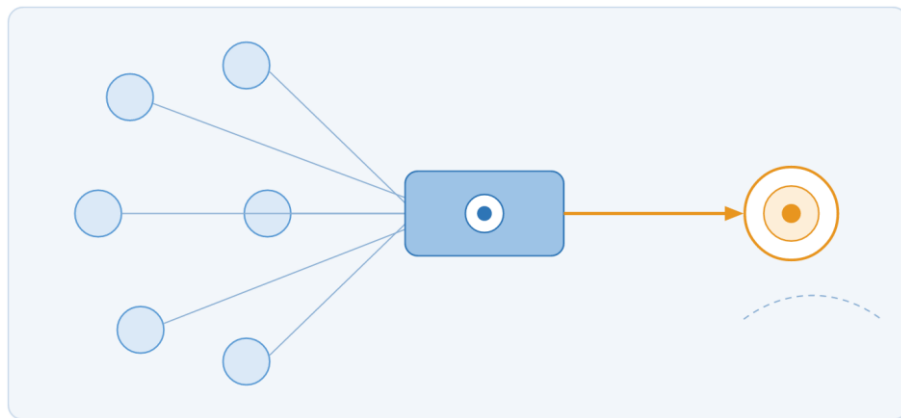


## Guide

# Agile Inception

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In-depth development of the State of the art topics



Updated September 2026

## About this document

This document is an in-depth development of the topics in the reference map (State of the art) for preparing, sizing, facilitating, and closing the initial alignment of an agile initiative, or realigning it when it changes course, which is available at: [Skill Arena](#).

Use it as reference material to keep your practice aligned with, and checked against, current professional knowledge.

It is complemented by the training and assessment platform in Skill Arena. In the [Agile Inception](#) area you can take training tests to check and improve your level of knowledge and, if you wish, you can also obtain a diploma that provides curricular accreditation of professional competence and currency in this area.



## State of knowledge

Knowledge about the inception evolves slowly at its core and very fast in its artificial intelligence layer: the two reference patterns are ten to twenty years old with no new editions, and workshop facilitation rests on decades of method and evidence, while formats (short sessions, remote and hybrid) keep shifting and the use of AI in preparation, synthesis, and prototyping changes within months. Throughout the document, the labels (ESTABLISHED, CONSOLIDATING, EMERGING) help identify the maturity of each concept:

**ESTABLISHED** settled consensus; knowledge taken as required.

**CONSOLIDATING** gaining adoption fast; not yet universal but already relevant.

**EMERGING** recent frontier; high relevance and high volatility.

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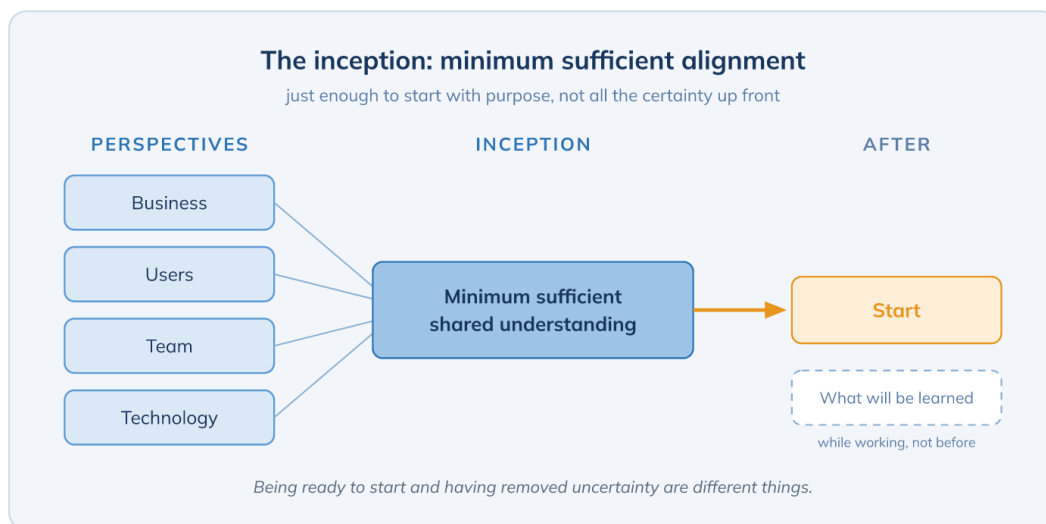
## BLOCK A · WHAT AN INCEPTION IS AND WHEN IT ADDS VALUE

**Chapter 1. The inception as minimum sufficient alignment** · ESTABLISHED

*What an inception is, what it produces, and why it is a family of practices combined according to the problem.*

**Introduction**

Every initiative begins with a conversation, even if nobody has called it. When that conversation is not organized, each person arrives at the work with their own version of what is going to be built, for whom, and how far, and the differences surface weeks later, already turned into code, spent budget, or distrust. The inception is the organized way of having that conversation beforehand, with every necessary voice in the same room. In this chapter we look at what it is, what it produces, and why it is best understood as a family of practices.

**1.1 What it is and what it produces**

An inception is the set of conversations through which those who will decide, build, and use a product build the minimum shared understanding needed to start an initiative with purpose, or to reorient it when the course changes. Jonathan Rasmusson, who systematized it at ThoughtWorks, summed up the problem it attacks in a sentence that remains the best justification for the practice: believing that consensus exists where there is none is what sinks most projects.

What it produces is concrete. At the end there must exist a shared vision that any participant can explain (what problem the initiative solves and for whom), a scope with its explicit exclusions, the list of risks that deserve attention, and the start-up agreements on how the team will work and how it will communicate with those who were not in the room. The Scrum Manager BoK records these as essential outputs and adds the mistake that most often ruins them: leaving without documenting them.

**Minimum sufficient.** The word that matters is "sufficient". The inception seeks just enough understanding to start working with purpose and leaves to the work what only the work can teach. Being ready to start and having removed uncertainty are different things.

## 1.2 A family of practices

There are two canonical patterns, the Inception Deck and the Lean Inception, and a lesser-known third one, the agile chartering of Diana Larsen and Ainsley Nies. None is mandatory in its full form. Paulo Caroli, author of the Lean Inception, describes the activities as the menu of a tapas restaurant, combined according to what the context calls for, and each method's set menu is just a convenient way to start. The practitioner chooses conversations, replaces them, and trims them, and the criterion for doing so is the problem at hand, not fidelity to the method.

The usual triggers are a new product or product line, a relevant change of direction, the arrival of a new team or new stakeholders, and situations of evident misalignment. There are also cases where a short meeting is enough, such as a well-understood extension of a product already in progress, recurring work, or an initiative whose context and team are already consolidated. Calling a full inception for those is the first antipattern of the discipline.

## 1.3 A gap the certifications do not cover

Neither the most widespread Product Owner certifications nor those in agile facilitation name the inception among their learning objectives, although all of them demand the capabilities it exercises, such as formulating the vision, mapping stakeholders, or planning the first release. The only specific credentials belong to the Lean Inception's own ecosystem. That is why this skill exists as a complement to Product Owner training. The role already knows the concepts; here it learns to build them with other people in a room.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Explain what an inception is and what outputs it must produce, and distinguish them from those of an analysis or a plan.
- Recognize, for a specific initiative, whether it needs an inception, a short meeting, or neither.
- Place the Inception Deck, the Lean Inception, and agile chartering as patterns of the same family of practices.
- Argue before a sponsor why the goal is enough understanding to start and not complete certainty.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Calling the inception out of habit.** A known extension or recurring work does not need a workshop; a short meeting with the minimum outputs is enough and respects everyone's time.

**Confusing alignment with unanimity.** Shared understanding admits recorded disagreements; demanding that everyone think alike lengthens the workshop and produces facade agreements.

**Leaving without documenting.** It is the critical mistake the BoK points out: what is not written down gets reinterpreted as soon as the group disperses.

## Further reading

- [Scrum Manager BoK — Inception](#)
- [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck](#)
- [Caroli — Lean Inception \(martinfowler.com\)](#)
- [Caroli — How to plan an inception](#)

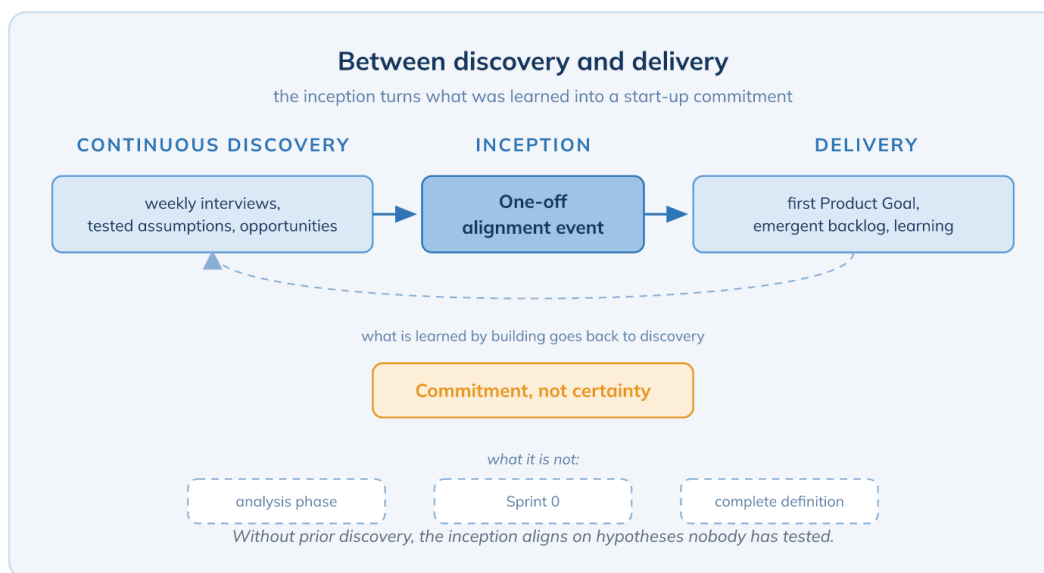
## BLOCK A · WHAT AN INCEPTION IS AND WHEN IT ADDS VALUE

## Chapter 2. Neither a phase, nor Sprint 0, nor discovery: the boundaries of the inception · ESTABLISHED

*What an inception is not, how it relates to continuous discovery, and what sets it apart from the initiation phases of formal frameworks.*

### Introduction

Defining an inception by what it is not is as useful as defining it by what it is, because almost all its failures consist of turning it into something else, be it an analysis phase, a sprint that delivers nothing, a requirements document, or a substitute for customer research. In this chapter we walk through those boundaries and place the inception between continuous discovery, which feeds it, and delivery, which follows it.



### 2.1 What an inception is not

It is not an exhaustive analysis or predictive planning. Big design up front is exactly what agile methods came to avoid, and Rasmusson presented the Inception Deck as the alternative to "six months of up-front planning and speculation". Nor is it the complete definition of the product, because the backlog emerges afterwards, nor a "Sprint 0".

Sprint 0 deserves a pause, because the debate is still alive in the Scrum community. Ken Schwaber already called it in 2008 "a misused expression to describe the planning that happens before the first sprint", Alistair Cockburn suspected the term was born to justify something with no evident business value, and Mike Cohn describes it as "a project before the project". The rejection is not of preparation but of calling it a sprint and prolonging it without delivering value. The inception, by contrast, lasts hours or days and produces understanding.

### 2.2 The inception and continuous discovery

Product discovery is continuous today. Teams interview customers every week, maintain an opportunity solution tree, and test assumptions before building, and nobody with weight in the

discipline, neither Marty Cagan, nor Teresa Torres, nor Jeff Patton, defends discovery as a phase that ends. That leaves room for the inception, which is something else. It is a one-off event of alignment and commitment that takes what was learned in discovery and turns it into a start-up plan.

Thoughtworks, where the practice was born, put it sharply in 2023: discovery identifies problems and opportunities and aligns the roadmap, while the inception plans the delivery of the solution, and mixing them "can be a huge mistake" because it leads to jumping to the solution without enough knowledge.

The risks are symmetrical. Running an inception without prior discovery decides a first cut on hypotheses nobody has tested, and Caroli himself warns that the Lean Inception "does not replace" customer research or ideation. Treating discovery as a phase that closes before the inception returns the team to the sequential model it wanted to avoid.

**Input and output.** Continuous discovery enters the inception as evidence, and the inception exits toward delivery as commitment. Neither replaces the other, and what is learned by building feeds discovery again.

## 2.3 Start-up in the formal frameworks

Several frameworks formalize an initiation phase. RUP had its Inception phase, closed with the lifecycle objectives milestone; Disciplined Agile, now at PMI, keeps an Inception phase with eight process goals and an average duration close to two working weeks; DSDM separates a feasibility phase and a foundations phase; and the UK government's Service Manual prescribes a Discovery of four to eight weeks that may end in the decision not to continue. Scrum defines no phase, and that is where the Sprint 0 debate comes from. The inception of this skill sits between both worlds, because it accepts that alignment is needed before starting and refuses to turn that alignment into a phase with project deliverables.

