Recovery Playbook

Facilitator guide

About this activity: your team already knows how to recover from a setback — it just never writes it down, so it pays the cost from scratch every time. This activity runs a real setback as a simulation, so the team watches itself scramble; then it captures the few moves that actually stabilised things as a short, reusable playbook the team can run — the same way — at the next setback. You run the simulation, hold one rule (simulate before you capture), drive the capture, and lock the trigger that says “run this now.”

What is Recovery Playbook? A team survives a nasty setback — barely — because two people happened to know what to do. Next time, those moves live in their heads, so the team improvises the whole recovery again. This activity captures that recovery once, from a real scramble, so it’s run next time instead of re-invented under pressure.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

The right moment

A 15-second picture: the team survived a nasty outage last quarter. It worked — barely. If the same thing hit next month, they’d improvise the whole recovery again, because the moves that saved them live in two people’s heads and were never written down. This activity captures that recovery. Run it between crises, while the team can think clearly — not during a live fire.

USE IT WHEN

The team meets setbacks with the same improvised scramble each time; recovery depends on one or two people who happen to know what to do; you’ve survived incidents but never captured what worked; you’re building resilience **between** crises, not during one.

USE A DIFFERENT TOOL WHEN

A setback is live right now › Delivery Recovery Path (recover in the moment). The same setback keeps recurring › Crunch Cycle Review. Nothing has broken and you’re assessing risk › Scenario Split.

The one test before you start: is this a real setback the team has faced, or realistically could — concrete enough to simulate? And is the room calm, not mid-crisis? If there’s a live fire, this is the wrong tool — use Delivery Recovery Path. This one builds the capability between crises.

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· WHAT WILL THE TEAM LEAVE WITH?

What you'll leave with

WHAT YOU GET

A short, reusable recovery playbook — an ordered sequence of the moves that actually stabilise the team, each with an owner. A trigger at the top that says "run this now." And a shared picture of where the team scrambles, so it knows what to drop next time.

WHY IT MATTERS

The team realises it already had the recovery — it simply never wrote it down. Next setback, it runs the playbook instead of re-improvising under pressure. The recovery is paid for once, from a real scramble, then reused.

PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

Your job

Run the simulation, hold the one rule, drive the capture, and protect the trigger. You are producing a reusable recovery from a real scramble — not teaching a recovery from a slide. Your job is to:

- run the escalation deck — turn one card per timed round and drive the scramble
- hold the line: **simulate before you capture** — don't let the team plan the recovery cold
- push when the team marks everything "worked" — keep only moves that actually stabilised things
- force the playbook short — 4–6 ordered moves, each with an owner
- protect the trigger — no trigger, no playbook; it never gets run without one

The one thing the team should learn: your team already knows how to recover — it just never writes it down, so it pays the cost from scratch every time. The recovery was reachable all along; it was lost because it was never captured.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

Roles

Who	What they do
You (facilitator)	Run the simulation and turn the cards on the clock. Hold the simulate-before-capture rule. Drive the capture — keep only what worked, force it short. Lock the trigger and name owners. You do **not** let the team plan the recovery up front.
Participants (3–6)	Respond to the setback in real time, as they actually would — let the scramble be messy. Then privately mark what stabilised it, debate the disagreements, and agree the ordered playbook and its owners.

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Say this to the team before you start (in your own words): “We’re going to take a real setback and play it forward — I’ll keep throwing new problems at us, and we respond as we actually would. Then we’ll look at what truly stabilised things, and capture it as a recovery we can run next time instead of improvising. Don’t plan the recovery up front — the scramble has to be real first.”

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

“Think of a setback we’ve actually survived — one that worked, but barely. We’re going to play it forward: I’ll throw problems at us on the clock, and we respond exactly as we would in real life. It’ll get messy — that’s the point. Afterwards we’ll mark the few moves that genuinely stabilised things and turn them into a short recovery we can run next time. Don’t design a better recovery as we go — just respond as you really would. The scramble has to be real first.”

