Decide Under Pressure

Facilitator guide

About this activity: a real constraint has just landed and the team wants to rush into a plan. This activity stops that. The team runs a premortem — it imagines it is six weeks on and has failed to adapt, and each person privately writes why. The reasons cluster into barriers, and the team forces one to the top: the barrier most likely to stop the response. You are not here to solve the constraint, or even the barrier. You are here to make the team find the real barrier before it plans.

What is a premortem? The opposite of a postmortem. Instead of asking "why did it fail?" after the fact, the team imagines the failure has already happened — six weeks from now — and works backwards to why. Imagining the failure first helps people say things they would never say about the present — a fear about the future is easier to admit.

WHEN DO I USE THIS?

The right moment

Picture this: a constraint just landed — the budget's been cut, a launch pulled in, half the team reassigned. The deadline hasn't moved. Within minutes the room is throwing out solutions, and every one seems to hit the same invisible barrier. That barrier — not the constraint — is what this activity finds.

USE IT WHEN

A real constraint has just landed and holds — a budget cut, a launch pulled in three weeks, a key person reassigned mid-project — and the team's instinct is to start planning immediately. This buys them the one conversation they'd otherwise skip.

DO NOT USE IT WHEN

A constraint the team has already adapted to. A hypothetical "what if". A problem with an obvious path — if there's no real adapting to do, there's no hidden barrier to find.

The one test before you start: has a real constraint just landed, and is the team about to jump straight to solutions? If yes, this is the tool. If it's already adapted to, or the path is obvious, pick a different one.

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· WHAT WILL THE TEAM LEAVE WITH?

What you'll leave with

WHAT YOU GET

The one barrier most likely to stop the team adapting — named and agreed out loud. The other barriers, captured for later. A shared view that the constraint was never the real problem, and a team ready to plan against the right one.

WHY IT MATTERS

The team stops planning around the wrong problem. It leaves knowing the real obstacle is belief, agreement, ownership or a decision — not the constraint everyone was focused on. No plan yet, and that's correct: finding the barrier is the win.

PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

Your job

Run the premortem and surface the real barrier — and stop the team solving. Do not let the room plan. Do not accept the constraint as the barrier. Your job is to:

- write the live constraint on the board in one line
- run the premortem — everyone writes, alone and silent
- cluster the reasons honestly and name each cluster
- force one barrier to the top — not a list
- name the shift, then stop — the barrier is the outcome, not a plan

> **The one thing the team should learn:** when a constraint lands, the thing that stops you adapting is usually not the constraint — it's a barrier underneath it: belief, agreement, ownership, or a decision no one is making. Find that first, and the plan is built on the real problem.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

Roles

Who	What they do
You (facilitator)	Write the constraint. Run the premortem. Cluster the answers honestly and name each cluster. Hold the team to one barrier. Name the shift and stop the room solving. You don't plan, and you don't decide the barrier — the team does. Photograph the board and send it round.
The team (3–6)	Each person writes their own honest failure reasons — the real version — alone and silent. Then helps cluster the reasons and rank them to the single biggest barrier.

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Say this to the team before you start (in your own words): “A real constraint just landed, and the instinct is to plan around it. We’re not doing that yet. First we’ll find what would actually stop us adapting — the barrier underneath — because a plan that ignores it will fail.”

3 · HOW DO I START?