Compared with the project charter of traditional management, the difference is one of nature. The charter is a document the sponsor issues and signs to authorize the initiative and assign authority; the inception is a conversation that produces reciprocal agreements between the team and its stakeholders, fits on one page, and may conclude that the initiative is not viable.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Distinguish an inception from a Sprint 0, an analysis phase, and a requirements document, and explain why the Scrum community rejects the term Sprint 0.
- Place the inception as a one-off event that takes continuous discovery as input and produces a start-up commitment.
- Identify the risk of running an inception without prior discovery and that of treating discovery as a phase that ends.
- Compare the inception with the initiation phases of RUP, Disciplined Agile, DSDM, or GDS and with the project charter.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Running an inception without discovery.** A first cut is decided on personas and needs nobody has researched; the workshop produces alignment on hypotheses, and the record should say so.

**Turning it into a Sprint 0.** If the inception stretches into weeks and produces environment, architecture, and a detailed backlog, it is already a project phase under another name.

**Confusing it with the project charter.** Signing the result as a contract with the sponsor freezes what should have been a living document.

## Further reading

- [InfoQ — the Sprint Zero debate](#)
- [Thoughtworks — Run a successful discovery](#)
- [GDS — How the discovery phase works](#)
- [Caroli — Lean Inception \(martinfowler.com\)](#)

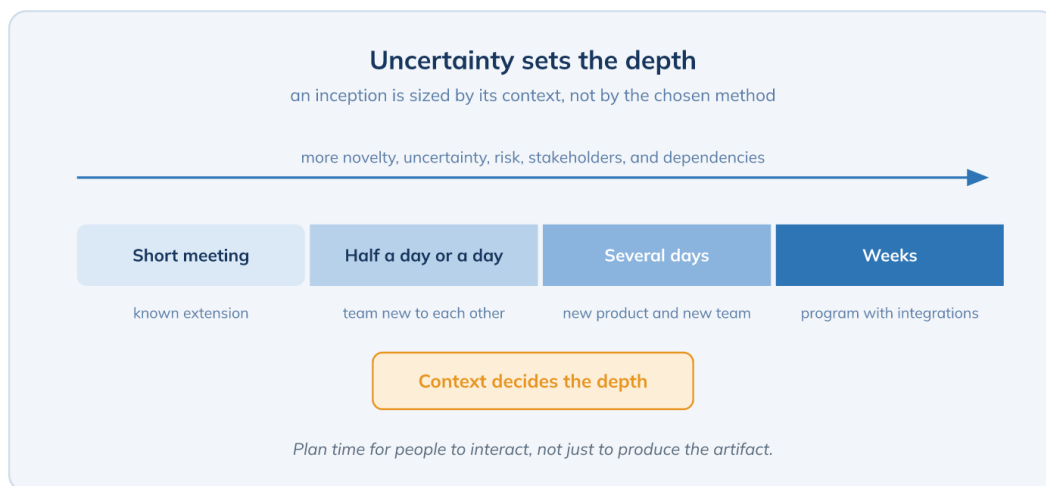
## BLOCK B · SIZING AND PREPARING

## Chapter 3. Proportionality: uncertainty sets the depth · ESTABLISHED

*How to size the inception by novelty, uncertainty, risk, complexity, stakeholders, and dependencies, and what formats exist.*

### Introduction

An inception can last an hour or two weeks, and both can be right. What decides the depth is not the preferred method but the initiative's context, and sizing it wrong is costly in both directions. A five-day workshop for a known extension exhausts the stakeholders' patience, and a one-hour meeting for a new product with a newly formed team leaves unresolved exactly what needed aligning. In this chapter we look at the factors that scale the inception, the documented formats, and the horizon its result covers.



### 3.1 The factors that scale it

Six factors set the depth. The novelty of the product or domain for the organization. The uncertainty about the problem, the users, or the solution. The risk, whether business, technical, or regulatory. The complexity of the system and its integrations. The number of stakeholders and teams involved. And the external dependencies. Caroli sums it up in three indicative tiers: under three days for a simple product with few features and little integration, around five for medium complexity, and more than five for large systems with many integrations. The Scrum Manager BoK frames it by degree of innovation and scope, and the Scrum Manager blog crosses two axes, urgency and uncertainty, to choose between techniques. The common criterion is the same: the more uncertainty, the more conversation.

### 3.2 The formats and their durations

Documented practice ranges from under an hour to several weeks. An express Inception Deck, without the product box, fits in an hour with an experienced facilitator; facilitation guides recommend four to eight hours and warn that compressing it to two produces "pleasant but superficial answers"; there are two-day inceptions, the Lean Inception takes five, ThoughtWorks' historical inceptions lasted two to four weeks, and the UK government's Discovery, four to eight. The

empirical average for initiating an agile project, measured by Scott Ambler in 2013, was around four and a half weeks.

There is also an underlying trend worth knowing. The typical facilitation session has gone from half a day to about ninety minutes and multi-day workshops are declining, which strains the canonical Lean Inception week and explains the rise of formats spread over several short sessions.

**The BoK, in three steps.** A short meeting for known extensions; half a day or a day when the team does not know each other; and multi-day workshops, with Lean Inception, Inception Deck, or Design Sprint, for new products and new teams.

### 3.3 The horizon of the result

The result of an inception is not eternal. Rasmusson considered it valid for a horizon of three to six months and treated it as a living document, revisited when something major changes. Sizing therefore includes deciding when it will be looked at again, whether at the close of the first release, when a central hypothesis is invalidated, or when the team changes. Chapter 19 deals with that return to the room.

#### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Assess an initiative against the six factors and propose a reasoned depth and format.
- Explain the documented durations of the different formats and their consequences.
- Recognize when compressing the workshop will produce superficial agreements.
- Set the validity horizon of the result and the triggers for revisiting it.

#### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Choosing the method before the context.** Applying the full Lean Inception week or the Deck's ten conversations without looking at the initiative produces long workshops for small problems.

**Compressing into the superficial.** Two hours for a new initiative are enough to agree on words, not meanings; the differences will show up later.

**Taking the result as permanent.** Without a review date, the inception becomes a document that ages without anyone noticing.

#### Further reading

- [Caroli — How to plan an inception](#)
- [Scrum Manager BoK — Inception](#)
- [Scrum Manager — Agile Inception: what it consists of](#)
- [SessionLab — State of Facilitation 2025](#)
- [Ambler — project initiation survey \(2013\)](#)

## BLOCK B · SIZING AND PREPARING

## Chapter 4. Preparing the inception: participants, agenda, and decision rule · ESTABLISHED

*Who must be in the room, what is prepared beforehand, and how to agree in advance who decides and by what rule.*

### Introduction

What is decided before the workshop conditions what can be decided inside it. An inception with the wrong people, without prior information, or without a decision rule ends in a list of pending items. In this chapter we look at whom to invite and with what pattern of presence, what to prepare and, above all, how to make clear before starting who decides and by what rule.

#### 4.1 Who is in the room

The room must hold those who will build, those who represent the users, the technical leads, and the sponsor and, according to the facilitation guides, anyone able to veto the scope or the budget. Their absence is the most cited reason for the workshop's decisions being overturned afterwards. Group size matters. Above seven or eight participants per facilitator the group needs subgroups, and with fifteen or more, specific dynamics.

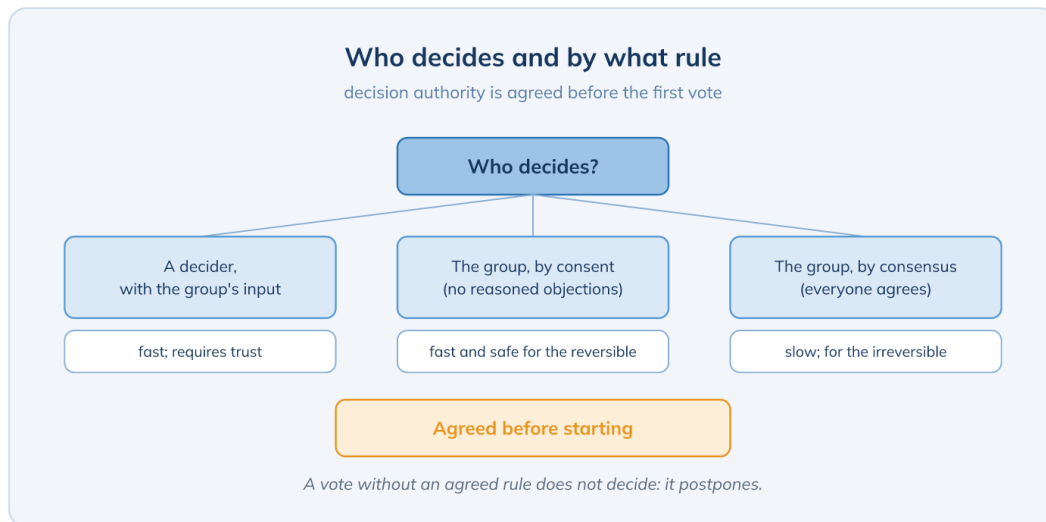
Each pattern sets its own pattern of presence, and knowing them avoids misunderstandings. In the Lean Inception the full product team works all week and the stakeholders attend only the kick-off and the final showcase. In the Design Sprint, the Decider is present all five days. In the Inception Deck, the sponsor is in the room because several conversations (what is going to give, what is it going to cost) are theirs. And when the Product Owner facilitates their own inception, they must know they give up defending content while running the process, or else hand the facilitation to someone neutral.

#### 4.2 What is prepared

Preparation sets the purpose of the session and the decisions it is expected to make, gathers the prior information (customer research, data, known constraints) and decides who presents it, designs the agenda with its timeboxes, and prepares materials and tools. Remote and hybrid add prior onboarding to the tool, the asynchronous work that can be brought forward, and the technical rehearsals, which chapter 16 develops. Caroli reminds us that the agenda must reserve time for people to interact and not only to produce artifacts, and that sharing it in advance strengthens commitment and trust in time management.

#### 4.3 Who decides and by what rule

It is the question almost nobody asks beforehand and almost everybody regrets afterwards. ICAgile's agile facilitation learning outcomes, revised in 2025, include as an explicit result "clarifying the team's decision-making authority", and for good reason. Without an agreed rule, a vote does not decide; it postpones.



There are three families of rule. A decider who listens to the group and decides, like the Design Sprint's Decider, who gets a supervote after everyone's anonymous input. The group by consent, in the manner of sociocracy, where whatever receives no reasoned objections is approved and a concern without an argument is recorded but does not block. And the group by consensus, slower and reserved for the irreversible. The rule may vary by type of decision, and it is worth tying it to the distinction between reversible decisions, which admit a light process, and irreversible ones, which deserve deliberation; the Product Owner guide covers it in detail. The essential thing is to communicate it to the participants before the first vote.

**Before the first vote.** Who decides, by what rule, and what happens with objections is announced when the workshop opens. It is the cheapest safeguard against the workshop that legitimizes decisions already made.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Invite the necessary people, including those who can veto scope or budget, with the pattern of presence the format calls for.
- Prepare purpose, expected decisions, prior information, agenda with timeboxes, and materials.
- Agree and communicate before the workshop the decision authority and the rule for each type of decision.
- Decide whether the Product Owner facilitates or delegates the facilitation, and explain the consequences of each option.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Holding the workshop without the sponsor.** Decisions are made in their absence and overturned at the first meeting afterwards.

**Voting without an agreed rule.** The group votes, nobody knows what the result means, and the decision is postponed to another meeting.

**Facilitating and defending content at once.** A Product Owner who runs the process and fights for their proposal loses neutrality, and the group notices.

### Further reading

- [Workshop Weaver — Agile Inception Deck \(facilitation guide\)](#)
- [Caroli — Lean Inception: participants](#)
- [ICAgile — Agile Team Facilitation, learning outcomes](#)
- [Sociocracy 3.0 — Consent decision-making](#)

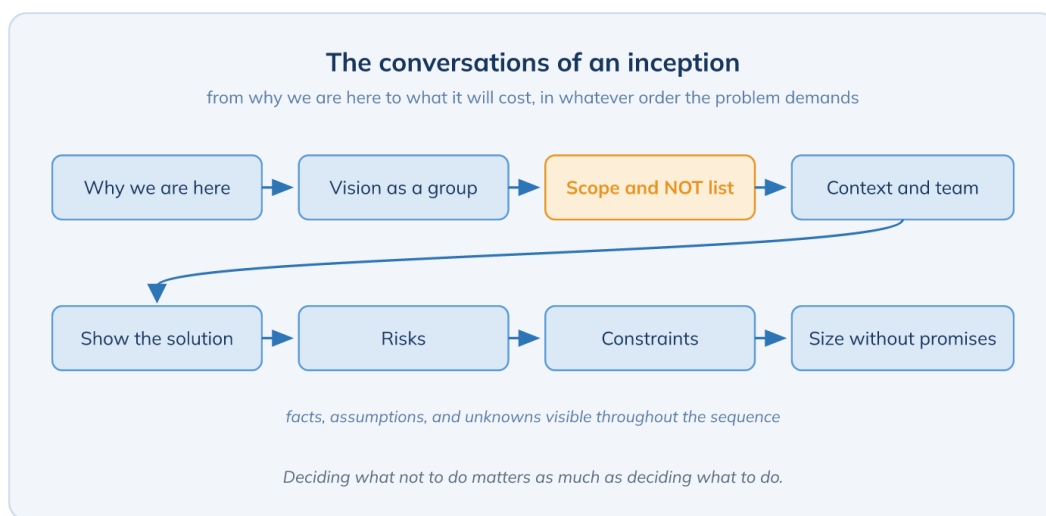
## BLOCK C · THE ALIGNMENT CONVERSATIONS

**Chapter 5. Why we are here and the vision written as a group** · ESTABLISHED

*Making the problem, the expected result, and the objectives explicit, and writing the vision as a group with techniques that make it shared.*

**Introduction**

The alignment conversations begin with the most uncomfortable one, why we are here. It seems obvious and rarely is, because each participant arrives with a different and often implicit answer. In this chapter we look at how to make the problem and the expected result explicit, how to derive the scope from the intended impacts, and how to write the vision as a group, so that it belongs to everyone and not only to the Product Owner.