4 · HOW DO I PREPARE?

Setup and materials

ONE KIT · THE DECK DRIVES THE SCRAMBLE · THE BOARD CAPTURES IT



The deck deals blows › the team scrambles on the board › the few moves that worked become the playbook.

Lay it all out before the team arrives — board open, deck face down, timer to hand. Setup under two minutes.

The **board** holds the setback, the scramble and the marked “what worked”. The **deck**, face down, drives the scramble — one card per timed round. The team never previews the deck: not knowing is what makes each blow feel real.

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Material	What it is, and when you use it
Escalation deck	Realistic follow-on blows, face down. Step 2: you turn one per round to drive the simulation. The realism is everything — see §5. Never let the team preview them.
The board	Tracks the setback, the moves the team made (the scramble), and which ones worked. Steps 2–3: the raw material for the capture.
Playbook sheet	Where the reusable recovery is written — the ordered moves, owners, and the trigger. Steps 4–5. The artefact the team keeps.
Timer	Each simulation round is short and timed. Step 2: keeps the scramble under real pressure.

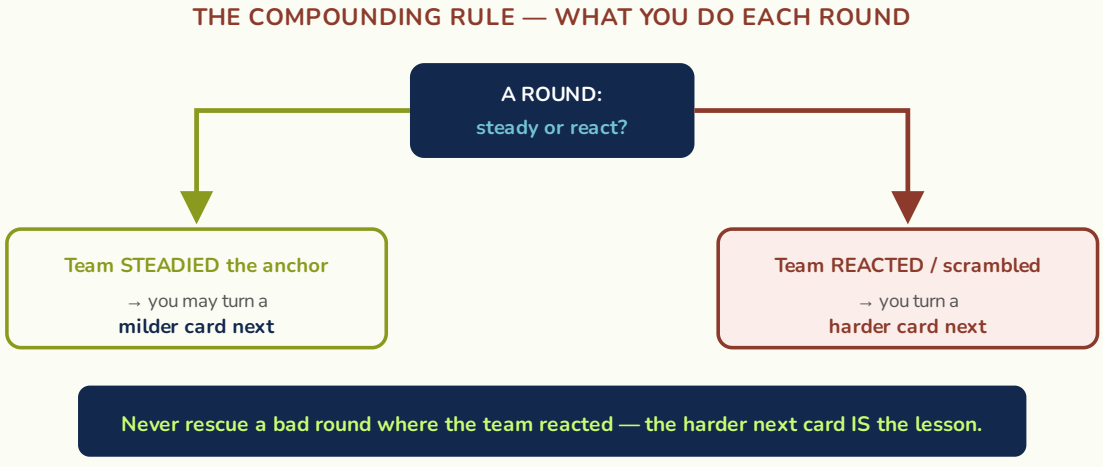
Everything is in one kit — lay it out before the team arrives. Board open, deck face down with the rule in view, timer and playbook sheet to hand. Either tool in this kit must be out and ready in under two minutes. If setup runs longer, simplify the kit, not the run.

Words to know: the **setback** is the real problem the team plays forward. The **scramble** is everything the team does in the simulation. **What worked** is the few moves that actually stabilised things. The **playbook** is those moves, ordered and owned. The **trigger** is the signal that says "run this now."

5 · HOW DOES THE DECK WORK?

The compounding deck — the make-or-break move

The escalation deck is the tool's foundation. It doesn't deal random events — it **compounds**: when the team reacts instead of stabilising, the next blow lands harder. That difference is what makes the team feel the cost of a bad recovery, rather than just be told about it. Get this right and the scramble is real; get it wrong and the whole exercise is a game.



Reacting instead of stabilising makes the next blow land harder. The room feels the cost of a bad recovery.

That difference is the mechanism — don't deal cards at random, or the compounding never lands.

Cascade type	Example blow the team recognises
Dependency failure	A service you rely on goes down too — now two things are broken and linked.

