Echo Test

Facilitator guide

About this activity: a piece of work is about to start and everyone believes they're aligned. This activity tests that. One person gives the brief out loud, once. Then each person privately writes what they heard — first move, success, top risk — and everyone posts at the same time. The gaps become impossible to miss: the same words produced different pictures. The team then rebuilds one shared picture before any work begins. You are not here to judge who was right. You are here to make the differences visible, then close them.

What is the Echo Test? Like an echo, a brief comes back changed. The briefer says one thing; each listener hears something slightly different and fills the gaps with their own assumptions. This activity plays the echo back out loud — so the team hears, before work starts, how far apart its pictures really are.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

The right moment

Picture this: a manager briefs the team, everyone nods, and the work begins. Weeks later it's clear people built different things — and the rework was built in from the start. Everyone was reasonable; everyone simply imagined a different project. This activity catches that gap in twenty-five minutes, before a line of code is written.

USE IT WHEN

The start of anything new, before effort is committed — a project kickoff, a fresh brief or spec, the start of a sprint, a transfer between teams. Best when the work is real and about to begin.

DO NOT USE IT WHEN

Work already well underway — the pictures have already collided. A task so small there's nothing to interpret. A brief nobody will act on. If there's no real work about to start, there's no gap worth surfacing.

The one test before you start: is a real piece of work about to begin, and is everyone assuming they're aligned? If yes, this buys the easiest alignment you'll ever get — before the work, not after.

· WHAT WILL THE TEAM LEAVE WITH?

What you'll leave with

WHAT YOU GET

One shared picture of the work: the agreed first move, what success looks like, and the top risk. The interpretation gaps surfaced before they cost rework. A team that actually starts from the same place — a brief everyone can repeat back the same way.

WHY IT MATTERS

The team sees, on the board, how differently each person read the same brief — and that nobody misheard. The alignment everyone assumed they had, they now actually have. Twenty minutes here saves weeks of rework later.

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PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

Your job

Run the activity so the gaps surface, then close them. Do not give the brief yourself — that's the briefer's job. Do not correct anyone's reading. Your job is to:

- protect the silent write — no talking, no questions to the briefer
- run the simultaneous post so the loudest voice can't frame the brief
- read the gaps out loud, especially in "success"
- hold the team to one shared picture — first move, success, top risk
- stop the briefer defending the brief during the reveal

> **The one thing the team should learn:** shared words do not create shared understanding. Everyone heard the same brief, everyone was reasonable, and everyone still walked away with a different picture. Checking beats assuming.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

Roles

Who	What they do
You (facilitator)	Run the activity. Protect the silent write. Run the reveal so the gaps show. Hold the team to one shared picture. You don't give the brief and you don't correct anyone's reading. Photograph the shared picture and send it round.
Briefer	The person who owns the work. Gives the brief once, out loud, in their own words — then stays quiet until the reveal. Watching their own brief land differently is the point; don't let them defend it early.
The team (3–6)	Each person privately writes their real reading of the brief — first move, success, risk — then helps name the gaps and rebuild one shared picture.

> **Say this to the team before you start (in your own words):** "We're about to start something, and everyone feels aligned. Before we commit, we'll each write privately what we heard, post it all at once, and see how close our pictures really are. Then we'll agree on one."

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3 · HOW DO I START?