**5.1 Why we are here**

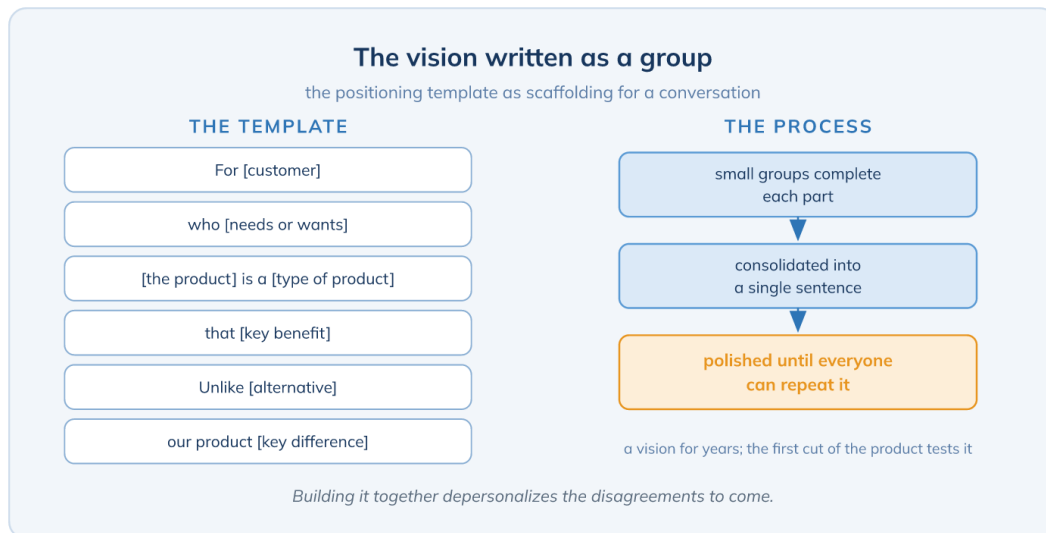
The first conversation of the Inception Deck asks for the three reasons the initiative exists, and it is no accident that it comes first, because it gives the team the context to make all later decisions well. The useful questions are specific. What problem or need gives rise to the initiative, what result we expect to observe if it goes well, and what business objectives it pursues. When participants bring different purposes, it pays to make them visible before reconciling them, with silent individual work and then sharing; a purpose imposed by the loudest voice will be argued again halfway through the workshop.

For initiatives where the purpose is under discussion, Gojko Adzic's impact mapping offers a robust structure with four levels: a measurable business goal, the actors who can bring it closer or push it away, the behavior changes we seek in them and, only at the end, the candidate deliverables. It derives the scope from the impacts rather than from a list of features, which is why it fits so well as the first activity of an inception.

**5.2 Writing the vision as a group**

The concept of product vision is taken as known; what the inception adds is the technique for building it together. Rasmusson and Caroli use the same positioning template, taken from Geoffrey

Moore. For a customer who has a need, the product is a type of product that delivers a key benefit and that, unlike the alternative, stands out for something. The mechanics are the same in both patterns. Small groups complete the parts of the template, they are consolidated into a single sentence, and it is polished together until everyone can repeat it. The sentence usually comes out clumsy the first time, and that is part of the exercise.



Two techniques complement the template. The elevator pitch, the thirty-second explanation any participant should be able to give. And the product box, taken from Luke Hohmann's Innovation Games, in which the group designs the product's packaging as if it were going to be sold on a shelf, with a name, a slogan, and three reasons to buy it; it forces thinking from the buyer's point of view. The vision looks years ahead, and the first cut of the product, covered in chapter 12, is the first piece that puts it to the test.

**Build it together.** A vision written as a group depersonalizes later disagreements. Faced with a request that does not fit, the conversation stops being "the Product Owner does not want to" and becomes "this does not bring us closer to where we agreed to go".

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Facilitate the conversation on purpose until problem, expected result, and business objectives are explicit.
- Use impact mapping to derive the scope from the intended impacts when the purpose is under discussion.
- Run the group writing of the vision with the positioning template, the elevator pitch, or the product box.
- Recognize when a vision has become shared and when it has only been written down.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Taking the purpose for granted.** The initiative starts with three different implicit purposes and the first serious disagreement appears when prioritizing.

**Bringing the vision already written.** The Product Owner presents their sentence and asks for approval; the group nods and does not make it their own.

**Confusing vision with a feature list.** A sentence full of features guides no decision; the vision speaks of the change for people.

## Further reading

- [Caroli — writing the product vision as a group](#)
- [Adzic — Impact Mapping](#)
- [Scrum Manager BoK — Impact mapping](#)
- [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck](#)

## BLOCK C · THE ALIGNMENT CONVERSATIONS

## Chapter 6. Scope, NOT list, and visible assumptions · ESTABLISHED

*Fixing what the product is and is not with explicit exclusions, and separating facts, assumptions, and unknowns in the room.*

### Introduction

Saying what will not be done saves more work than saying what will. It is one of the oldest lessons of the Inception Deck and one of the most forgotten, because saying "no" in front of the sponsor is hard. In this chapter we look at the two classic scope tools, the NOT list and the matrix of what the product is and does, and a third conversation that goes with them, the one that separates what we know from what we assume.

### 6.1 The NOT list

The Inception Deck's NOT list has three columns: in, out, and unresolved. The first two fix the scope; the third is the most valuable, because it makes visible what the group cannot yet decide and turns it into an open question with an owner instead of an ambiguity. Rasmusson puts it bluntly: saying what will not be done "removes a lot of waste up front". Facilitation guides add the typical failure, which is a vague list. If the "out" column is written in generalities, silent scope creep comes in through there.

### 6.2 Is, is not, does, does not

The Lean Inception uses a four-quadrant matrix: what the product is, what it is not, what it does, and what it does not do. Each participant describes the product on notes and places them in the corresponding quadrant; then they are read and grouped. It serves to define a product, but also a team or a strategy, and its strength is that many things are easier to describe by what they are not. Caroli sums it up in the rule that presides over this block: deciding what not to do matters as much as deciding what to do. Liberating Structures' Min Specs applies the same idea with different mechanics, generating every possible rule and eliminating them mercilessly until only the essential ones remain.

### 6.3 Facts, assumptions, and unknowns

In any of those conversations, statements appear that sound like facts and are assumptions. The practice of the inception consists of separating them in front of everyone, into what we know with evidence, what we assume, and what we do not know. Making visible the different interpretations of the same sentence ("users want X" may be a research finding or a salesperson's opinion) prevents the group from aligning on words instead of meanings. What is pending is recorded with an owner. Assumption mapping and its prioritization by risk are taken as known from Product Owner training and the discovery skill; in the inception it is enough to make them visible and decide which ones must be resolved before starting.

**Unresolved, with an owner.** The unresolved column and the list of assumptions share a fate. Each entry leaves the workshop with a responsible person and a date, or it becomes the ambiguity that will break the plan.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Facilitate the NOT list with its three columns and prevent the "out" column from being written in generalities.
- Run the "is, is not, does, does not" matrix and group its results.
- Separate facts, assumptions, and unknowns in the room and record what is pending with an owner.
- Detect when the group is aligning on words and not on meanings.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Leaving the scope in the positive.** Without explicit exclusions, each stakeholder takes for granted that what matters to them is included.

**A vague NOT list.** "Out: advanced features" excludes nothing; exclusions are written with the same specificity as inclusions.

**Treating assumptions as facts.** The plan rests on statements nobody has checked, and the first contact with users takes it apart.

## Further reading

- [Caroli — É, não é, faz, não faz \(is, is not, does, does not\)](#)
- [Scrum Manager BoK — Agile inception deck](#)
- [Liberating Structures — Min Specs](#)
- [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck](#)

## BLOCK C · THE ALIGNMENT CONVERSATIONS

## Chapter 7. Context, neighbors, and the team that also aligns · ESTABLISHED

*Mapping actors, stakeholders, and dependencies, and aligning the team itself with working agreements, an initial Definition of Done, and a team canvas.*

### Introduction

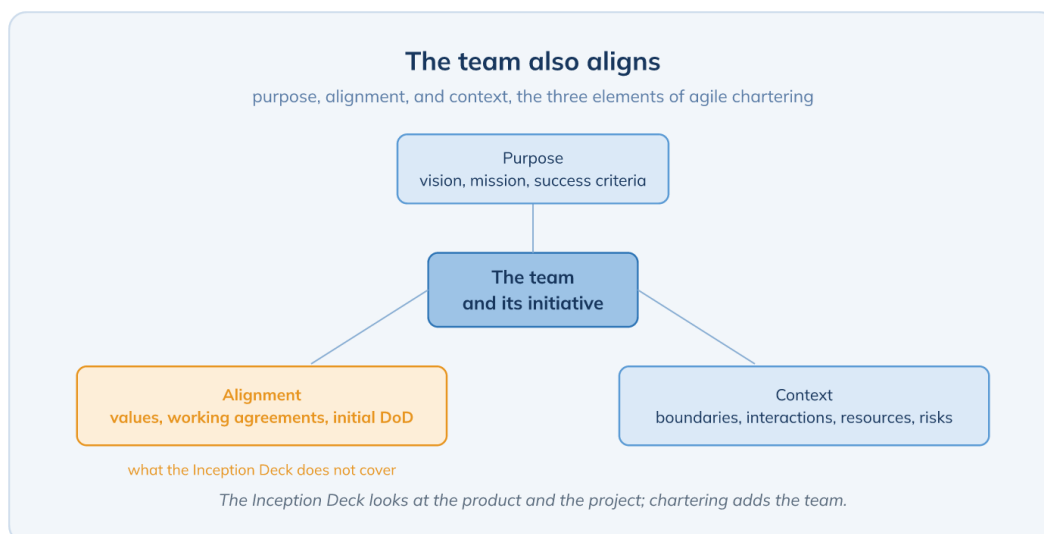
The community around an initiative is usually larger than it seems. The Inception Deck calls it "meet your neighbors" and asks to discover early all the teams, systems, and people the initiative will have to deal with. But there is one neighbor the Deck does not look at, and that is the team itself, which, when new or changed, also needs to align. In this chapter we look at both, the external context and the internal alignment, with agile chartering as the frame.

### 7.1 Context and neighbors

The context conversation identifies relevant users and actors, stakeholders, the ecosystem the initiative lives in, the business processes it touches, the systems it integrates with, and the external dependencies. The result is a map more than a list, with who needs what from whom and by when. Rasmusson insists on building bridges early, because the infrastructure, security, legal, or support teams that show up late tend to show up as blockers. The Product Owner guide covers the stakeholder map in depth; what matters here is doing it with the group in the room, because each participant knows neighbors the others do not.

### 7.2 The team also aligns

The agile chartering of Diana Larsen and Ainsley Nies, formulated in *Liftoff*, organizes the start-up in three elements: purpose (vision, mission, and success criteria), alignment (values, core team, and working agreements), and context (boundaries, interactions, resources, and risks). The Inception Deck covers the first and the third well; the second is its clearest gap, and the Scrum Manager BoK points to it by including agreements on sprint start-up and communication among the essential outputs.



Three instruments fill that gap. Working agreements, the shared understanding of how the team wants to work. An initial Definition of Done (DoD), which in Scrum is the commitment of the increment and a special kind of working agreement. And the Team Canvas, with a basic half-hour version (goals, roles, purpose, values, and rules) to start or adjust course, and a full version of about two hours for deeper alignment sessions. When the team already exists and its composition has changed, this is the part it needs most.

**Good enough for now.** Liftoff provides a rule for the whole inception. Agreements are taken as "good enough for now" and revised as the team learns; it is the logic of minimum sufficient understanding applied to the team itself.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Facilitate the context and neighbors map with the group, including the dependencies and support teams that tend to show up late.
- Place purpose, alignment, and context as the three elements of agile chartering and detect which one is missing in a given inception.
- Run the team's alignment with working agreements, an initial Definition of Done, or a team canvas, as the case requires.
- Recognize when a team that has changed needs to realign even if the product does not change.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Mapping only business stakeholders.** Infrastructure, security, legal, and support show up as blockers in the third sprint.

**Aligning the product and forgetting the team.** A new team with a clear vision but no working agreements wears itself out in avoidable friction.

**Turning agreements into regulations.** Working agreements are revised; carving them in stone at the inception makes them useless as soon as the team learns.