Second incident	A rushed fix broke something else; a new alert just fired.
Context-switch cost	A third issue pulls your best person off the first — nothing has a clear owner.
Stakeholder escalation	A senior stakeholder wants an update every 15 minutes; someone must handle them.
Quality-debt accumulation	An earlier shortcut is now causing intermittent failures.
Time / resource squeeze	The deadline didn't move, and half the buffer is gone.

Build it real: use 10–14 cards across these six cascade types, in less severe and more severe versions, and tune the wording to this team's world. A generic deck ("a customer complains") turns the simulation into a game and the captured playbook is worthless. Each card must be a blow the team recognises from real delivery.

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PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

Before you begin — 30-second check

- ✓ One real, concrete setback is chosen — one the team has faced or realistically could
- ✓ The room is calm, not mid-crisis (if there's a live fire, use Delivery Recovery Path)
- ✓ The escalation deck is built real, face down, and never previewed by the team
- ✓ Board, timer and playbook sheet are laid out — setup under two minutes
- ✓ The team understands the one rule: we scramble for real first, then capture

6 · WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Run the activity

Pick the setback › Run the simulation › Mark what worked › Capture the playbook › Lock the trigger

1. Pick the setback

5 min

Choose one real setback, concrete enough to play out. Appoint the facilitator; the deck stays face down. A real past one beats a hypothetical.

2. Run the simulation

15–20 min

Turn escalation cards on the clock; the team responds in real time. Apply the compounding rule (§5): react › harder card next; steady › you may go milder.

> **Let the scramble happen.** Don't let the team plan ahead, and don't rescue a bad round where the team reacted. This mess is what you work with — capture every move on the board as it happens.

3. Mark what worked

10 min

Each person privately marks the moves they think stabilised it; then compare and debate the disagreements. Keep only moves the team agrees changed the outcome.

> **Expect real disagreement — that debate is the value.** Push back on "everything worked": did this move actually stabilise things, or just feel busy?

4. Capture the playbook

15–20 min

Write the worked moves as a short ordered sequence, each with an owner: the first thing to stabilise, who does what, in what order.

> **Keep it to 4–6 moves.** A long playbook won't be run under pressure. If it's getting long, force it shorter — only the moves that mattered most.

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5. Lock the trigger
5–10 min

Agree the signal that says “run this now” — the early sign of the setback. Write it at the top of the playbook, name an owner, and photograph it.

> **Protect this step.** No trigger = no one knows when to start. A well-written playbook with no trigger never gets run — and an un-run playbook is exactly the failure this tool exists to prevent.

These times are indicative and will depend on the nature of the problem and the size of the team. A full run is 60–75 minutes for a team of 3–6. The step that overruns is the simulation (2); the step that gets squeezed is locking the trigger (5). Protect step 5.

THE ONE RULE

Simulate before you capture. The team must scramble for real in the simulation before it writes the playbook. The recovery is discovered from the experience of the scramble, not designed cold — that is what makes the team believe it and reuse it.

And capture only what stabilised the situation. The playbook is not a diary of everything the team did. It is only the few actions that changed the direction of the recovery. In any real scramble, most moves are just busy — page the vendor, open a channel, update the ticket; only two or three actually turned it around. Those are the playbook.

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

STEP IN

The team plans the recovery before simulating → stop them; scramble first.

They mark everything as “worked” → push: did it actually stabilise things?

The playbook is getting long → force it shorter.

They skip the trigger → hold the line; no trigger, no playbook.

STAY OUT

The simulation gets messy and loud → that mess is the raw material.

They argue over which move actually worked → that debate is the capture.

They’re surprised they already knew the recovery → let that land.

A round goes badly → don’t rescue it; the harder card is the lesson.

Hold this line: simulate before you capture. Capture only what worked. Keep it short. Every playbook needs a trigger — without it, the playbook never runs.