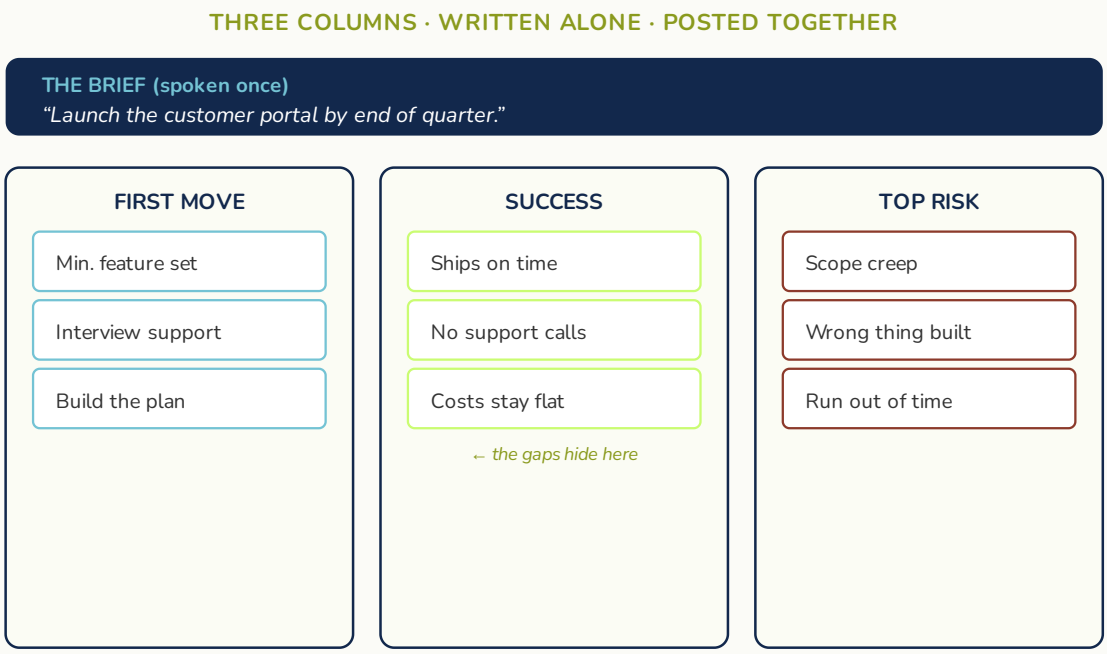
Opening script — 2 minutes

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

> **SAY**
>
> “Before we start this work, we’re going to run a quick check. One of us will give the brief out loud, once, the way they would in a normal meeting. Then each of you — alone and silent — writes three things: the first move, what success looks like, and the top risk. We post them all at the same time. We are not testing whether anyone listened well. We’re testing whether the same words created the same picture. They usually don’t — and that’s exactly what we want to catch now.”

4 · HOW DO I PREPARE?

Setup and materials



One brief. Three people. Three different pictures — posted all at once.

Set up three columns on the board before the team arrives — **First move · Success · Top risk**. Each person writes one note per column; all the notes go up at the same time, so the spread is visible before anyone speaks.

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Material	What it is, and when you use it
A board or wall	Any whiteboard or wall with room for three columns of notes — First move, Success, Top risk. Set the columns up before you start. Steps 1, 4.
Sticky notes	A pad for each person — they write three short notes, one per column, privately. Step 3.
A few markers	People write their own notes; you use one to mark the gaps and the rebuilt shared picture. Steps 3, 5, 6.
Capture sheet	One sheet. You write the brief, the gaps that showed, and the one shared picture — as the activity runs.

> **The simultaneous post is the whole tool — protect it.** If people talk before they post, the loudest reading frames the brief and the gaps vanish. Silent write, then everyone posts at once. Guard that above everything else.

Words to know: the **brief** is what the briefer says out loud, once. A person's **reading** is their private version of it — their three notes. The **gaps** are the differences between readings; the **shared picture** is the one first move, success and risk the team agrees at the end.

5 · HOW DO I SET UP THE BRIEF?

Pick the briefer first

Before anything else, name who owns the work — that person is the briefer. Tell them: say the brief once, out loud, the way you'd say it in a corridor — no document to read from. The spoken-once constraint is deliberate; it's how briefs actually land in real life. If they want to add caveats and detail, gently cap them: "say it as you normally would."

> **Rule:** the briefer speaks the brief once and then stays quiet until the reveal. No document, no slides — and no defending it early. Watching the brief land differently is the point.

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PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

Before you begin — 30-second check

- ✓ The briefer is named — the person who owns the work
- ✓ The board has three columns set up: First move · Success · Top risk
- ✓ 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 their real reading — not what they think is wanted

6 · WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Run the activity

Set up › Give the brief › Write privately › Post together › Name the gaps › Rebuild one › Commit

1. Set up

2 min

Appoint yourself facilitator. The person who owns the work is the briefer. Set up three columns on the board: First move · Success · Top risk.

2. Give the brief

3–5 min

The briefer states the goal out loud, once, in their own words — no slides, no document. Everyone else just listens. No questions yet.

> **Tell the briefer:** say it the way you'd say it in a corridor. If they start adding caveats, cap it: "say it as you normally would."

3. Write privately

7 min

Each person, alone and silent, writes three notes — the first move, what success looks like, the biggest risk. One idea per note, their real reading — not what they think is wanted.