## Further reading

- [Larsen and Nies — Liftoff \(2nd ed.\)](#)
- [Agile Alliance — Project chartering](#)
- [Team Canvas](#)
- [Scrum Manager BoK — Inception](#)

## BLOCK C · THE ALIGNMENT CONVERSATIONS

## Chapter 8. Showing the solution, risks, and constraints · ESTABLISHED

*Discussing the solution at a high level, making risks visible while the group is calm, and making explicit the constraints and what gives way if something squeezes.*

### Introduction

Three conversations of the Inception Deck deal with the reality surrounding the initiative, that is, what the solution will look like in broad strokes, what can go wrong, and what limits we have. All three share a risk, that of turning into detailed design, catastrophizing, or negotiation, and all three are resolved with the same discipline, keeping the conversation at the right level. In this chapter we look at how.

### 8.1 Showing the solution without designing it

"Show the solution" asks for a one-page diagram with the architecture and technologies at a high level. Its function is to bring technical problems and integrations to light early, and to remember that, as Rasmusson wrote, "you choose your architecture when you choose your team". The conversation separates the decisions that must be made now, because they condition everything else, from those that can be deferred to the last responsible moment. When the domain is complex or there are many integrations, Alberto Brandolini's Big Picture EventStorming adds what the technical diagram does not give, an end-to-end view of the business with its hot spots, in a one-day workshop with fifteen to thirty participants.

### 8.2 Risks: what keeps us up at night

The risk conversation is held "while we are all calm and rational", and its result is a list classified into risks worth fighting and risks that are not. The Deck covers business, product, technical, and organizational risks, plus dependencies and critical assumptions. Gary Klein's pre-mortem adds rigor and a psychological basis. The group imagines that the initiative has already failed and each person writes in silence the plausible reasons for the failure, which are then shared one by one. Imagining the failure as already happened frees the informed dissenters, who show "how smart they are by the quality of the problems they raise", and it fits at the end of the inception, when there is already a plan to kill.

### 8.3 Constraints and what gives way

Time, budget, regulation, technology, organization, and resources are made explicit as constraints. The most useful conversation about them is the trade-off sliders, which Rasmusson titled "what is going to give". Scope, schedule, budget, and quality are ranked without ties, together with any criteria the team wants to add, so as to know in advance what we will sacrifice if something squeezes. It is a conversation with the sponsor, who is usually the one who needs it most, and its value lies in having it before the crisis and not during it.

**At the right level.** Thoughtworks put it as facilitation advice. Park implementation details when they come up, use pictures, and be honest about what is not known; the one-page diagram and the classified risk list are formats that force that level.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Facilitate the conversation on the solution in a one-page diagram, separating the decisions that must be made now from those that can be deferred.
- Run the risk conversation with "what keeps us up at night" or a pre-mortem, and classify risks by whether they deserve action.
- Make constraints explicit and rank the trade-off sliders with the sponsor.
- Choose Big Picture EventStorming when the domain or the integrations justify it.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Designing in the room.** The one-page diagram turns into two hours of architecture and the rest of the participants disconnect.

**Listing risks without classifying them.** A list of twenty risks without deciding which deserve action reassures and is useless.

**Postponing the trade-off conversation.** Without trade-off sliders, the first schedule crisis is resolved by cutting quality without anyone having agreed to it.

## Further reading

- [Klein — Performing a Project Premortem \(HBR\)](#)
- [Avanscoperta — EventStorming](#)
- [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck](#)
- [Thoughtworks — 7 tips for an effective inception](#)

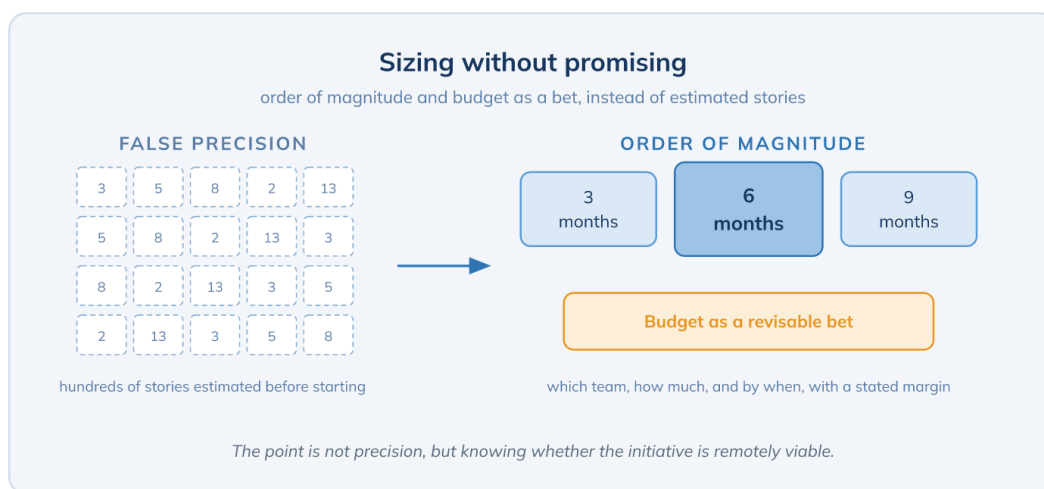
## BLOCK C · THE ALIGNMENT CONVERSATIONS

**Chapter 9. Sizing without promising** · CONSOLIDATING

*Answering the sponsor on how much it will cost, how long it will take, and with what team, as an order of magnitude and with the budget as a bet instead of estimated stories.*

**Introduction**

The last two conversations of the Inception Deck answer the sponsor's questions: how much is it going to cost and when will it be ready. They are legitimate and must be answered, but the way of answering is what distinguishes an inception from a predictive plan. In this chapter we look at what sizing by order of magnitude means, why breaking everything down into estimated stories produces false precision, and how the budget is treated as a bet that gets revised.

**9.1 Order of magnitude**

"Size it up" asks, in Rasmusson's words, for an order-of-magnitude estimate, three, six, or nine months, and warns that "the point is not precision" but knowing whether the initiative is "remotely feasible". Dan North added in 2009 the critique that still stands. Inceptions that break the whole project into hundreds of stories and score them practice a "fractal estimation" in which the more detail, the more the total tends to infinity. The inception should give a sense of size and defer detail to the last responsible moment. With that, the "what is it going to cost" conversation answers with the team needed, the approximate duration, and the budget, with the margin stated.

**9.2 The budget as a bet**

The #NoEstimates movement, with Vasco Duarte as its most visible voice, goes a step further and proposes treating the budget as a bet that is revised with what is learned, first investing a fraction to check that the software delivers the expected value. There is no need to subscribe to the whole movement to use the idea in an inception. The workshop's result is a start-up commitment with a limited horizon, and the budget can be released in tranches tied to what is learned.

### 9.3 Why it is consolidating

The critique of early estimation has taken hold in the discourse, but practice still estimates the initial cost in most initiatives; in Ambler's 2013 survey, 86% of teams made a cost estimate at initiation. Two ways of answering the sponsor therefore coexist, and the practitioner must know both, know when the organization demands a figure, and how to accompany it with its margin. Scrum Manager keeps the same clean separation between #NoEstimates and flow metrics in its Scrum Master training; agile estimation is taken here as known.

**Estimates that turn into commitments.** The most expensive antipattern of the inception is an order of magnitude given in the room circulating afterwards as a committed date. It is avoided by writing the margin next to the figure and agreeing with the sponsor when it will be revised.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Answer how much it will cost, how long it will take, and what team is needed with an order of magnitude and a stated margin.
- Explain why breaking the initiative down into estimated stories produces false precision.
- Propose to the sponsor a budget in tranches tied to what is learned.
- Prevent the inception's figures from circulating as commitments.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Estimating story by story in the inception.** Days are spent scoring a backlog that will change, and a figure with the appearance of accuracy is produced.

**Giving a figure without a margin.** The sponsor keeps the number and forgets the context; the inception becomes a promise.

**Refusing to give a size.** The sponsor needs to know whether the initiative is viable; answering that we do not estimate, without offering an order of magnitude, does not help them decide.

### Further reading

- [North — The Perils of Estimation](#)
- [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck](#)
- [Rasmusson — Agile Project Initiation Techniques \(2006\)](#)
- [Ambler — project initiation survey \(2013\)](#)

## BLOCK D · THE REFERENCE PATTERNS AND THEIR TOOLBOX

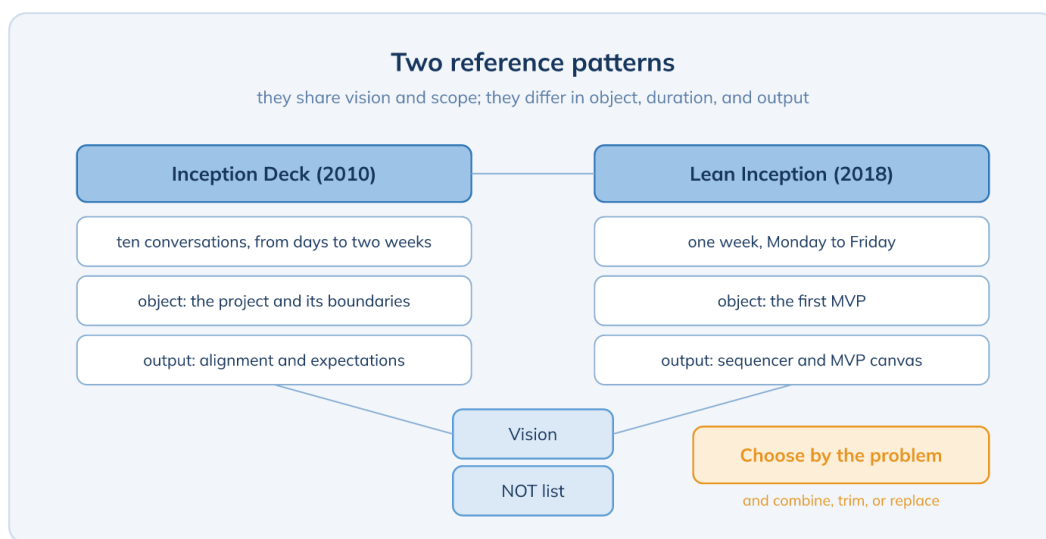
## Chapter 10. The Inception Deck: ten conversations and their flexible use

### · ESTABLISHED

*Origin, principles, and the ten conversations of the most cited start-up pattern, and how it is adapted without applying it to the letter.*

### Introduction

The Inception Deck is the most cited start-up pattern in agile practice and, at the same time, one of the most misunderstood, because it tends to be read as a list of ten slides to fill in. In this chapter we look at where it comes from, what principles govern it, what each of its conversations asks for, and how it adapts to the context without betraying it.



### 10.1 Origin and principles

It was born at ThoughtWorks. The original deck was created by Robin Gibson, and Jonathan Rasmusson systematized it and published it at the AGILE 2006 conference, with ten exercises under different names from today's and a typical duration of two weeks. The canonical version is that of *The Agile Samurai* (2010), which describes it as "ten questions and exercises you'd be crazy not to ask before starting a project", with a duration "from a couple of days to a week or two" and validity for three to six months of planning. It has had no second edition and there is no "version 2.0", although countless templates circulate.

Its principles are two. "Less is more", with one slide per conversation and the instruction to keep the deck light; and the deck as a living document, updated and revisited when major aspects of the initiative change. Rasmusson presented it as the alternative to "six months of up-front planning and speculation", that is, in the territory of just enough and not of big design up front.

### 10.2 The ten conversations

The first five answer the why: why are we here (the three reasons for the initiative), the elevator pitch, the product box, the NOT list, and meet your neighbors. The next five answer the how. Show the solution, with the architecture on one page; what keeps us up at night, with the risks worth

fighting and those that are not; size it up, by order of magnitude; what is going to give, with the trade-off sliders ranked without ties; and what is it going to cost, with team, duration, and budget. The chapters of block C develop each conversation; what matters here is the whole, because its strength lies in the sequence. Each output fits on one sheet, and the set hangs on the team's wall as an information radiator.

**Inherited pieces.** The elevator pitch uses Geoffrey Moore's positioning template, the product box comes from Luke Hohmann's Innovation Games, and the trade-off sliders are reused today by Atlassian and by the Lean Inception itself. The Deck did not invent the techniques; it put them in order.

### 10.3 Adapting it without betraying it

The deck is adapted by choosing conversations. There are one-hour express versions that drop the product box, the longest to facilitate; remote versions with one frame per question on the digital whiteboard and the agenda spread over two or three sessions; and two-day inceptions that combine it with a story map and relative estimation. The failure modes are well documented by those who facilitate it. Compressing it to two hours produces pleasant but superficial answers, running it without the sponsor gets the decisions overturned afterwards, a vague NOT list opens the door to scope creep, and filing the deck away after the start turns it into theater.

#### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Explain the origin of the Inception Deck, its two principles, and its validity horizon.
- State the ten conversations with their purpose and their output, and place them in the sequence from why to how.
- Adapt the deck to a specific context by choosing, replacing, or trimming conversations.
- Recognize the failure modes of applying it literally.

#### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Filling in ten slides.** The deck becomes a form and the conversations do not happen; the outputs exist, but there is no understanding behind them.

**Filing it away after the start.** A deck nobody looks at again is a dead document; its value lies in revisiting it when something changes.

**Applying all of it to everything.** A known extension needs neither a product box nor trade-off sliders; choosing conversations is part of the method.

#### Further reading

- [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck \(2010\)](#)
- [Rasmusson — Agile Project Initiation Techniques \(2006\)](#)
- [Scrum Manager BoK — Agile inception deck](#)
- [Workshop Weaver — facilitation guide](#)

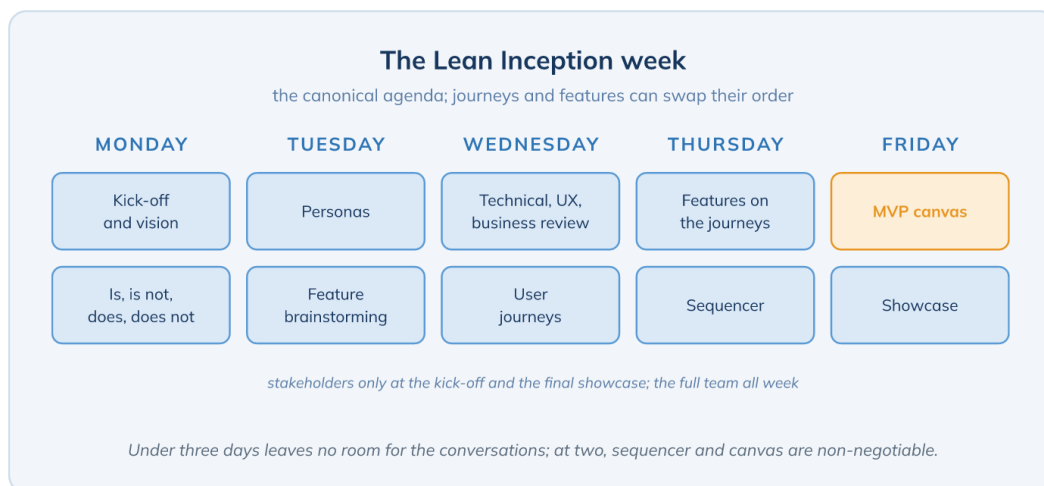
## BLOCK D · THE REFERENCE PATTERNS AND THEIR TOOLBOX

## Chapter 11. The Lean Inception: the week, its activities, and its rules · ESTABLISHED

*The canonical five-day agenda of the Lean Inception, its activities with their specific rules, and the MVP canvas that closes it.*

### Introduction

Paulo Caroli's Lean Inception was born at ThoughtWorks Brazil around 2011 as a response to inceptions of two to four weeks: concentrating in a single week the alignment on the first minimum viable product (MVP), combining design thinking with the logic of the Lean Startup. It is today the most adopted inception pattern in the Spanish-speaking world and in Brazil, with a book translated into Spanish in 2019 and an official Miro template used more than eleven thousand times. In this chapter we look at the week, each activity with its rules, and the canvas that closes it.



### 11.1 The week

The canonical agenda runs from Monday to Friday. Monday, the kick-off with the stakeholders, the product vision, and the matrix of what it is, is not, does, and does not do; the official template adds the product goals, with a business focus. Tuesday, personas and feature brainstorming. Wednesday, the technical, user experience, and business review, and the user journeys. Thursday, the features placed on the journeys and the sequencer. Friday, the MVP canvas and the final showcase to the stakeholders, who attend only the kick-off and the close, while the full product team works all week. Caroli allows swapping the order of journeys and features and defends the five days. In 2016 he wrote "no more, no less", and in 2022 he qualified that he does not recommend going below three and that, if forced down to two, the sequencer and the canvas are non-negotiable.

### 11.2 The activities and their rules

What sets the Lean Inception apart is the specificity of its rules. Personas are created in small groups, with pen and paper, to align the team on who will use the product, and Caroli warns that they are not the personas of user research. Features are generated on a matrix of goals by personas, so that each one answers to both. In the technical, UX, and business review, each card gets a color according to uncertainty (green, yellow, or red, on the double question of whether we know what it

is and how to do it) and three marks: effort as E, EE, or EEE, business value as one, two, or three dollar signs, and user value as one, two, or three hearts.

The feature sequencer orders them in waves with six rules: at most three cards per wave, at most one red, no wave with three cards that are all yellow or red, the sum of effort does not exceed five E, the sum of value is not below four dollars and four hearts, and a card that depends on another goes in a later wave. The first waves form the MVP and the following ones, the increments.

### 11.3 The MVP canvas

The MVP Canvas closes the week with seven blocks: the MVP proposal, the segmented personas it targets, the journeys it improves, the features it includes, the expected result or learning, the metrics to validate the business hypotheses, and the cost and schedule. Caroli removed in 2016 the vision block the first version had, because "the canvas is about the MVP, not about the product". Filling it in takes from half an hour to a day depending on complexity, and its underlying rule is that the MVP must validate a need of a segment of personas and a business hypothesis.

**Rules for conversing, not for calculating.** The scales and the six sequencer rules do not produce a scientific prioritization; they produce a structured conversation between business, experience, and technology. Joca Torres recalled it about the sequencer: prioritization is not an exact science and the rules are combined with judgment.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Describe the canonical Lean Inception agenda and explain why its author defends the five days and what is non-negotiable if it is shortened.
- Facilitate the activities with their rules (personas, features, review with traffic light and scales, sequencer with its six rules).
- Complete an MVP canvas with its seven blocks and explain what it validates.
- Distinguish the aligning use of personas and journeys in the inception from their use in user research.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Compressing the week without judgment.** One day of Lean Inception produces a list of features with neither review nor sequence; if cuts are needed, sequencer and canvas are kept.

**Taking the workshop's personas for research.** The Lean Inception's personas align the team; they do not replace interviews, as Caroli himself warns.

**Applying the sequencer rules as arithmetic.** The waves come out of the debate on value, effort, and uncertainty; the rules channel the conversation, they do not replace it.

## Further reading

- [Caroli — Lean Inception \(martinfowler.com\)](#)
- [Caroli — the sequencer rules](#)
- [Caroli — The MVP Canvas](#)
- [Scrum Manager BoK — Lean inception](#)

## BLOCK D · THE REFERENCE PATTERNS AND THEIR TOOLBOX

## Chapter 12. Lean Inception variants and the step to the backlog

### CONSOLIDATING

*The pattern's branches (without an MVP, two days, remote, outside software) and the backlog building that continues it.*

### Introduction

A pattern that is widely used branches out. The Lean Inception has generated variants for technical platforms, for short formats, for remote work, and for fields far from software, plus a natural continuation toward the backlog. In this chapter we look at those variants, what they keep and what they change, and why the set is still consolidating.

### 12.1 Inception without an MVP and the two-day format

For evolutions of technical platforms, where there is no MVP to define, Caroli documented in 2018 an agenda of twelve sessions that recovers the project conversations of the Inception Deck, with vision, risks and dependencies, commitments, personas, features, review, sequencer, path to production, roadmap, and final showcase. It is proof that the two patterns merge naturally. The two-day format, which organizational pressure often imposes, forces choosing the priority perspective and trimming the rest, with two non-negotiable activities: the sequencer and the MVP canvas.

### 12.2 Remote and outside software

The remote version has been "entirely possible and as important as the in-person one" since 2020, with official templates in Mural and Miro created with Caroli's team, and the 2024 *State of Lean Inception* report shows that remote and hybrid formats keep growing, with Miro and Mural as the dominant tools. The key, according to its author, is the combination of process, facilitation, and tools. Outside software, the Lean Inception has been applied to data science (replacing features with hypotheses or MVP activities), to a television program, and to human resources processes, and in 2025 Caroli proposed including artificial intelligence agents as actors in personas and journeys, with the agent experience as the fourth axis of the review; chapter 21 covers it.

### 12.3 From features to the backlog

The sequencer leaves features ordered in waves, and features are not user stories. Product Backlog Building (PBB), formulated by Fábio Aguiar with Caroli in 2021, is the step that turns them into stories with the template "as a persona, I want an action, so that benefit", through a canvas that chains problem, expectations, personas, features, and backlog items. It is the natural continuation of the inception and the bridge to the work, which chapter 18 picks up.

### 12.4 Why it is consolidating

The variants and PBB have less than five years of documented track record, adoption remains concentrated in Brazil (forty-two of the forty-three certified trainers), and the second edition of the book, announced in 2021, has not been published. The canonical part is established; its branches are still settling.

**First cut, not fake MVP.** The nature of the MVP as an experiment is taken as known from the discovery skill. What is specific to the inception is the trap of filling the canvas with the sequencer's features and turning it, without hypotheses or metrics, into a first release under another name.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Choose the Lean Inception variant the context calls for (without an MVP, two days, remote) and explain what each one keeps.
- Explain the continuity between the feature sequencer and Product Backlog Building (PBB).
- Detect when an MVP canvas has become a first release without hypotheses.
- Justify why the variants are consolidating and what signals to follow.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Forcing an MVP where there is none.** An evolution of a technical platform needs risks, commitments, and a path to production; the inception without an MVP exists for that.

**Cutting to two days by removing the sequencer.** Without sequence or canvas, the workshop does not produce the start-up plan that justifies it.

**Jumping from the sequencer to the sprint.** Features are not stories; without the PBB step the team refines in a vacuum.

## Further reading

- [Caroli — Two-day Lean Inception](#)
- [Caroli — agenda for an inception without an MVP](#)
- [Caroli — From features to user stories \(PBB\)](#)
- [Caroli — State of Lean Inception 2024](#)

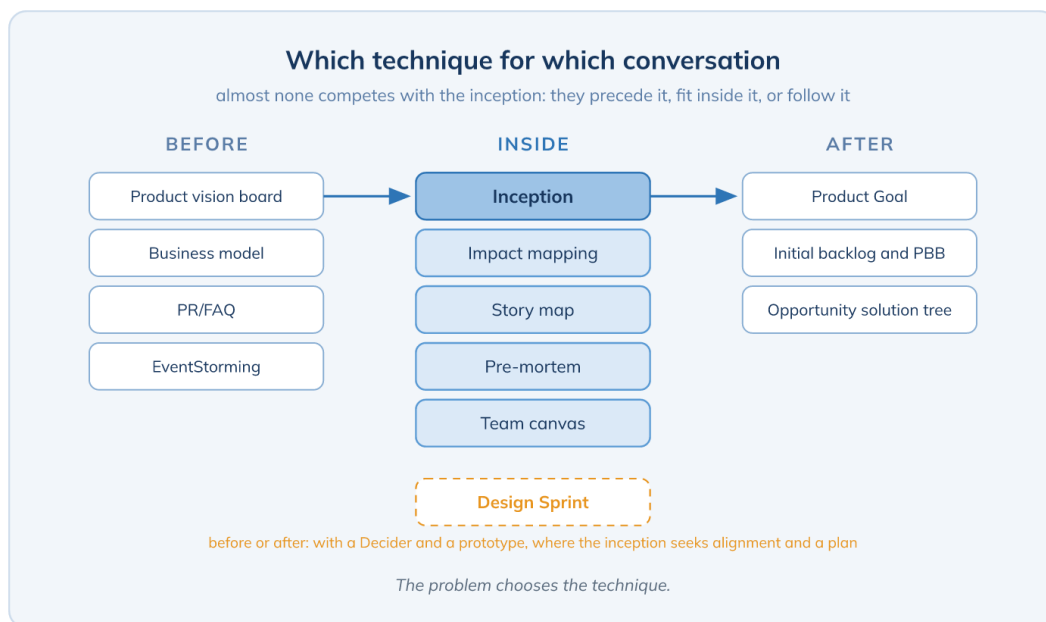
## BLOCK D · THE REFERENCE PATTERNS AND THEIR TOOLBOX

**Chapter 13. Which technique for which conversation** · ESTABLISHED

*The map of neighboring techniques by position (precede, fit inside, follow, compete) and the relationship with the Design Sprint.*

**Introduction**

Dozens of techniques orbit the inception, and the usual question, which one is best, is badly posed. Almost none competes with the inception: some precede and feed it, others fit inside it, and others follow it. In this chapter we give the map, with each technique's relationship and the criterion for combining them, and clarify the most confused relationship, the one with the Design Sprint.

**13.1 Before, inside, after**

The techniques of the business and discovery layer precede the inception and feed it. Roman Pichler's Product Vision Board, which sums up on one page vision, target group, needs, product, and business goals, is the ideal input the Product Owner brings to the room. The business model canvas and the Lean Canvas provide the economic layer. Amazon's PR/FAQ is the written alternative to the workshop for the why, the pitch, and the risks, and an approved document is an excellent input. Big Picture EventStorming gives the map of the domain when it is complex.

Fitting inside the inception are impact mapping (chapter 5), Jeff Patton's user story mapping to size and plan the first release, the pre-mortem for risks, the team canvas and working agreements, and the formulation of hypotheses from hypothesis-driven development, of the kind "we believe this capability will produce this result and we will know when we see this signal".

