HOW DO I FINISH?

Closing script — 2 minutes

SAY

"Look at where we started — four lists, four different now-lines, three different tasks at number one. We weren't really disagreeing about priority. We were each watching a different risk, so we were looking at different work. Once we could see that on the wall, agreeing the order was fast. Next time we're under pressure and going in circles, the move is: write yours first, privately — then see if we're even looking at the same picture."

8 · DID WE GET A GOOD RESULT?

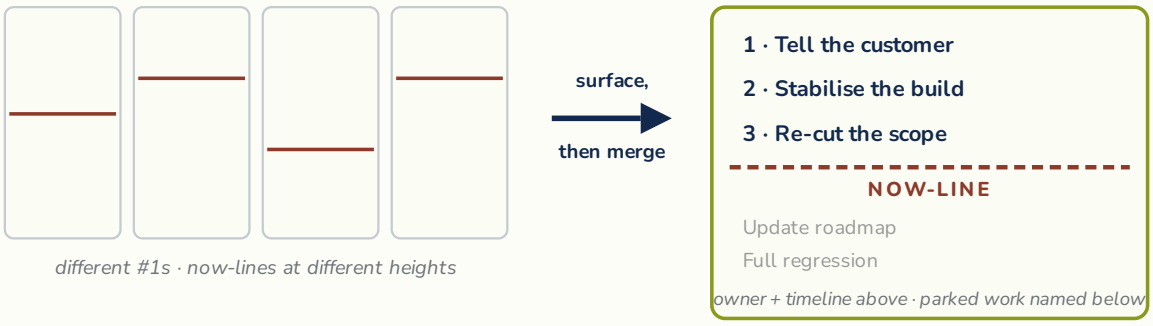
Check your run

GOOD RUN

The team has seen how differently each person read the situation — and still leaves with one agreed order, one now-line, owners and timelines on the now tasks, and the work that is postponed named. A clear first move.

HOLLOW RUN

The lists go up but you rush past the differences. The order is really the most senior person's list. Nobody can say what the team is *not* doing. Surfacing without committing, or committing without surfacing — either one is a miss.



They weren't disagreeing — they were looking at different pictures of the work.

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Before people leave — the finish check

- ✓ The goal was named in one line before anyone wrote
- ✓ Everyone wrote their own list privately, alone and silent
- ✓ All lists went up together — the simultaneous post
- ✓ The real differences were named, especially different now-lines
- ✓ One shared order and one now-line are agreed — no ties
- ✓ Every task above the line has an owner and a timeline; the postponed work is named
- ✓ A photo of the board has been taken and shared

9 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

Build the habit — 30 seconds

THE HABIT

“Are we even looking at the same work? Let’s each write the team’s top 3–5 first.”

A team that has run this once tends to reach for “write yours privately first” the moment a pressured discussion starts to scatter. That habit — surfacing the different pictures of the work before forcing one order — is the lasting change, well beyond this one session.

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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
People talk before they write	The biggest failure — one confident voice frames the priorities and the private lists converge toward it. Reset: everyone writes silently, then all lists go up at once.
Personal to-dos instead of team tasks	Catch it in step 2. If people list their own work, the lists won't compare and the reveal is lost. Redirect: "what the team must do, not your own list."
The lists barely overlap	Perfect — the tool is working. Spend your time on step 5; the gaps are the conversation.
The lists are nearly identical	Genuine alignment — say so, agree fast, move to commit. Don't manufacture disagreement.
One person dominates	The private writing already guards against this. In the merge, ask quieter people to explain a task only they listed.
Two tasks won't separate	Ask which one's absence breaks more, or which the other depends on — and if they depend on each other, place them side by side rather than forcing an order. If still tied, the person accountable decides and says why. Two minutes, then move.
Everything ends up above the now-line	Very common — everyone wants everything in "now." Ask: "if everything is now, what is actually waiting?" The team must move at least one task below the line before they can finish. Scarcity is the point of the line.
The team keeps reopening the order	Once the shared line is drawn, a change needs one task to cross each way — one up means one down. No free additions above the line.
It's really a capacity problem	If nothing can be parked, this isn't an order problem. Stop and have a capacity conversation instead.

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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 as the activity runs. It carries the goal, the differences that showed, and the one shared order — the outcome — on a single page the team keeps.

1 · THE GOAL — the live pressure, in one line

"Hit the new date without shipping something broken."

2 · THE DIFFERENCES THAT SHOWED — tasks on one list only, different #1s, now-lines in different places

On one list only	Different top priority	Now-line differences
"tell the customer" (Product only)	engineer: freeze scope · product: tell customer	Product 4 above · QA & Design 2

3 · THE ONE SHARED ORDER (agreed — one ranked list, one now-line, owners + timelines)

1 Tell the customer · **2** Stabilise the build · **3** Re-cut scope — **NOW-LINE** parked: roadmap, full regression

Box 1 holds the goal. Box 2 holds the differences — the evidence that the team was reading the same situation four different ways. Box 3 is what leaves the room: one order, one now-line, owners, and the work that is postponed named.

12 · WHAT DOES A GOOD RUN LOOK LIKE?

Worked example



Different #1s. "Tell the customer" on one list only. Now-lines (rust) at four different heights.

The pressure: a product team is told the launch date has moved up by three weeks. The goal on the board: "Hit the new date without shipping something broken." Four people write privately, each through the risk they watch most closely — the engineer (technical): freeze scope, cut risky features, stabilise the build; QA (quality): protect a test window, triage critical paths; product

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(relationship): tell the customer, re-cut scope; design (visible failure): the demo flow must work, cut polish. Same goal, four different pictures — and four now-lines in different places (Product put four tasks above the line; QA and Design only two). The facilitator didn't let the team jump to arguing. They pointed at the boards: "'Tell the customer' is on only one list. 'Stabilise the build' is on all four. Three of you have a different task at number one." Then, to the person: "Priya, why is telling the customer your number one?" That surfaced the real issue: the date couldn't be hit without dropping two features — so the customer conversation had to come first, because it changed what the rest of the work even was. The team merged to one order — tell the customer, stabilise the build, re-cut scope — drew one now-line, and parked the roadmap and full regression. Same situation, one shared picture — reached in twenty-five minutes.

13 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

Common mistakes

- **Letting people talk before they write.** The biggest one. Discussion first means the loudest view sets the direction for everyone and the differences never surface. Protect the silent writing.
- **Personal to-dos instead of team tasks.** If people list their own work, the lists won't compare and the insight is lost. Catch it in step 2.
- **Rushing to the shared order.** The differences are the value, not an obstacle — don't skip past them to "just make a list." Slow down at steps 4–5.
- **Letting seniority set the order.** If the shared list is just the manager's list, the activity did nothing. Settle by "what breaks if we wait?", not by who feels strongest.
- **Stopping at the differences.** Surfacing without merging to one order, owners and a now-line leaves the team where it started.

14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

Prioritise Under Pressure assumes the team knows its goal and simply can't agree the order. When that isn't the case, reach for a different tool:

If instead…	Use this
the real problem is capacity, not order — too much for the people available, nothing can be parked	**Capacity Triage** — no ranking will help until the load itself is dealt with.
a constraint just landed and something is stopping the team adapting at all	**Decide Under Pressure** — find the barrier before you try to order the work.
the fire is out and you want the habit to stick	**If–Then Lock** — pre-commit to "write yours first" the next time pressure scatters the team.

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