> **Protect the silence.** If someone asks the briefer "did you mean X?", don't let the briefer answer — say "write what you think, including the bit you're unsure about." The uncertainty is data.

4. Post together

3 min

Everyone posts at the same time, under the three columns. Don't let anyone narrate as they post. When the board is full, pause — let the team see the spread before anyone speaks.

5. Name the gaps

7 min

Read across in silence first, then open it up. Point at the biggest divergence — usually in Success — and ask the two people to say what they pictured. Then name it plainly: **"Nobody misheard. Everyone was reasonable. And we still walked out with different pictures."**

> **Don't let the briefer "correct" anyone** — the gap is the lesson, not the briefer's fault.

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6. Rebuild one picture 5 min	Now converge. Agree one first move, one definition of success, one top risk — written where everyone can see. Keep talking until everyone can repeat back essentially the same picture. This is the real brief the team starts from.
7. Commit 2 min	Stop here. Photograph the shared picture — and keep the divergent notes beside it as the evidence of how far apart the start really was. 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 step that gets squeezed is Write privately (step 3) — give it the full silent time; thin readings kill the reveal. The step teams drift in is Rebuild (step 6) — force one first move, one success, one risk, and stop.

THE ONE RULE

Write alone and silent — then post together. The reveal only works if nobody hears anyone else's reading first. If people talk before they post, the loudest voice frames the brief and the gaps collapse toward it. Silent write, simultaneous post — every time.

One more thing: the reveal is the simultaneous post — everyone seeing, at once, how differently the same brief landed. If you skip the rebuild, the team leaves exactly where it started. Surfacing the gaps without converging is a hollow run.

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

STEP IN

People start talking before they post. → Stop them; post first.

Someone asks the briefer a clarifying question during the write. → Hold it; they write their own reading, gaps and all.

The briefer tries to "correct" a reading. → Not yet; let the difference stand.

WAIT

The readings look messy or contradictory. → That's the tool working.

Someone's reading is "wrong". → Don't correct it; the brief allowed it.

People disagree about success. → That's the most valuable gap; let them work it.

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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 all heard the same brief, and every one of us was reasonable — and we still walked in with different pictures of the first move, of success, of the risk. Nobody misheard. The brief just couldn't convey the whole picture on its own. We've now agreed one, together. Next time we start something and everyone's nodding, ask the question that saves the weeks: did we all actually hear the same thing?"

8 · DID WE GET A GOOD RESULT?

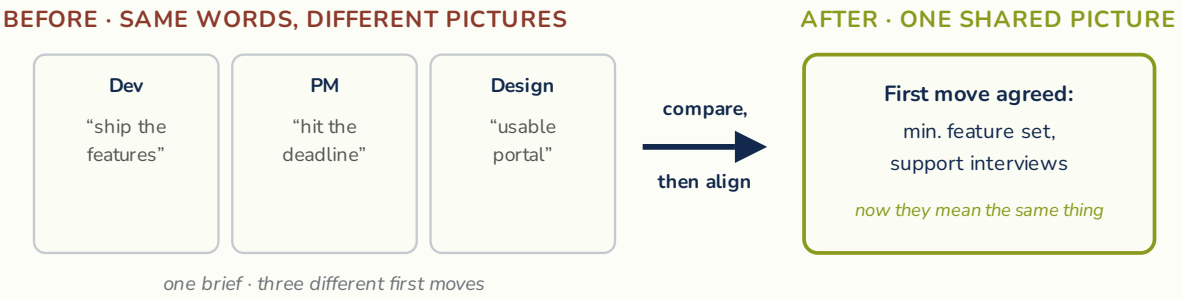
Check your run

GOOD RUN

The team can see, on the board, how differently each person read the same brief — and has agreed one first move, one definition of success, one top risk that everyone can repeat back the same way.

HOLLOW RUN

People glance at the notes, say "yeah, we're aligned", and move on without naming a real gap. Or the briefer "corrects" everyone to their version — which teaches nothing, because the point was that the brief allowed the other readings.



one brief · three different first moves

Shared words are not shared understanding — until you check.

"Did we all actually hear the same thing?"