Following it are the first Product Goal and the initial Product Backlog, Product Backlog Building (PBB), and Teresa Torres's opportunity solution tree as an artifact of continuity, in which the tree's outcome is the inception's goal, the opportunities are what was learned about users, and the

solutions are the scope decided, now treated as hypotheses. Competing with it, on the other hand, is the traditional project charter, which we saw in chapter 2.

## 13.2 The Design Sprint

The Google Ventures Design Sprint (five days, with a 2.0 version of four) does not compete with the inception, although they are often confused. Caroli pointed out three differences: the participants (mainly the design team, versus business, users, and development), the decision (a Decider versus collective alignment), and the result (a prototype tested with users versus an MVP plan). And he admitted two valid sequences, the Design Sprint before the inception to explore the concept or after it to polish the design before building. Marty Cagan adopted it as a one-week "discovery sprint" for new teams, critical initiatives, or stuck teams. The Design Sprint method belongs to the Design Thinking skill.

**The problem chooses the technique.** Caroli describes the activities as a menu to choose from according to context. The practitioner does not apply a method; they design the inception by combining, trimming, and replacing techniques according to the problem at hand.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Place each neighboring technique as preceding, integrated in, or following the inception and explain what it contributes in that position.
- Explain the three differences between Design Sprint and Lean Inception and the two valid sequences for combining them.
- Design an inception by combining techniques according to the problem, without developing those that belong to other skills.
- Use the opportunity solution tree as an artifact of continuity after the inception.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Choosing the technique by fashion.** A Design Sprint to align a new team produces a prototype and leaves team, risks, and scope unresolved.

**Repeating inside the inception what is already done.** If there is a vision board or an approved PR/FAQ, it is brought as input; redoing it in the room wears people out.

**Applying a whole method.** The menu exists to choose from; applying every dynamic of the Lean Inception or the Deck to any initiative is the antipattern this chapter prevents.

### Further reading

- [Caroli — How to plan an inception](#)
- [Caroli — Design Sprint and Lean Inception](#)
- [Cagan — Discovery Sprints](#)
- [Scrum Manager BoK — Design sprint](#)

## BLOCK E · FACILITATING THE INCEPTION

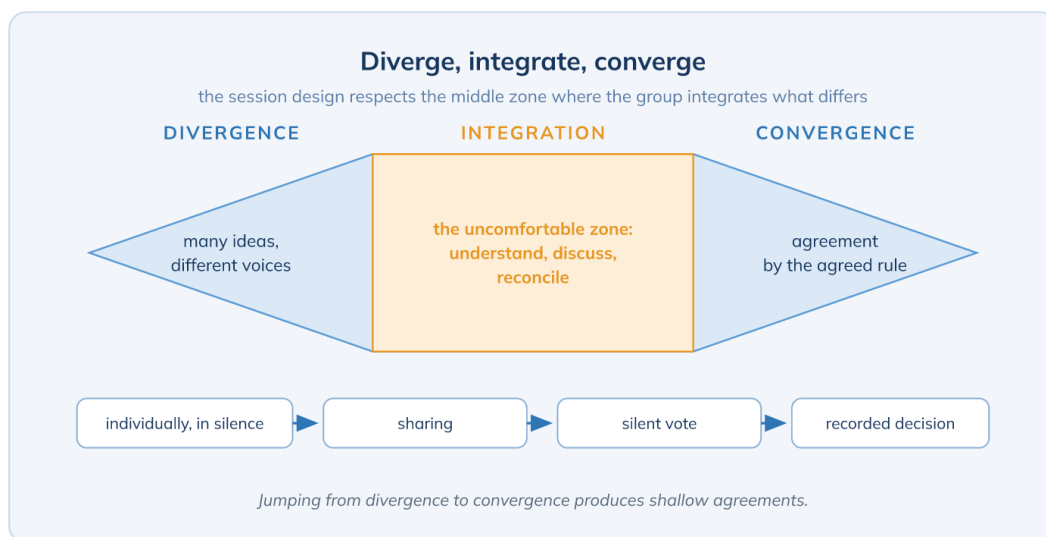
## Chapter 14. Facilitating versus directing: neutrality, dynamics, and pace

### · ESTABLISHED

*The facilitator's role, the design of the session in divergence, integration, and convergence, silent individual work, and looking after the pace.*

### Introduction

The result of an inception is produced in the room, so the quality of the facilitation is the quality of the result. Facilitating is not steering the conversation toward a conclusion, but running the process so that the group reaches its own. In this chapter we look at the facilitator's neutrality, the design of the dynamics with their uncomfortable zone in the middle, the evidence in favor of silent individual work, and looking after the pace.



### 14.1 Neutral on content, responsible for the process

Roger Schwarz's classic definition still holds: the facilitator is "substantively neutral", with no authority over the decisions, and diagnoses and intervenes to help the group decide better. Neutral on content does not mean passive on process, and confusing the two produces the antipattern Doc List called "Switzerland", the facilitator who does not intervene. The International Association of Facilitators sets six competencies, among them planning appropriate processes, creating a participatory environment, and guiding the group to useful outcomes, and the agile facilitation learning outcomes add maintaining neutrality and clarifying decision authority. When the Product Owner facilitates, they temporarily give up defending content; if they cannot, they delegate the facilitation.

### 14.2 Diverge, integrate, converge

Sam Kaner described the dynamics of every participatory decision as a diamond, with a divergence phase in which many ideas and different voices appear, an uncomfortable middle zone he called the "groan zone", in which the group struggles to understand and integrate what differs, and a convergence phase toward agreement. Every facilitator's temptation is to jump from divergence to

convergence, and the result is shallow agreements that come undone on the way out. Designing the session means reserving explicit time for integration, with timeboxes, and choosing reusable structures for each step: 1-2-4-All so that every voice comes in, Min Specs to trim, Note-and-Vote to decide without open debate, and Nine Whys for the purpose. Liberating Structures gathers forty-three of these microstructures with their timing sheets.

### 14.3 First in silence, then together

The rule best backed by evidence is to have each person work in silence before sharing. Diehl and Stroebe showed in 1987 that groups generating ideas aloud produce less than the same individuals working alone, because of production blocking; whoever speaks first anchors the rest; and the groupthink described by Irving Janis leads to self-censorship and the illusion of unanimity. Hence Jake Knapp's "Note-and-Vote" practice and the "together, alone" principle of the workshop school, according to which everyone works individually toward a shared goal and only afterwards shares. In an inception that means writing the risks, the reasons, or the features in silence before reading them out, and voting in silence before talking.

### 14.4 Pace and energy

A one-day inception has pace or has no result. The sequence alternates dynamics, ten-minute breaks between blocks reduce accumulated stress (Microsoft measured it with electroencephalography in 2021), and the facilitator adapts the agenda on the fly without losing the timeboxes. Caroli recommends spreading the inception over several days to respect people's energy, and facilitation guides agree on scheduling no more than three or four hours of focused work per day.

**The group is the source.** The facilitator's neutrality rests on a conviction, that the group has the capacity to reach its own answer. The facilitator designs the conditions; the content belongs to the group.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Exercise neutrality on content and responsibility for the process, and recognize when the Product Owner role requires delegating the facilitation.
- Design a session with explicit divergence, integration, and convergence and choose the right structure for each step.
- Apply silent individual work before sharing and explain the evidence that backs it.
- Manage the pace with timeboxes, breaks, and changes of dynamic, and adapt the agenda without losing it.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Skipping the uncomfortable zone.** The group goes from generating to voting without integrating; the agreements come undone as soon as the group disperses.

**Brainstorming aloud.** Whoever speaks first anchors the group and the quiet voices are lost; writing first in silence prevents it.

**The absent facilitator.** Neutrality on content is not passivity on process; a facilitator who does not intervene leaves the workshop to the most talkative person.

### Further reading

- [IAF — Core Competencies](#)
- [Corrigan — the diamond of participation \(Kaner\)](#)
- [Liberating Structures — 1-2-4-All](#)
- [Knapp — Note-and-vote](#)

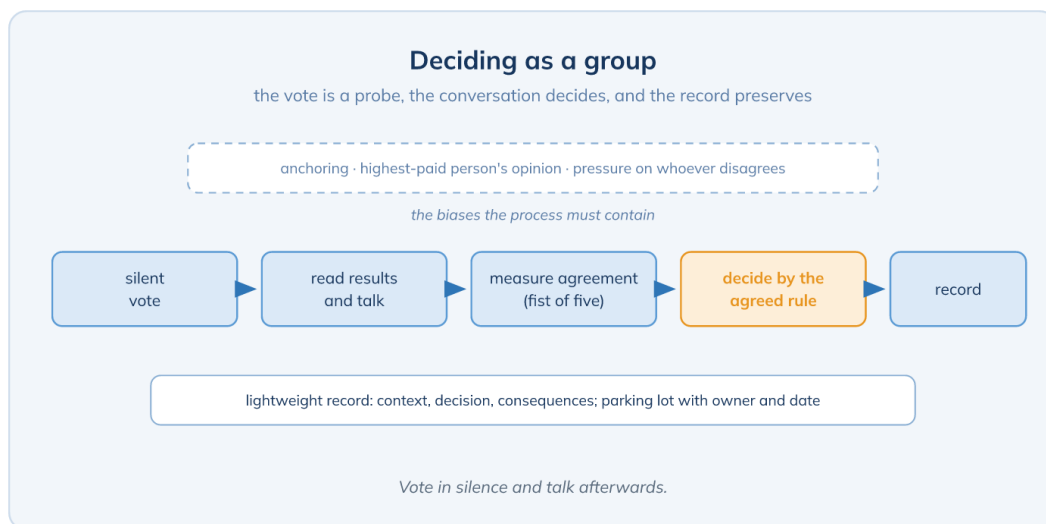
## BLOCK E · FACILITATING THE INCEPTION

**Chapter 15. Participation, power, and group decisions** · ESTABLISHED

*Containing the weight of hierarchy in the room and making decisions by the agreed rule: silent vote, measuring agreement, consent, decider, and record.*

**Introduction**

The sponsor in the room weighs more than they speak. Anchoring, the highest-paid person's opinion, and pressure on whoever disagrees operate even when nobody intends them, and the facilitator who does not contain them gets the apparent alignment of a group that has actually gone quiet. In this chapter we look at how participation is balanced and how decisions that withstand hierarchy are made, with the vote as a probe, the conversation as the decision, and the record as memory.

**15.1 Hierarchy, anchoring, and psychological safety**

Three documented mechanisms distort a room. Anchoring, by which whoever speaks first sets the frame for the others. The highest-paid person's opinion ("HiPPO", the term Ronny Kohavi coined to explain why organizations do not experiment), which prevails without arguments. And pressure on whoever disagrees, which Irving Janis described as groupthink. The countermeasures are known: the leader refrains from opining at the start, voting is silent and simultaneous, the speaking order starts with the most junior profiles, and the facilitator looks after psychological safety, that shared belief that the team is a safe place to take interpersonal risks which Amy Edmondson linked to team learning. In large groups, breakouts in pairs or foursomes give a voice to those who would not take it in plenary.

**15.2 Voting is probing**

Dot voting is the most widespread technique and the worst used. Its biases are documented: persuaded voting when someone campaigns, split voting between similar options, and bandwagon effects when the dots are visible. So are the mitigations: vote in silence, after reading time, with explicit criteria and with votes per person equal to a quarter of the number of options, and cluster

duplicates first. The vote does not decide; it shows where the group stands, and the conversation that follows about the results is what decides. To measure the degree of agreement, Jean Tabaka's fist of five (from the enthusiastic five to the one that threatens the initiative, with the threshold agreed beforehand) and Kaner's gradients of agreement, which distinguish abstention from "I don't like it but I'll support it", make false consensus visible.

### 15.3 Deciding by the rule and recording

With the rule agreed during preparation (chapter 4), the decision is made. If by consent, reasoned objections are sought and distinguished from concerns, which are recorded without blocking. If there is a decider, they decide after listening, in the manner of the Design Sprint's supervote, and the group practices the "disagree and commit" that Jeff Bezos popularized. In any case, the decision is recorded with its context, the alternative chosen, and its consequences, in the lightweight format of Michael Nygard's architecture decision records, which has jumped to product decisions. The parking lot collects what is not for now and is closed at the end with who, what, and when, so that it does not become, as Nielsen Norman Group warns, "a graveyard for questions we don't want to address".

**Disagree and commit.** A decision well made in the inception is one that whoever did not share it can support because their objection was heard, recorded, and answered. It does not require them to change their mind; it requires the process to have been clean.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Recognize anchoring, the highest-paid person's opinion, and pressure on whoever disagrees, and apply their countermeasures.
- Run a dot voting round with its biases in mind and use it as a probe before the conversation.
- Measure the degree of agreement with fist of five or gradients of agreement and make false consensus visible.
- Apply the agreed decision rule, record each decision with context and consequences, and close the parking lot with an owner and a date.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**The sponsor speaks first.** Their frame anchors the group and the rest of the session confirms what they said.

**Voting and calling it decided.** The result of a vote is a data point; without a follow-up conversation or a rule, it is not a decision.