Opening script — 2 minutes

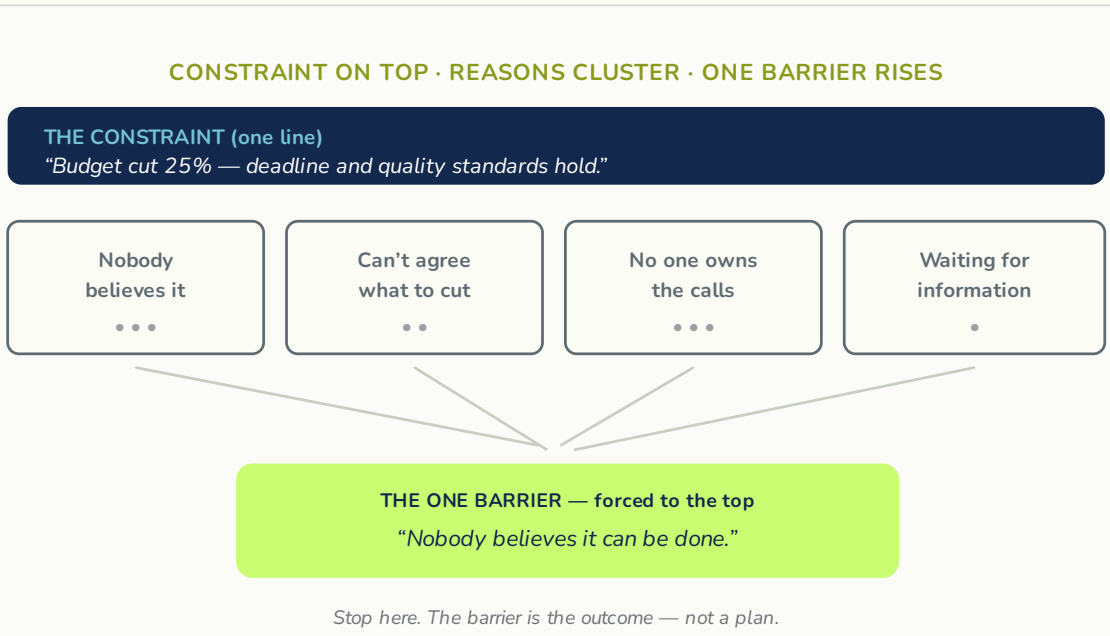
Say this in your own words before you start. Do not read the app page out loud.

SAY

“A constraint has just landed on us, and every instinct in the room is to start planning. We’re going to resist that for twenty-five minutes. Instead, we’ll imagine it’s six weeks from now and we failed to adapt — and each of us will write, privately, why. Not what happened to us — how we responded. We’ll group those reasons, and force one barrier to the top: the thing most likely to stop us. We are not solving today. Finding that barrier is the whole job.”

4 · HOW DO I PREPARE?

Setup and materials



You need a board or wall, a sticky-note pad for each person, and a few markers — nothing else. Clear enough wall space to post every note and move them into clusters.

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Material	What it is, and when you use it
A board or wall	Any whiteboard or wall with space to post notes and group them. The constraint goes at the top; the clusters form below. Steps 1, 3, 4.
Sticky notes	A pad for each person — one reason per note, so everyone writes privately before anything goes up. Step 2.
A few markers	People write their own notes; you use one to name the clusters and mark the top barrier. Steps 2–5.
Capture sheet	One sheet. You write the constraint, the clustered barriers, and the one barrier named — as the activity runs.

> **The premortem question is the whole tool — say it exactly.** "It's six weeks from now. The team failed to adapt. Why?" The future tense is what gets honesty. If you drop it, people get defensive and say nothing useful — you're back to "what's stopping us?", which surfaces nothing.

Words to know: the **constraint** is the thing that landed (the budget cut). A **barrier** is what would stop the team adapting to it (belief, agreement, ownership, a decision). The premortem finds the barrier, not the constraint.

5 · HOW DO I FRAME THE CONSTRAINT?

Name the constraint first

Write the live constraint on the board in one concrete line, before anything else. "Budget cut 25% — deadline and quality standards hold" works; "resourcing pressure" is too vague to react to. Make clear the constraint is fixed — the team can't negotiate it away today.

> **Rule:** use a real, live constraint the team is actually facing — not a hypothetical. If there's nothing real to adapt to, there's no barrier to find, and this isn't the tool.

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PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

Before you begin — 30-second check

- ✓ A real, live constraint is named and written at the top of the board in one line
- ✓ The board or wall has space to post notes and cluster them
- ✓ Every person has a sticky-note pad and a marker
- ✓ The team understands the one rule: we're looking at how the team responded, not what happened to it
- ✓ Everyone is ready to write alone and silent — no discussion first

6 · WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Run the activity

Name the constraint › Run the premortem › Post and cluster › Force one barrier up › Name the barrier

1. Name the constraint

3 min

Write the live constraint on the board in one concrete line — for example, "Budget cut 25% — deadline and quality standards hold." Make clear it's fixed: the team can't negotiate it away today.

2. Run the premortem

7 min

Everyone works alone and silent. Say the question exactly: **"It's six weeks from now. The team failed to adapt to this constraint. Why?"** Each person writes what stopped the team responding well — how the team responded, not what happened to it. Up to 3–5 reasons, one per note.

> **Steer what they write:** the real version, not the polite one. Good: "nobody believed the target was achievable", "we couldn't agree what to cut", "no one owned the hard calls." Not: "the budget was cut" (that just restates the constraint).

