Delivery Recovery Path

Facilitator guide

Your job: a setback has just hit. Get the team to choose one anchor to keep steady, then turn over escalation cards on a clock — each a new blow — so the team feels that every time it scrambles instead of steadying, the next hit lands harder. They leave having protected the anchor and locked one steady next move. You choose realistic blows, keep them face down, and hold the steady-first rule when the room wants to chase every fire.

The one idea: the setback is usually survivable; the scramble is what turns it into a crisis. Under pressure the team reacts everywhere at once, and each unsteadied reaction makes the next blow land harder — the cost compounds. Steady one anchor first and the blows stay manageable. The scramble does more damage than the setback.

WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

A delivery has broken and the team is reacting on instinct; one problem is visibly causing others; the team is fighting several fires at once and nothing settles. Bring a real setback the team is in now, or one that just landed — not a hypothetical.

WRONG TOOL

You want a reusable recovery for next time › Recovery Playbook. A setback is spreading pressure across teams and you need to contain it › Pressure Stabilisation System. The same setback keeps recurring › Crunch Cycle Review. Nothing has broken yet — you're planning for risk › Scenario Split.

The one test before you start: is this a real setback the team is in now, or one that just landed? If nothing has actually broken, this won't land — it needs a live, concrete failure with real stakes. A hypothetical setback produces a hypothetical scramble.

WHAT WILL THE TEAM LEAVE WITH?

What you'll leave with

WHAT YOU GET

The one anchor protected while the blows kept coming, a clear view of where reacting made things worse, and the next real move — with an owner — made from stable ground, not mid-scramble.

WHY IT MATTERS

The team feels each blow it took while scrambling land harder, and feels how steadying one thing first made the rest manageable. It leaves with the reflex: steady first, then react.

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PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

Your job

You are running this to one outcome: the anchor protected, and one steady next move locked. Your job is to:

- force **one anchor** — protect everything and you protect nothing
- build and turn a **real escalation deck** — realistic blows, face down, one per round
- enforce the **compounding rule** — reacting makes the next card harder; never rescue the team from that
- protect the **next move** (step 5) — a vivid simulation with no committed move is just drama

THE ONE IDEA

The scramble does more damage than the setback. The setback causes the first problem; the team's reactions create the next three. A system that hasn't been steadied spreads damage, and each rushed reaction raises the cost of the next blow — the cost compounds. Steady one anchor first, and the blows stay manageable; the team recovers from stable ground instead of compounding the mess.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

Roles

Role	What they do
You (facilitator)	Brief the team, hold the one-anchor rule, turn the escalation deck on the clock, enforce the compounding rule, keep time, and protect the next-move step. You run the pressure; you don't rescue the team from it.
Participants (a team)	The people in the delivery. They choose the anchor, decide each round what to sacrifice to protect it, and commit the next move. 30–45 minutes.

3 · HOW DO I OPEN?

Opening script — 2–3 minutes

In your own words, never read aloud. Keep the escalation cards face down — the not-knowing is what makes it real.

SAY — IN YOUR OWN WORDS

"A setback has hit. We're going to pick the one thing we must keep steady — our anchor — then I'll keep throwing new problems at you on a clock. Each round you choose: steady the anchor, or react. If you react, the next problem hits harder. By the end you'll see the scramble did more damage than the setback — and you'll leave with one steady next move."

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4 · HOW DO I PREPARE THE SPACE?

Setup and materials

Component	What it is, and when you use it
Escalation deck	Realistic follow-on blows, face down. Step 3: you turn one per round. The realism is everything — see the deck guide in §6. Never preview them.
Anchor card	One card; the team writes the single thing it must keep steady. Step 2: written and placed in front of the team; it stays there, unchanged, all run.
The board	Two areas — anchor (what you protect) and incoming (where each blow lands). Throughout: track what's steady versus spreading.
Timer	Each round is short and timed. Step 3: the clock keeps real pressure and stops over-analysis.

PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

Before you begin — 30-second check

- ✓ This is a real, live setback with real stakes — not a hypothetical
- ✓ The people in the delivery are in the room
- ✓ The escalation deck is built real, face down, and never previewed
- ✓ You're ready to hold one anchor and enforce the compounding rule

5 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

How to run it

Brief the team (2–3 min), then run these in order. The bold part is what you say or do; the note under it is where you add the most. Hold the timings.