**The graveyard parking lot.** Parked items with no owner or date never come back, and parking is perceived as contempt.

## Further reading

- [NN/g — Dot voting](#)
- [Cohn — Four quick ways to gain or assess team consensus](#)
- [Sociocracy 3.0 — Consent decision-making](#)
- [Nygard — Documenting architecture decisions](#)
- [NN/g — Parking lots](#)

## BLOCK E · FACILITATING THE INCEPTION

## Chapter 16. Remote and hybrid facilitation · CONSOLIDATING

*The rules of remote (short sessions, one board moderator, pairs, asynchronous, breaks) and those of hybrid, the hardest format, with their tools.*

### Introduction

The remote inception is today as common as the in-person one and, according to the author of the Lean Inception, as important; hybrid, on the other hand, is the hardest format and the one facilitators like least. In this chapter we look at the rules practice has settled for remote, why hybrid fails and how it is corrected, and which tools dominate, with the warning that the codification of this competency lags behind practice.

### 16.1 Remote: the settled rules

Zoom and Teams as rooms, and Miro and Mural as whiteboards, are the dominant facilitation tools, with the official Lean Inception templates on both whiteboards since 2020. The rules practice has settled are few and firm. Sessions of no more than three hours, spread over several days. A single board moderator, which prevents twenty people from moving notes at once. Breakouts in pairs and not in threes, because in a pair you are either present or presenting. Asynchronous work before (onboarding to the tool, recorded tutorials, homework) and after. More breaks than in person, because video call fatigue is real and has known causes (excessive eye contact, constant self-view, reduced mobility). Written instructions on the board itself, a plan B for technical failures, and music during individual work. Caroli sums it up: what works is the combination of process, facilitation, and tools, not the tool alone.

### 16.2 Hybrid: the hard format

In hybrid, remote participants speak up and influence less, and it is not an impression. A 2023 study measured that they perceive less participation and influence in decisions and less effectiveness, and other work documents that they feel they are "presenting" rather than collaborating. Only 7.5% of facilitators regularly work in hybrid, and it is the format they like least. The rules that correct it invert the logic of the room. The whiteboard is always digital, even if there are people in the room; remote participants speak first; there is a co-facilitator dedicated to the remote side, watching the chat and the raised hands; each person in the room has their own camera and microphone; and a turn queue is respected that those present also use.

### 16.3 Why it is consolidating

Practice is massive and the rules are convergent, but their codification lags behind. The agile facilitation learning outcomes revised in 2025 do not mention remote facilitation, and the most cited guides come from the tool vendors themselves. This skill treats it as a competency in its own right because an inception without it is today the exception.

**Traceability in any mode.** Remote or hybrid, the digital board leaves a record of decisions and of how the notes evolved that the paper wall did not provide. Making use of it is part of the method, because at the close, the board is the minutes.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Design a remote inception with short sessions, a board moderator, pairs, asynchronous work, and breaks.
- Recognize why hybrid penalizes remote participants and apply the rules that correct it.
- Choose and prepare the tools (room and whiteboard) and the participants' prior onboarding.
- Use the digital board as a traceable record of decisions.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Transferring the in-person agenda as is.** Five eight-hour days on a video call exhaust the group by the second day.

**Hybrid with a physical whiteboard.** Remote participants see a blurry wall through the camera and stop participating.

**Everyone moving notes.** Twenty cursors on the board produce chaos; a board moderator and clear turns prevent it.

## Further reading

- [SessionLab — State of Facilitation 2025](#)
- [Mural — How to run a remote workshop](#)
- [Miro and AJ&Smart — Remote facilitation](#)
- [W3C — Hybrid meetings](#)

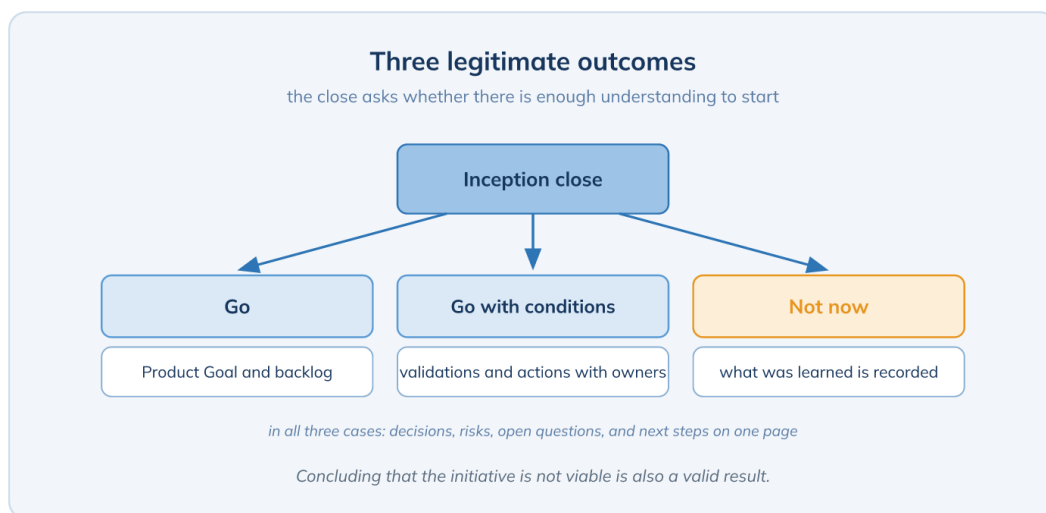
## BLOCK F · CLOSING, HANDING OVER, AND REALIGNING

## Chapter 17. Closing the inception: what must remain, the three outcomes, and the lightweight record · ESTABLISHED

*The essential outputs, the closing criterion with its three legitimate outcomes, and a record that fits on one page and reaches those who were not there.*

### Introduction

An inception ends when the group can answer one question, whether there is enough understanding to start, and that answer admits three forms. In this chapter we look at what must remain at the end, the three legitimate outcomes of the close, including not going ahead, and how the result is recorded and communicated without turning it into a heavy document.



### 17.1 What must remain

The Scrum Manager BoK sets the essential outputs: a shared vision the participants can explain, a scope with its exclusions, the risks with their mitigation, and the agreements on start-up and communication. To these are added the decisions made with their rule, the open questions with owner and date, and the next steps. The criterion for accepting each output is simple. If any participant can explain it to someone who was not there, it exists; if its author has to explain it, not yet.

### 17.2 Three legitimate outcomes

The close asks whether there is enough understanding to start, and the answer can take three forms. Go, with the first Product Goal and the initial backlog as the output toward the work. Go with conditions, when validations or decisions remain that must be resolved before committing, each with an owner and a date. And not now, when the conversation has shown that the initiative is not viable, not mature, or not worth the investment. José Manuel Beas wrote it in 2013 in the first text in Spanish on the practice, and it remains the outcome least understood by sponsors: concluding that the project is not viable is a valid result. The UK government's Discovery formalizes it as an explicit decision to continue or not, and the Inception Deck itself, in "size it up", asks whether the

initiative is remotely feasible. An inception that can only end in "go ahead" is not aligning; it is ratifying.

### 17.3 The lightweight record

Not documenting is the critical mistake the BoK points out, and its opposite, producing a heavy document nobody reads again, is the second. The record of an inception fits on one page, plus the photographed posters or the exported digital board. It contains the vision, the scope with exclusions, the risks and constraints, the decisions with their context, the open questions, the pending assumptions, the closed parking lot, and the actions with an owner. Agile Alliance reminds us that an agile charter "should fit on a single page; anything longer will be seen as yet another heavy document that is rarely looked at". And it is communicated to those who were not there, with the same vision sentence the group repeats, because alignment that does not reach the absent is lost at the first meeting with them.

**Follow-up is the hard part.** More than a third of facilitators admit that their greatest difficulty is keeping the momentum after the session, and almost half point to the lack of follow-up conversations as a barrier to measuring impact. The inception does not end in the room; it ends when every action has an owner and the first review has a date.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Check at the close that the essential outputs exist and that any participant can explain them.
- Steer the close toward one of the three outcomes and defend "not now" before the sponsor when the conversation justifies it.
- Produce a one-page record with decisions, risks, open questions, assumptions, parking lot, and actions with an owner.
- Communicate the result to those who were not there without losing the alignment achieved.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Closing without next steps.** The workshop ends with energy and without owned actions; two weeks later nobody remembers what was decided.

**Turning the record into a report.** Nobody reads thirty pages of minutes; one page and the posters, yes.

**Ruling out not now.** A sponsor who only accepts "go ahead" turns the inception into a formality; the inception that can say "no" is the one that is worth it.

## Further reading

- [Scrum Manager BoK — Inception](#)
- [Beas — Agile Inception \(2013\)](#)
- [GDS — How the discovery phase works](#)
- [SessionLab — State of Facilitation 2026](#)
- [NN/g — Parking lots](#)

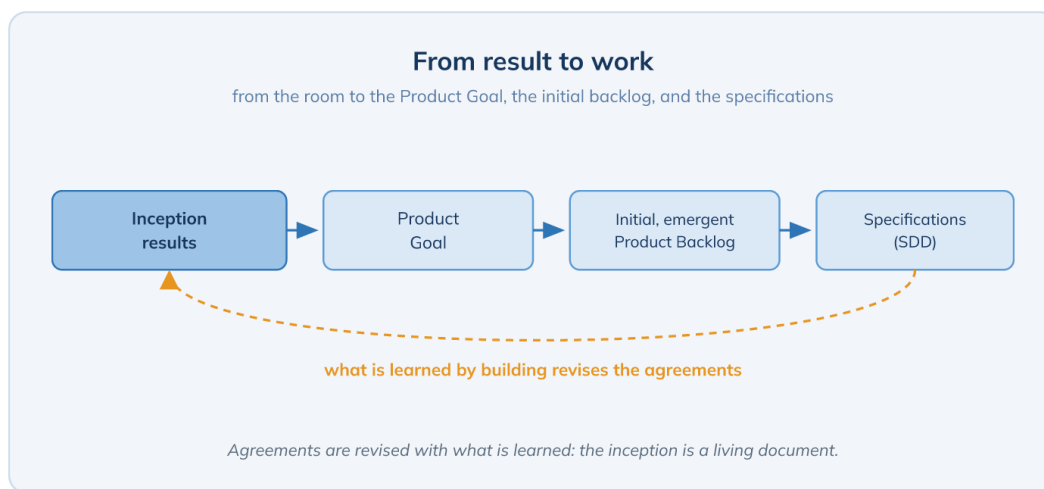
## BLOCK F · CLOSING, HANDING OVER, AND REALIGNING

## Chapter 18. From result to work: Product Goal, initial backlog, and specifications · ESTABLISHED

*How the inception's result passes into the first Product Goal, the emergent backlog, and the specifications, without becoming a contract.*

### Introduction

The inception is worth what happens afterwards. Its results have to become the goal the team pursues, the backlog it starts working with and, increasingly, the specifications that guide the work with artificial intelligence. In this chapter we look at that transition and the rule that governs it, that the agreements are revised with what is learned.



### 18.1 The first Product Goal and the initial backlog

The 2020 Scrum Guide gave the team an explicit Product Goal, "a future state of the product which can serve as a target for the Scrum Team to plan against", which lives in the Product Backlog and from which the rest of the backlog emerges. That goal has to be built somewhere, and the inception is the natural place: the why, the vision, and the scope of the workshop are distilled into a goal the team can pursue for months. From the scope come the first backlog items. If the Lean Inception was used, the sequencer's waves give the sequence and Product Backlog Building (PBB) turns features into stories; if a story map was used, the top slice is the first release. In both cases the backlog is initial and emergent, and the pending validations are formulated as testable hypotheses, of the kind "we believe this capability will produce this result and we will know when we see this signal".

### 18.2 From the inception to the specifications

In teams that work with spec-driven development, the inception's conversations are the raw material of the first specifications. The purpose, the scope with its exclusions, the constraints, and the risks are exactly what a specification needs as context before asking anything of an artificial intelligence agent, which is why Scrum Manager recommends the combined Agile Inception and SDD course, two skills that define the "what" before building. The SDD skill covers the method; here it is

enough to know that the inception's record is not filed away but becomes the header of the specifications.

### 18.3 A living document

The risk of the transition is freezing the agreements. Rasmusson treated the deck as a living document revisited when something major changes, and *Liftoff* sets the rule of "good enough for now". In practice that means three things. The backlog emerges and is refined, no decision of the inception stands above what is learned by building, and inspection and adaptation also apply to the workshop's result. When what is learned invalidates a central agreement, it is time to go back to the room, and that is the subject of the next chapter.

**The record is not filed away.** The inception's result is carried into the backlog, the Product Goal, and the specifications; the one-page document is the reference that gets revised, not the file that gets stored.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Distill from the inception's result a first Product Goal the team can pursue.
- Turn the scope into an initial, emergent Product Backlog, with the pending validations formulated as hypotheses.
- Use the inception's record as context for the first specifications in teams that work with SDD.
- Keep the agreements open to revision and detect when what is learned requires going back to the room.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Exhaustive backlog on the way out.** Turning the whole scope into detailed stories before the first sprint fixes what should have emerged.

**Frozen agreements.** Treating the inception's record as a contract prevents adapting when the first increment teaches something.

**Losing the thread to the specifications.** The team writes specifications from scratch and ignores the purpose, scope, and risks that were already agreed.