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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 we just built. We took a setback we'd survived by improvising — and we found we already knew how to recover; we'd just never written it down. Now it's four moves, in order, each owned, with a trigger that tells us when to start. Next time this hits, we don't re-invent it under pressure — we run it. And after each real recovery, we spend five minutes updating it with what we learned."

8 · DID WE GET A GOOD RESULT?

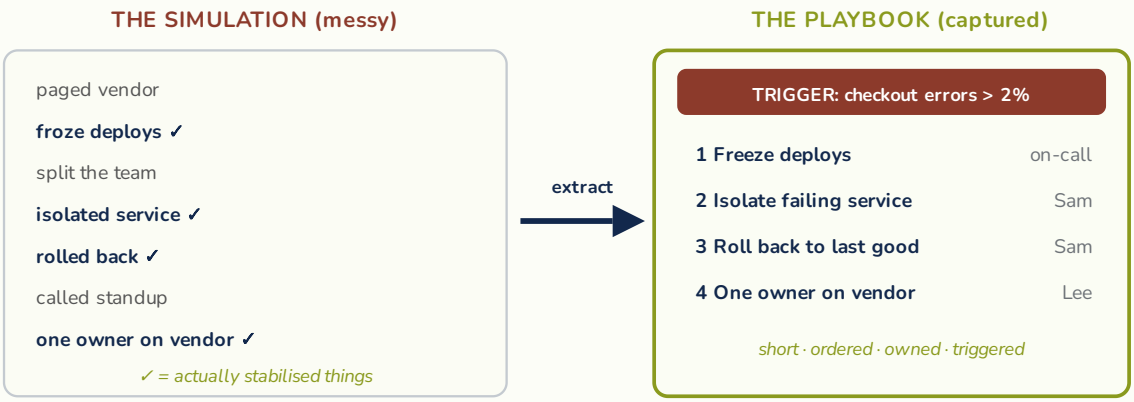
Check your run

GOOD RUN

A short ordered playbook (4–6 moves), each with an owner, and a clear trigger at the top. The team agrees it would actually run this next time — and it was earned from a real scramble, not written cold.

HOLLOW RUN

A long "everything we did" list with no ordering, no owners, no trigger — another document that won't be reopened. If it looks like this, cut it to the moves that worked and add a trigger.



The team already knew how to recover — it just never wrote it down.

The messy scramble is the raw material; the few moves that worked become the reusable playbook.

We don't re-invent our recovery — we run it.

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Before people leave — the finish check

- ✓ The simulation produced a real scramble — the team felt the compounding
- ✓ Only the moves that actually stabilised things were marked “worked”
- ✓ The playbook is 4–6 ordered moves, each with a named owner
- ✓ A trigger that says “run this now” is written at the top, with an owner
- ✓ The team agrees it would reach for this playbook at the next setback
- ✓ A photo of the playbook — trigger, moves, owners — has been taken and shared

9 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

Build the habit — 30 seconds

THE HABIT

“When a setback hits, we don’t re-invent our recovery — we run the playbook.”

A team that has run this once tends to reach for its playbook at the next setback instead of improvising from scratch — and after each real recovery, it spends five minutes updating the playbook with what it learned. That pause — run it, then improve it — 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
The team plans the recovery before simulating	Stop them. The scramble must be real first, or the playbook is just a guess. Run the simulation, then capture.
The team keeps redesigning the recovery instead of replaying what really happened	Almost guaranteed — someone says “we’d do it differently now.” Say: “Run what actually happened first. We’ll improve it after we see what genuinely stabilised the situation.”
Everything gets marked “worked”	Push: did this move actually stabilise things, or just feel busy? Only stabilising moves go in the playbook.
The playbook is getting long	A long playbook won’t be run under pressure. Force it to the 4–6 moves that mattered most.
The team can’t agree which move worked	That debate is the capture working. Let it run briefly, then the setback-owner makes the call.
No clear setback to simulate	Use a realistic hypothetical built from the six cascade types — but a real past one is far better.
The team says “we’d never use a playbook”	That’s the real risk. Make it short and trigger-led — a 4–6 move sequence with a clear “run this now” signal is the version teams actually reuse. If it’s long and triggerless, the doubt is justified.

