Future Back

Facilitation guide · team, one facilitator

What this is: a short, facilitated activity you run when a team has several problems it could work on and isn't sure which one actually matters. Instead of defining the problem from the present forward, the team stands in the achieved future, works backward through what had to be true to get there, and lands on the single problem that actually stands between them and the outcome. It takes about 20–30 minutes. Bring the candidate problems and a clear desired outcome before you start.

The one line to hold: your job is to stop the team defining the problem from where they stand today, and make them define it from where they want to end up. Everything rests on making the future vivid enough that the real problem becomes obvious. **Define the problem from the finish line, not the starting line.**

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

The team has several plausible problems and isn't sure which to solve first; you're at the start of a project or a planning moment and want to aim correctly; the loudest or most urgent problem is pulling all the attention; you've been burned before by solving the wrong problem well. You need a clear desired outcome to work back from.

WRONG TOOL

You need to understand why *one* problem keeps recurring › Root Cause Drill. You want to surface the risks that could sink a plan › It Already Failed. You already know exactly which problem you're solving › a different tool. This one only defines *which* problem.

The boundary worth stating out loud: Future Back and It Already Failed look similar — both stand in a future and work back. But they're inverses: **Future Back stands in success to find the problem; It Already Failed stands in failure to find the risks.** Same shape, opposite direction and job.

SAME SHAPE, OPPOSITE DIRECTION

FUTURE BACK

stand in **success**

work back to the **problem**

which problem gets me there?

Define the Problem

IT ALREADY FAILED

stand in **failure**

work back to the **risks**

what could sink this?

Manage Risks

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PART 1 RUNNING THE ACTIVITY

team, one facilitator

1 · WHAT IS THIS REALLY DOING?

The one idea

Left to itself, attention fixes on what's loud now — the urgent, the broken, the obvious — and the team defines the problem forward from there. That's present-bias — the pull toward whatever's in front of you — which quietly picks the nearest problem instead of the right one. This activity moves the team's viewpoint to the finish line: standing in the achieved outcome, "what had to be true for this to happen?" becomes unavoidable, and the nearest problem is exposed as a distraction. The problem in front of you is rarely the one worth solving — and from the finish line, the one that is becomes obvious.

TWO WAYS TO DEFINE THE PROBLEM

FROM THE STARTING LINE
define the problem in front of you
the nearest problem ✗

FROM THE FINISH LINE
stand in the outcome, work back
the right problem ✓

The problem in front of you is rarely the one worth solving.

2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

A clear desired outcome (core)	Something concrete enough to picture clearly — a real future state, not "do well." The more specific the outcome, the sharper the problem that falls out of it.
The candidate problems (core)	The several things the team could plausibly work on — three to seven works best (otherwise teams arrive with twenty). They don't need to be fully defined, just named, so the backward chain can show which one was actually on the path.
The people closest to the work	The people who understand both the desired outcome and the candidate problems. Without them the backward chain becomes speculation instead of discovery.
A facilitator who can make the future vivid	The one skill this tool needs: helping the team picture a concrete future, not a vague "imagine success." The capture sheet carries the backward chain.

Problem Solving · Define the Problem · about 20–30 minutes, depending on how many candidate problems are in play and how quickly the future gets vivid.

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3 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

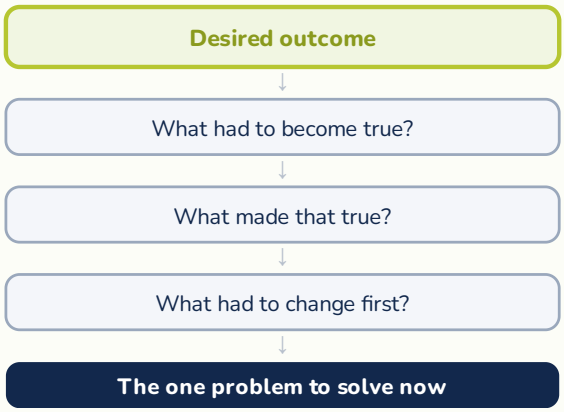
The run-sheet

Everything rests on one thing: make the future vivid. If the team pictures a concrete, specific future, the real problem falls out of the backward chain almost on its own. If the future stays vague, the activity collapses into ordinary goal-setting — the one failure mode this tool has.

1. Name the outcome	**3 min**	*Write the desired outcome at the top of the chain* — the real future state you're aiming at, concrete enough to picture.
2. Stand in the future, vividly	**7 min**	*"It's exactly one year from today, and the outcome is real."* Ask: what's visibly different? What are customers saying? What does leadership say? What is the team no longer struggling with? What evidence tells you it's truly been achieved? Don't move on until it's concrete.
3. Work backward through the chain	**10 min**	*From that future, ask in order: (1) what had to become true for it? (2) what made that true? (3) what had to change before that?* Write each link, walking back toward today, one step at a time.
4. Force out the single problem	**5 min**	*Find the **one** problem the chain lands on — the first thing that had to be solved for everything else to follow.* If five or six problems appear, the mechanism hasn't finished — keep working back until one remains on the **critical path**.
5. Write the problem statement	**3 min**	*"The problem we must solve now is _____, because without solving it the outcome is impossible."* Then test it: if we solved this tomorrow, would the outcome become significantly more likely? If not, keep working back.
6. Check the nearest problem	**2 min**	*Name the loudest problem you started with, and say why it wasn't the one on the path.* If you can't explain the difference, work the chain again.