1. Name the setback	**4 min**	*One line: what broke, what's at stake now.* Board out, appoint the facilitator, keep it concrete and current. The deck stays face down.
2. Choose the anchor	**4 min**	*"If this collapses, what else immediately becomes harder?"* Choose the thing most others depend on. Write it on the anchor card, in front of the team. Push for one — protect everything, protect nothing.
3. Run the escalation	**14–18 min**	*Turn cards on the clock, one per round.* Before each card, ask first: what must wait so our anchor stays steady? Decide that, then deal with the card. Steadying = the action that protects the anchor from further damage this round. React elsewhere › the next card hits harder. Don't rescue them.

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4. Review what happened	**5–6 min**	*Stop the deck; on the board, what held and what spread.* Name where reacting made the next blow worse — and which escalation became avoidable once the anchor stayed steady.
5. Decide the next move	**4–5 min**	*One real move + owner, from stable ground.* Pick the first move that keeps the anchor steady after this activity ends. Protect this step — don't let it get squeezed.

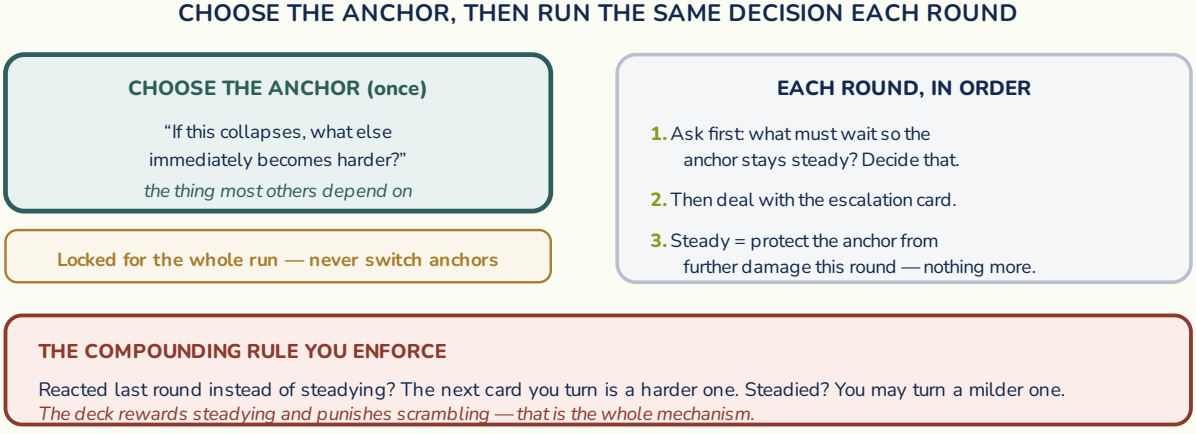
These times are indicative and will depend on the nature of the problem and the size of the team; the whole activity runs 30–45 minutes. The step that overruns is running the escalation (step 3); the step that gets squeezed is deciding the next move (step 5) — protect it. A vivid simulation with no committed move is just drama.

6 · HOW DO I RUN THE ANCHOR AND THE ROUNDS?

The anchor and the decision loop

The anchor is chosen once and locked; each round runs the same short decision. This is the engine — don't let it drift into chasing every fire.

What counts as a real steadying action: only accept one the team could realistically do now — in the next hour, or by the next working day for a slower setback. An idealised future fix ("we'd re-architect the service") is not a steadying action; it's an escape from the round. Hold them to something real and immediate.



7 · HOW DO I BUILD THE ESCALATION DECK?

Build the deck real — this matters most

A generic deck ("a customer complains") turns this into a game and the lesson dies. Each card must be a blow the team recognises from real delivery. Write 10–14 cards across these types; tune the wording to the team's world.

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BUILD THE DECK REAL — SIX CASCADE TYPES

10–14 cards, each a blow the team recognises from real delivery

Dependency failure	A service you rely on goes down too — now two things are linked.
Second incident	Your rushed fix broke something else; a new alert just fired.
Pulled between tasks	A third issue pulls your best person off — nothing has a clear owner.
Stakeholder escalation	A senior stakeholder wants an update every 15 minutes.
Quality building up	The shortcut you took an hour ago now causes on-and-off failures.
Time / resource squeeze	The deadline didn't move, and half your buffer is gone on the scramble.