Before people leave — the finish check

- ✓ The brief was spoken once, out loud — no document to read from
- ✓ Everyone wrote their three notes privately, alone and silent
- ✓ All notes went up at the same time — the simultaneous post
- ✓ The real gaps were named, especially in “success”
- ✓ One shared picture is agreed: one first move, one success, one top risk
- ✓ A photo of the shared picture has been taken and shared

9 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

Build the habit — 30 seconds

THE HABIT

“Before we start — did we all actually hear the same thing?”

A team that has run this once tends to pause at the start of new work and check the picture, not just the words. That pause — reading the brief before building from it — is the lasting change, and it costs twenty minutes against weeks of rework.

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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 post	The biggest failure — one confident voice frames the brief and the private readings collapse toward it. Re-run the post: everyone places notes face-to-board, then turn them over together.
The briefer keeps defending the brief	Step in: “hold that — right now we’re just looking at how it landed, not whether it was right.” Their defence is the instinct the tool is built to interrupt.
The readings are all basically the same	Either the brief was genuinely well-shared (rare, worth celebrating) or it was trivial. Check the Success column closely — that’s where hidden gaps hide. If truly aligned, end early; don’t manufacture disagreement.
The brief is genuinely vague — every reading is wildly different	A different problem: the brief gave nothing to interpret. Pause. Ask the briefer to restate the goal, the outcome and the constraints more clearly — then re-run the reading step.
Someone says “this is obvious, we’re clearly aligned”	Point at one real difference on the board and ask the two people to explain what they each pictured. The difference answers the objection.
The team can’t agree one definition of success	That’s the most valuable disagreement in the room. Make them resolve it now — it would have surfaced in the work anyway, far more expensively.
Time runs out before the rebuild	Protect the rebuild over the discussion. Better to cut the gap-naming short and leave with one agreed picture than to leave with the gaps named but unresolved.

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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 reveal runs. It carries the brief, the gaps that showed, and the one shared picture — the outcome — on a single page the team keeps.

1 · THE BRIEF — what the briefer said, in one line

"Launch the customer portal by end of quarter — reduce onboarding time, don't raise support costs."

2 · THE GAPS THAT SHOWED — where the readings diverged, usually in Success

First move	Success	Top risk
min. feature set / interview support / build plan	ships on time vs. self-serve onboarding vs. flat costs	scope creep / wrong thing / out of time

3 · THE ONE SHARED PICTURE (agreed — one first move, one success, one top risk)

First move: identify min. features · **Success:** ships, onboarding self-serve · **Risk:** scope creep

Box 1 holds the brief as spoken. Box 2 holds the divergent readings — the evidence of how far apart the team started. Box 3 is what leaves the room: the one shared picture everyone can now repeat back.

12 · WHAT DOES A GOOD RUN LOOK LIKE?

Worked example

The brief: a product lead tells the team, out loud — "Launch the customer portal by the end of the quarter. It must reduce onboarding time and can't increase support costs." Everyone nods. Nobody asks a question. Then each person reads it privately. On the board: three different first moves (identify the minimum feature set / interview the support team / build the project plan) and — more tellingly — three different definitions of success (ships by the deadline / onboarding needs no help / support costs stay flat). One engineer said "wait, I thought success was just shipping"; the designer had built her whole plan around self-serve onboarding. Both were right about their own picture. Nobody misheard — the brief simply left room, and each person filled it differently. The team agreed one shared picture before a line of work was done. Checking took twenty minutes; the rework it prevented would have taken weeks.

13 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

Common mistakes

- **Letting people talk before they post.** The biggest one. One confident voice frames the brief and the private readings collapse toward it — the gaps vanish. Silent write, simultaneous post, every time.
- **Letting the briefer defend the brief.** "What I meant was…" turns the reveal into a correction. The point isn't who was right — it's that the words allowed different pictures.
- **Treating a reading as wrong.** If a reading looks off, that's the brief's gap, not the person's error. Don't grade the readings.
- **Skipping the rebuild.** Surfacing the gaps without agreeing one shared picture leaves the team exactly where it started. The converge step is the payoff.

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14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

Echo Test is the mission-check at the front of a piece of work — it confirms the team shares one picture before effort is spent. Once it does, different tools take over:

If instead…	Use this
the picture is shared, but the team can't agree what to do first	**Prioritise Under Pressure** — surface and resolve the different orderings.
a constraint has just landed and the team must adapt	**Decide Under Pressure** — find the real barrier before planning.
the brief itself rests on a shaky assumption	**Assumption Breaker** — test what's actually fixed before committing.

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