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THE BACKWARD CHAIN



FACILITATOR WARNING — ONE PROBLEM, NOT A LIST

The most common way this activity fails is producing a list. If the team ends up with five or six "important" problems, **Stop — the mechanism has failed.** This is not a prioritisation exercise; it's a problem-definition one. Keep working backward until exactly one problem remains on the critical path — the single thing without which the outcome is impossible. A list means the team drifted back into planning from today; the backward chain always narrows to one. And guard the other failure mode just as hard: if the future stays vague ("everyone's happy"), push for concrete evidence before you let anyone work backward.

If the future won't become vivid, the team will drift into planning. Rescue it with sharper prompts: *What headline would your customer write? What numbers improved? What complaints disappeared? What would your CEO proudly say in the board meeting?* Keep pushing until the team is describing the future as if living it — only then work backward.

PART 2 GETTING IT RIGHT

why it works & common mistakes

4 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

If left alone, attention fixes on what's loud now, and the team defines the problem forward from there — present-bias — the pull toward what's in front of you — quietly picking the nearest problem instead of the right one. Standing in the achieved outcome moves the viewpoint: from the finish line, "what had to be true for this to happen?" becomes unavoidable, and the nearest problem is exposed as a distraction. The backward chain walks the outcome back to the single problem that actually blocks it. The team isn't told to "start with the goal" — it's standing somewhere that makes the real problem obvious.

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5 · WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes

What happened	The fix
The future stayed vague	"Everyone's happy" isn't a future you can work back from. Push for concrete evidence — what's visibly different, what would you actually see? The vividness is the mechanism.
You ended with a list of problems	That's prioritisation, not problem-definition. Keep working back until one problem remains on the critical path — the single thing without which the outcome is impossible.
The outcome kept changing mid-activity	If the destination moves, the backward chain becomes unstable. Freeze one outcome first; restart the chain once it's fixed.
The team worked forward, not back	Listing what to do next from today is defining the problem from the starting line. Return to the outcome and move toward the present, one link at a time.
The problem only "would help"	"Would help" isn't enough. Test it: is the outcome genuinely impossible without solving this? If not, it's not the critical-path problem.
The nearest problem crept back in	The loud problem will keep pulling attention. Name it explicitly, and state why it wasn't on the path — that comparison is what makes the reframe stick.

Before you close the activity

- ✓ The future was made concrete — specific, evidence-based, not "everyone's happy"
- ✓ The chain was walked backward from the outcome, not forward from today
- ✓ Exactly one problem remains — on the critical path, not a list
- ✓ The team can say why the nearest problem wasn't the one worth solving

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6 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

Next time the team faces several problems, ask:

“Which of these is actually on the path to what we want?”

The more the team works backward from outcomes, the faster it stops reaching for the loudest problem. “Define it from the finish line” becomes a reflex — and the most expensive mistake in execution, solving the wrong problem well, stops happening.

Appendix · Reference

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

7 · A WORKED RUN

Watch the real problem appear

A team had three problems competing for attention: a flaky test suite, a slow onboarding flow, and a data pipeline gap. All felt urgent. The desired outcome: a product customers actively recommend within a year.

Stage	What happened
Stand in the future	One year out: customers recommending the product, activation rates up, the team shipping improvements confidently. Made concrete — specific numbers, specific customer quotes.
Work backward	For customers to recommend it, the product had to visibly improve. For that, the team had to know *what* to improve. For that — they needed reliable activation data. Which they didn’t have.
The single problem	“The problem we must solve now is our missing activation data **(the critical-path problem)**, because without it we can’t tell what to improve — and the outcome is impossible.” The onboarding flow was never it.
Check the nearest	The flaky test suite was the loudest and most urgent — but it wasn’t on the path to the outcome. Naming that stopped it from stealing the quarter.

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8 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

The real need	Use this
Find which problem actually leads to the outcome	**This tool — Future Back.** Stand in a successful future, work back to the one problem on the critical path.
Find why today's problem keeps recurring	**Root Cause Drill** — works *downward* from a present symptom to its cause. Future Back works *backward in time* from an outcome. Different directions, different jobs.
Imagine failure to expose the risks	**It Already Failed** — stands in *failure* to surface risks. Future Back stands in *success* to find the problem. Same shape, opposite direction.

The move underneath: shift where you're standing before you define the problem — step into the outcome you want, and let the backward chain reveal the one thing that actually blocks it. That same move — change the vantage point, then reason back — is one of the Gym's most leveraged, because the most expensive execution error isn't solving a problem badly. It's solving the wrong problem well.

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