The compounding rule you enforce: if the team reacted last round instead of steadying its anchor, the next card you turn is a harder one. If they steadied, you may turn a milder one. The deck rewards steadying and punishes scrambling — that is the whole mechanism.

What makes a card "harder": a harder card does at least one of four things — affects more people, reduces the capacity available, shortens the time left, or adds a second dependency. **A concrete example:** if the team split to chase the vendor instead of steadying checkout, the next card is a second-service failure (a new dependency), not a mild stakeholder query. Pick the harder card that fits the setback, and let it land.

When to step in — and when to stay out · a principle, not a step

STEP IN

The team tries to protect everything → force one anchor.

They try to switch anchors mid-run → the anchor is locked; a new card is never a reason to switch.

They previewed or second-guessed the deck → keep it face down.

They're analysing instead of choosing → the clock is running.

STAY OUT

The scramble is biting and the room goes quiet → that's the lesson.

They argue over steady-versus-react → that argument is the work.

A reacted round goes badly → don't soften the next card.

They're uncomfortable sacrificing something → the discomfort is the point.

Hold this line: one anchor, steadied first, every round. Cards face down. Reacting makes the next blow harder — never rescue the team from that, or the compounding never lands.

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PART 3 AFTER THE ACTIVITY

make it stick

8 · HOW DO I CLOSE?

Closing script — 2 minutes

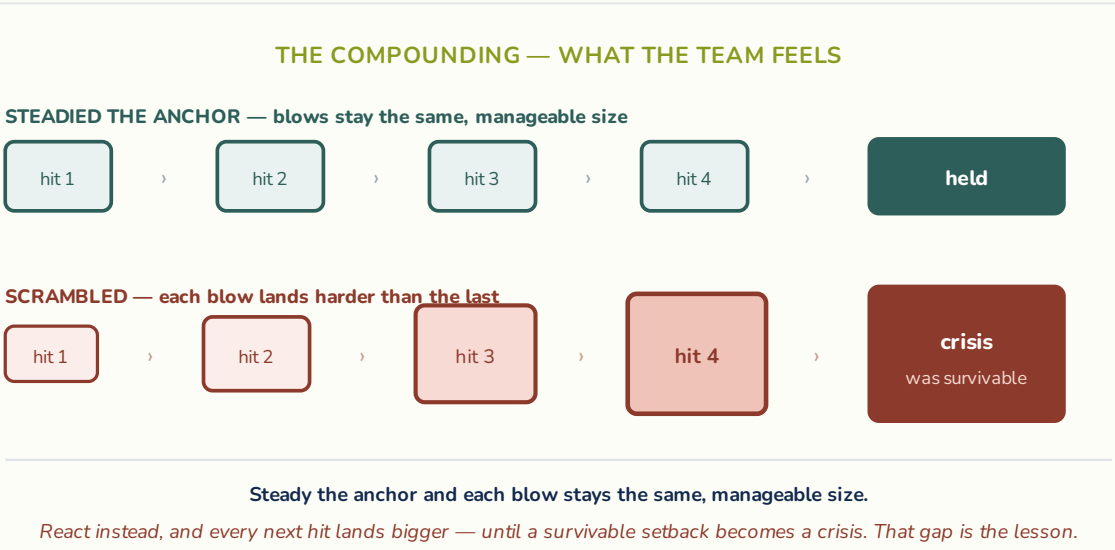
Reconstruct the compounding — replay how the scramble grew the blows, so the lesson lands as something felt.

> **SAY — IN YOUR OWN WORDS**
>
> "We anchored on *[the anchor]*. Watch what happened each time we jumped to a fire instead: the next blow landed harder — *[replay a compounding moment]*. The setback itself was survivable; the scramble is what nearly made it a crisis. Our one move, from stable ground, is *[move + owner]*. Next time a setback hits: steady the anchor first, then react."

9 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

The idea underneath

Under a setback the instinct is to act on everything at once — but a system that hasn't been steadied spreads damage, and every rushed reaction creates another problem to recover from. Steadying one anchor first contains the spread, so the team recovers from stable ground instead of compounding the mess. The value isn't the simulation; it's the reflex it builds — steady first, then react.