3. Post and cluster

5 min

Everyone posts their notes. Group similar reasons out loud and name each cluster in the team's words — "nobody believed it", "couldn't agree what to cut", "no one owned the calls." Group fast; don't perfect it.

> **Watch for constraint-blaming:** if a note just says "not enough budget", push one level deeper — "what about *us* would let that stop the team?"

4. Force one barrier to the top

7 min

As a team, answer one question: **which of these would kill us first?** Force one cluster to the top — not a ranked list, one barrier. Settle ties by asking which one makes all the others worse. The discipline of choosing one is where the value is.

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5. Name the barrier 3 min	Point at the constraint, then at the barrier, and say it plainly: “We walked in thinking the problem was the budget. It isn’t. It’s that nobody believes this can be done. That’s what we fix first.” Write the one barrier on the board. Then stop — don’t let the energy roll into planning.

These times are indicative. A full run is about 25–30 minutes, for a team of 3–6. The time you need will vary with the constraint and the size of the team. The step that sprawls is Cluster (step 3) — group fast. The step teams resist is Force one barrier (step 4) — don’t allow a tie to stand.

THE ONE RULE

We’re looking at how the team responded — not what happened to the team. Reasons the team didn’t respond well (belief, agreement, ownership, a decision) are barriers. The constraint itself, and outside events, are not — they happened *to* the team. If a reason isn’t about how the team responded, it doesn’t go up.

One more thing: the whole point is to stop *before* the plan. If the team leaves with a plan but never named the barrier, the activity failed. If it leaves with the barrier named and no plan yet, it succeeded. Protect that line.

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

STEP IN

The team starts proposing solutions. → Pull them back; today is the barrier, not the plan.

Every failure reason blames the constraint. → Push: “what about *us* would stop us adapting to that?”

People write the polite version. → Ask for the reason they’d say in the corridor.

WAIT

The failure reasons feel uncomfortable. → That discomfort is the tool working.

Someone names a barrier about the team itself. → Don’t soften it; write it down.

The room goes quiet after you name the shift. → Let it land.

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PART 3 AFTER THE ACTIVITY

use it again

7 · HOW DO I FINISH?

Closing script — 2 minutes

SAY

"Notice what just happened. We walked in ready to plan around the constraint. But the thing that would actually stop us isn't the budget — it's that nobody yet believes this can be done. No plan would have worked while that was true underneath. That barrier is what we deal with first. Next time a constraint lands and the room reaches for solutions, ask the other question first: if we fail to adapt, what about *us* will be the reason?"

8 · DID WE GET A GOOD RESULT?

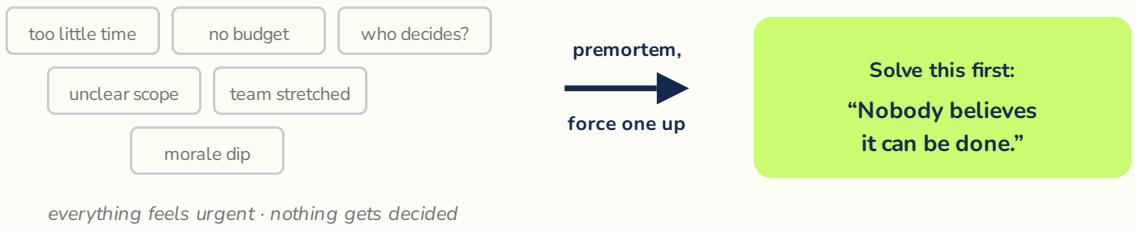
Check your run

GOOD RUN

The team agrees on one barrier that is *not* the constraint itself — and sees why the plan it was about to build would have missed it. No plan yet, and that's correct.

HOLLOW RUN

The team lists ways to cope with the constraint. The "barrier" is just the constraint restated ("not enough budget"). The session slides into planning and never names what would really stop adaptation.



Under pressure, the win isn't a plan — it's naming the one barrier to clear first.

Find the barrier before you try to fix everything.

Before people leave — the finish check

- ✓ The live constraint is written at the top of the board
- ✓ Everyone wrote their own failure reasons, alone and silent
- ✓ The reasons are clustered and each cluster is named
- ✓ One barrier — not a list — is forced to the top and written down
- ✓ The barrier is about the team's response, not the constraint or outside events
- ✓ No plan was made — and a photo of the board has been taken and shared

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9 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

Build the habit — 30 seconds

THE HABIT

“Before we plan — if we fail to adapt to this, what about us will be the reason?”