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11 · WHAT DO I WRITE DOWN?

The playbook sheet — what you fill in

The playbook sheet is the artefact the team keeps and re-runs. It carries the trigger, the ordered moves and their owners — short by design, so it actually gets run under pressure.

TRIGGER — the signal that says 'run this now' (printed first, on purpose)

Trigger: "Checkout error rate > 2% for 5 minutes." · **Owner:** on-call lead

THE MOVES — ordered, each owned (4–6, no more)

#	The move	Owner
1 / 2	Freeze deploys / Isolate the failing service	on-call / Sam
3 / 4	Roll back to last good / One owner talks to the vendor	Sam / Lee

THE HABIT (keep it alive)

When a setback hits, we run the playbook — we don't re-invent it. After each real recovery, five minutes to update it.

The trigger sits at the top because a playbook no one runs is the exact failure this tool prevents. The moves are short and owned so they run under pressure. Keep it to 4–6 — a long playbook won't be run.

12 · WHAT DOES A GOOD RUN LOOK LIKE?

Worked example

A platform team picks a real one: a payments outage that hit them last quarter. They survived it, but nobody had written down how. The facilitator runs the escalation deck — checkout fails; the team pages the vendor, splits to investigate, rolls back, calls a standup, freezes deploys. Some moves help; some make it worse (the split leaves the rollback ownerless when a second alert fires). It's messy, exactly as it was on the day. Marking what actually worked, the team debates — and once it agrees, the stabilising moves form a sequence: freeze deploys, isolate the failing service, roll back to last good, one owner on the vendor. Someone says: "we already know how to do this — we just never wrote it down; we've just never agreed which four steps mattered most." They add the trigger (checkout error rate > 2%), name owners, photograph it, and close. The recovery was reachable all along; it was lost every time because it was never captured.

WHAT LEAVES THE ROOM

A GOOD RUN

TRIGGER at the top

4–6 ordered moves, each owned

1 Freeze · 2 Isolate · 3 Roll back · 4 Vendor

short enough to actually run under pressure

the team agrees it would run this next time

A HOLLOW RUN

a long "everything we did" list

no ordering · no owners · no trigger

another document that won't be reopened

if it looks like this: cut to what worked, add a trigger

Short, ordered, owned, triggered — or it never gets run when the next setback hits.

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13 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

Common mistakes

- **Capturing before the scramble is real.** A playbook written cold is a guess; it's only believed when it's earned from the experience of the scramble. Simulate first, always.
- **Marking everything as "worked".** Only moves that actually stabilised things belong in the playbook. Push back on "busy" moves.
- **A long playbook.** Under pressure, a 4–6 move sequence gets run; a long document doesn't. Force it short.
- **No trigger.** Without a clear "run this now" signal, no one knows when to start — and the playbook never runs.
- **A generic escalation deck.** If the blows aren't real to the team, the scramble isn't either, and neither is the playbook.

14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

Recovery Playbook is built **between** crises — it captures a recovery the team already knows so it isn't re-improvised next time. Reach for a different tool when the situation is different.

If instead…	Use this
a setback is live right now	**Delivery Recovery Path** — recover in the moment; steady the anchor as the blows land.
the same crunch keeps recurring	**Crunch Cycle Review** — diagnoses the repeating pattern.
nothing has broken — you're preparing for risk	**Scenario Split** — prepares for multiple futures before they hit.

> **Rule of thumb:** Recovery Playbook captures a recovery the team already knows, so it isn't re-improvised next time. It's not a live save (Delivery Recovery Path), not a diagnosis of a repeating crunch (Crunch Cycle Review), and not risk-preparation before anything breaks (Scenario Split).

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