Before you finish — the check

- ✓ The team chose one anchor — and kept it unchanged all run
- ✓ The escalation deck was real, face down, and never previewed
- ✓ The compounding was enforced — reacting made the next blow harder
- ✓ The team felt the gap between steadying and scrambling
- ✓ One real next move is locked, with an owner, from stable ground
- ✓ The board has been photographed before anyone leaves

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10 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

When the next setback hits: “what’s the one thing I steady first, before I react to anything?”

Protect the anchor, then move. The scramble is the enemy, not the setback. The scramble does more damage than the setback.

Appendix · Reference

You should not need this while you run the activity. Read it before, or use it if a run goes sideways.

11 · A WORKED RUN

Watch the compounding land

A payments team’s checkout starts failing at 4pm on a release day. The team reaches for the obvious fixes — roll back, hotfix, page the vendor — all at once.

WORKED RUN — CHECKOUT FAILS AT 4PM ON RELEASE DAY

THE ANCHOR

“Keep checkout working for existing sessions.” Written on the anchor card — locked for the whole run.

THE COMPOUNDING

Card 1: fraud-check service wobbles. Half the team scrambles to the vendor. Card 2 (because they split): the hotfix corrupts a second endpoint. Card 3: a VP wants updates every ten minutes. “Every time we jumped, the next thing got worse.”

THE RECOVERY

Stop the deck. Anchor held: checkout stays up on the last good version. One move, from stable ground: roll back the release (owner named); vendor handled separately — not mid-scramble.

What the facilitator did: pushed for one anchor (“keep checkout working for existing sessions”), then let the deck compound on the half that scrambled — without rescuing them. The team that kept steadying still had checkout up; the half that split had three fires and no owner. The recovery came from stable ground, not mid-scramble. **Ask the team:** “which later problems never appeared because checkout stayed steady?” That question turns the lesson from recovery into prevention — the whole point of steadying first.

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12 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

Common mistakes

Mistake	Why it fails the run
Protecting more than one anchor	Protect everything and you protect nothing. Force a single anchor — the thing most others depend on.
Switching anchors mid-run	A new card is never a reason to switch. The locked anchor is what the compounding tests; changing it dissolves the lesson.
A generic escalation deck	“A customer complains” turns it into a game. Every card must be a blow the team knows from real delivery.
Rescuing the team from a bad reaction	Softening the next card after they scramble kills the compounding. Let the harder card land.
Trying to solve every escalation card	The activity isn’t about solving every problem — it’s about protecting one anchor while making deliberate trade-offs. Treating every card as equally important is the scramble in miniature. Hold the anchor; let the rest wait.
Ending with no committed move	A vivid simulation with no next move is just drama. Protect step 5.

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13 · WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

Edge cases

What happens	What to do
The chosen anchor has already collapsed	It will happen. Choose the next most important thing still worth protecting, and anchor on that. The lesson is preventing further compounding from here — not reversing the first loss. Name that explicitly, then run on.
The team can't agree on the anchor	Use the test: "if this collapses, what else immediately becomes harder?" The thing most others depend on is the anchor. If still split, the delivery owner decides — then lock it and move.
They steady perfectly and nothing compounds	Rare, and good — but make the lesson explicit: turn one harder card to show what a reaction would have cost, then close. The point is the reflex, not a loss.
The real setback resolves mid-activity	Fine — keep running the deck as rehearsal. The reflex you're building is for the next setback, not only this one.
Someone insists "we'd just fix it all at once"	Let the deck answer. Turn the compounding cards and let the split team feel the next blow land harder. The mechanism makes the argument better than you can.
The team keeps sacrificing the anchor to react	That's the habit you're here to break. Don't correct it — let the compounding punish it, then name it in the review. The felt cost teaches more than the instruction.
Time runs out mid-deck	Stop, review what happened, and still commit one next move. A shorter run with a committed move beats a full deck with none.

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14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

If instead…	Use this
you want a recovery the team can run every time	**Recovery Playbook** — builds the reusable sequence from a rehearsed setback.
a setback is spreading pressure across teams	**Pressure Stabilisation System** — contains pressure before it cascades between teams.
the same crunch keeps recurring	**Crunch Cycle Review** — diagnoses the repeating pattern.
nothing has broken yet — you're preparing for risk	**Scenario Split** — prepares for multiple futures before they hit.

Rule of thumb: this is for the live moment everything's breaking at once — what do we protect first? For a reusable recovery you rehearse in calm, use Recovery Playbook; for pressure spreading across teams, Pressure Stabilisation System.

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