A team that has run this once tends to pause before solutioning and ask what would really stop them — belief, agreement, ownership — rather than assuming the constraint is the whole problem. That pause, in normal work, is the lasting change.

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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
Every reason blames the constraint	The team is staying safe. Reframe: “assume the budget is fixed and fair — now, what about how *we* work would stop us adapting?” Keep pushing until the reasons are about the team, not the number.
The team insists on solving	Acknowledge the urge, then set it aside: “we’ll plan next — but a plan that ignores this barrier will fail. Name it first.”
The barrier is uncomfortable (“we don’t trust the plan”)	That’s a successful run, not a problem. Name it calmly, write it down, don’t soften it. The value is that it’s finally on the board.
People write the polite version	You’ll get nothing from safe, surface reasons. Ask for the version they’d say in the corridor, not the one for the meeting.
The team can’t agree which barrier is top	Ask “which one makes the others worse?” That usually breaks it. If still split, the person accountable decides — two minutes, then move.
“They’re all connected / all equally important”	Very common. Ask: “if you could only remove one today, which would make the others easier?” That forces the ranking without denying the links.
There genuinely is no hidden barrier	Rare, but real — if the path is obvious and the team is aligned and willing, this activity isn’t needed. Stop and let them plan.
Time runs out before ranking	Better to name the top two honestly than force a rushed single. Mark them; agree to settle which is primary at the start of the planning session.

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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 premortem runs. It carries the constraint, the clustered barriers, and the one barrier named — the outcome — on a single page the team keeps.

1 · THE CONSTRAINT — the live constraint, in one line

"Budget cut 25% — deadline and quality standards hold."

2 · THE BARRIERS — the clusters, named in the team's words

Barrier cluster
Nobody believes it can be done
Couldn't agree what to cut
No one owns the hard calls

3 · THE ONE BARRIER (forced to the top — the one to deal with first)

"Nobody believes it can be done." · **Deal with this before any planning.**

Box 1 holds the constraint the team walked in with. Box 2 holds the barriers the reasons clustered into. Box 3 is the outcome: the single barrier forced to the top — the real problem to deal with before any plan.

12 · WHAT DOES A GOOD RUN LOOK LIKE?

Worked example

The constraint: a team is told its budget is cut 25% — but the deadline and quality standards both hold. The instinct is to start listing what to cut. Instead, the facilitator runs the premortem: "It's six weeks on, we failed to adapt — why?" Working privately, people write the real reasons, and almost none are about money: "we'll quietly assume the date will slip", "no consensus on what to protect", "decisions stalled — who decides?", "same old options." The reasons cluster into four barriers. Asked "which kills us first?", the team forces one to the top — and it isn't the budget. It's the belief barrier: nobody really believes the deadline is achievable on a smaller budget. The facilitator names the shift — "no budget plan would have worked while we quietly believed the target was impossible" — and stops. That belief is what the team deals with first.

13 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

Common mistakes

- **Letting the team solve.** The biggest one. The moment people propose cuts or fixes, the tool is lost. Hold them to finding the barrier.
- **Accepting the constraint as the barrier.** "Not enough budget" is the constraint, not the barrier. Push one level deeper: what about the team would let that stop them?
- **Polite premortems.** Safe, surface reasons give you nothing. Ask for the version they'd say in the corridor.
- **Keeping several barriers.** If the team won't rank to one, the hard conversation never happens. Force the single barrier.
- **Accepting vague barriers.** "Communication" or "alignment" is too vague to act on. Push for the concrete version — "nobody owns the final decision" — before it goes up.
- **Rolling into the plan.** Stopping at the barrier *is* the outcome. Don't let the energy carry the room into solutioning.

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14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

Decide Under Pressure is the diagnostic at the front of a larger set. It ends when the barrier is named — it doesn't solve the barrier, it tells you which tool to reach for next.

If your barrier is...	Where to go next
Different priorities — people rank the response differently	**Prioritise Under Pressure** — get one shared order of what to do first.
Nobody believes it can be done	**Assumption Breaker** — test what's actually fixed versus only assumed.
No one owns the hard calls	**Decision Ownership Drill** — name who decides what, before any planning.
No fresh ideas — only the obvious options	**Borrowed Brain** — bring in other perspectives to open new options.
Waiting for more information	**How-Sure Line** — decide what's good enough to act on now, and what genuinely must wait.

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