### Further reading

- [Scrum Guide 2020 — Product Goal](#)
- [Caroli — From features to user stories \(PBB\)](#)
- [O'Reilly — Hypothesis-driven development](#)
- [Skill Arena — SDD in agile teams](#)

## BLOCK F · CLOSING, HANDING OVER, AND REALIGNING

## Chapter 19. Re-inception: realigning an initiative already under way ·

### CONSOLIDATING

*When to return to the room and how to run a trimmed inception on the earlier results.*

### Introduction

Initiatives drift, teams change, and hypotheses are invalidated, and no initial inception holds up indefinitely. Realigning an initiative already under way is a different competency from starting it, less codified and with scattered sources, which is why this entry is consolidating. In this chapter we look at the triggers of a re-inception and its format.

### 19.1 When to return to the room

Five triggers justify a re-inception. The effort has gone astray, the case *Liftoff* describes as "refocusing an effort that has drifted". The team's composition has changed significantly, and the new team does not share the old one's agreements. The MVP hypotheses have been invalidated and a pivot is needed, with a change of strategy without a change of vision. The Product Goal is abandoned, something the Scrum Guide expressly provides for when it asks the team to fulfill or abandon a goal before taking on the next. And a major release of an existing product arrives, with new features that have to be aligned with what is already in production. The team canvas in its basic version is recommended precisely to "adjust course", and some teams repeat it every two or three months.

### 19.2 How it is done

A re-inception is a trimmed inception, sized with the same proportionality criterion of chapter 3 but with one advantage, that a baseline already exists. The posters or the board of the previous inception are recovered and walked through, marking what still holds, what has changed, and what has to be reopened. For an existing product, the practice of the Brazilian Lean Inception community classifies the current flow into four quadrants, keep, add, improve, and remove, before sequencing. A pre-mortem of the new plan closes the workshop. What is not reopened is kept; a re-inception that starts from scratch disregards what was learned and exhausts the team.

### 19.3 Why it is consolidating

Re-chartering has been in *Liftoff* since 2016 and the Scrum Guide contemplates abandoning the Product Goal, but there is no canonical re-inception pattern comparable to the Inception Deck or the Lean Inception; what exists are scattered practices of teams and facilitators. This entry synthesizes them, and it is best treated as a guide to judgment rather than a closed method.

**Returning is not starting over.** The re-inception takes the earlier results as a baseline and reopens only what has changed. Its first step is always to reread, not to redesign.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Recognize the triggers of a re-inception (drift, team change, invalidated hypotheses, abandonment of the Product Goal, major release).
- Design a trimmed re-inception that takes the earlier results as a baseline and reopens only what has changed.
- Apply the keep, add, improve, and remove classification to an existing product before sequencing.
- Explain why the practice is consolidating and what sources support it.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Carrying on without returning to the room.** The team changes, the hypothesis falls, and nobody realigns; the misalignment shows up as conflict months later.

**Starting from scratch.** Repeating the full inception ignores the baseline and exhausts those who were already there.

**Confusing re-inception with retrospective.** The retrospective improves how the team works; the re-inception realigns what is built and why.

### Further reading

- [Larsen and Nies — Liftoff \(2nd ed.\)](#)
- [Team Canvas — using it to adjust course](#)
- [Scrum Guide 2020](#)
- [Caroli — How to plan an inception](#)

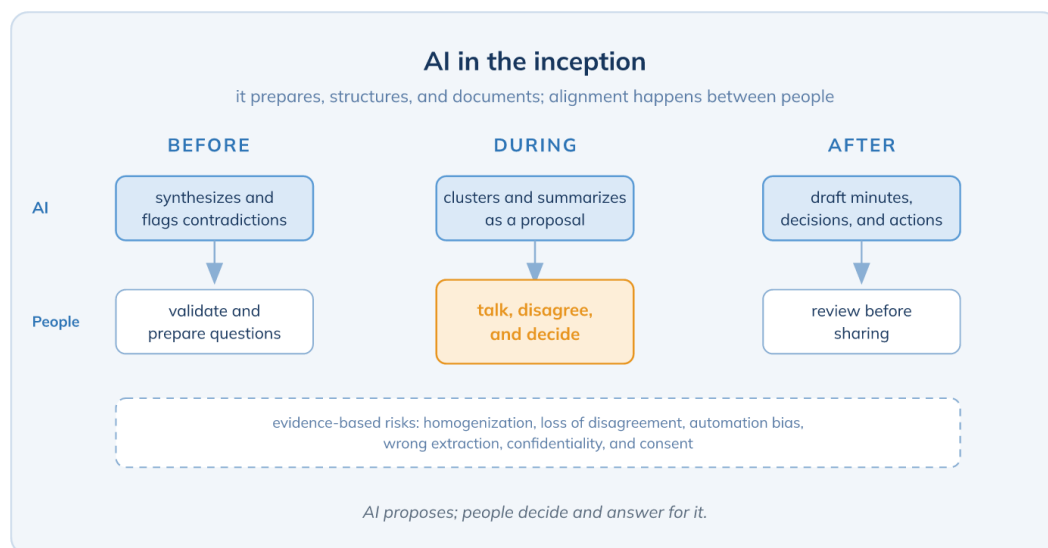
## BLOCK G · THE INCEPTION IN THE AGE OF AI

## Chapter 20. AI before, during, and after: preparing, synthesizing, and documenting with human review · CONSOLIDATING

*What artificial intelligence does today at each moment of the inception, with what tools and what limits, and why human review is the minimum practice.*

### Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence has entered workshops through the door of the tools: whiteboards cluster and summarize notes, meeting assistants transcribe and extract decisions and actions, and three out of four facilitators use it to prepare sessions. In this chapter we look at what it really does before, during, and after an inception, with what documented limits, and the practice nobody disputes, that a person reviews before anything circulates.



### 20.1 Before

Before the workshop, AI synthesizes the prior documentation, spots contradictions between documents or between stakeholders, prepares questions and draft agendas, and helps define evaluation criteria. SessionLab calls it the facilitator's "blind spot detector" and proposes the sandwich rule, with human input, AI processing, and human refinement, and two conditions: always identify what was generated by AI, and take care of the privacy of what is uploaded. Paulo Caroli publishes prompts for the Lean Inception with an explicit stance, AI as a thinking partner to organize context and identify ambiguities, never to generate ready-made answers, and uses his own assistant, ChatMVP, to review hypotheses and raise questions about the MVP canvas.

Synthetic personas, users simulated by a model, deserve a warning. Nielsen Norman Group compared them with real studies and found flattery, overpromising, and generic lists with no behavioral data. They serve to generate hypotheses and prepare interview questions, and they neither replace the user's voice nor validate anything.

## 20.2 During

During the workshop, digital whiteboards cluster notes by topic and sentiment and summarize selections or whole boards, and the vendors themselves warn that the clustering is a proposal the group validates (Mural recalls that "two people would cluster differently" and offers a preview; FigJam describes it as "one step within a larger process"). AI can generate alternatives for discussion, with their origin marked and in bounded volume, because its outputs are much longer than human ones and can drown convergence; Nielsen Norman Group proposes setting the criteria before generating and co-writing the prompts in small groups so that there is still conversation. What does not exist as a product, although it is achievable with prompts over the transcript, is the living glossary and the detection of agenda topics not addressed. And there is a practical limit: on some whiteboards external guests cannot use AI, which matters in an inception with a client.

## 20.3 After

Meeting assistants produce a summary, decisions, and actions from the transcript. Their measured accuracy is high on key data and low on what matters most, because actions are extracted with a hit rate of between 62% and 87% and they can record as a decision the opposite of what was decided. Review by a person before sharing is therefore the minimum documented practice. In the step to the backlog the evidence is consistent: models generate user stories with a style comparable to human ones but less diverse and meeting acceptance criteria worse, whereas they evaluate the quality of a story well when given clear criteria. AI is a better reviewer than author of the backlog. And consent has stopped being a courtesy. A 2025 lawsuit against a meeting assistant for recording without consent and the obligation Zoom imposes since 2026 to accept a notice before staying in the meeting set the standard, which comes down to notifying everyone, deciding what is not recorded, and knowing which provider processes the audio.

**The sandwich.** Human input, AI processing, human refinement. Everything AI produces for an inception carries its origin marked and passes through a person before the group sees it or before it leaves the room.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Use AI to synthesize documentation, spot contradictions, and prepare questions and agenda, marking its origin and taking care of privacy.
- Use automatic clustering and summarizing as a proposal the group validates, with criteria set beforehand and bounded volume.
- Review the draft minutes, decisions, and actions before sharing them, and use AI as a reviewer of the backlog rather than as its author.
- Obtain the participants' consent and decide what is not recorded.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Synthetic personas as research.** The workshop decides on simulated users who say what people want to hear.

**Sharing the automatic minutes without review.** A badly extracted action or an inverted decision circulates with an air of officialdom.

**Recording without notice.** Beyond the damage to trust, today it is a legal risk.

### Further reading

- [NN/g — Facilitating AI-enhanced workshops](#)
- [SessionLab — GenAI for facilitators](#)
- [Kitces — accuracy of AI meeting assistants](#)
- [Caroli — ChatMVP](#)
- [NN/g — Synthetic users](#)

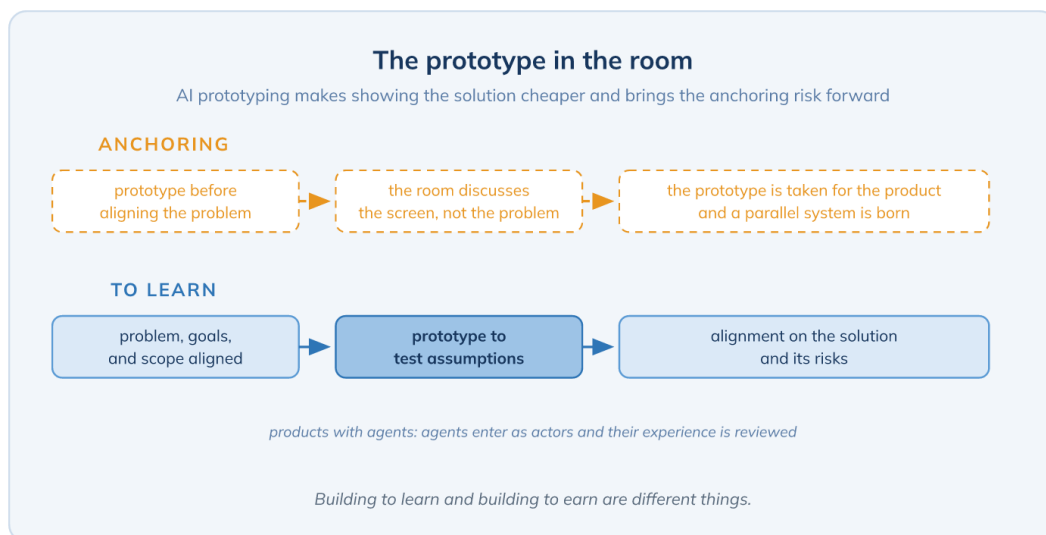
## BLOCK G · THE INCEPTION IN THE AGE OF AI

**Chapter 21. The prototype and the agents in the room** · EMERGING

*How AI prototyping changes the conversation about the solution and the MVP, with its three risks, and how AI agents enter the inception of products that include them.*

**Introduction**

Until recently, a clickable prototype was a deliverable that came after the inception. Today it is generated in minutes with AI prototyping tools and can be in the room during the workshop. That strengthens the "show the solution" conversation and, at the same time, brings forward risks that used to arrive later. In this chapter we look at what changes, what those risks are, and how AI agents enter the inception of products that incorporate them. All of it is less than two years old, which is why it sits at the frontier.

**21.1 The prototype in the room**

Figma Make has been generally available since July 2025 and sits in Trial on the 2026 Thoughtworks Technology Radar, and prompt-to-app tools such as v0, Lovable, Bolt, or Replit let a Product Owner with no code stand up a multi-page prototype in an afternoon. Scrum Manager's Product Owner guide already covers it, and the prototype has stopped being the bottleneck. For the inception it means that "show the solution" can rest on something clickable, that the conversation about the first cut can test assumptions in the room, and that the MVP as a learning artifact gets cheaper.

**21.2 Three risks**

The first is anchoring. A pretty prototype before problem and goals have been aligned biases the conversation, the room discusses the screen and not the problem, and that is consistent with the evidence on how AI homogenizes contributions, because exposing the group to a proposal reduces the diversity of what it contributes. The rule is to align the why and the scope first and bring the prototype afterwards, to test assumptions. The second is confusing the prototype with the product. Marty Cagan put it in November 2025 with regard to these tools: prototypes are for "building to learn" and products for "building to earn", and a real product covers dozens of use cases and

demands reliability, telemetry, security, and integrations the prototype does not have. The third is organizational, and Thoughtworks names it in its 2026 Radar as an antipattern, "AI-accelerated shadow IT", parallel systems created by non-programmers with agentic tools and without governance. An inception that leaves with a prototype taken for a product has manufactured exactly that.

### 21.3 Products with agents

When the product incorporates artificial intelligence agents, the inception changes in another way. Caroli proposed in 2025 treating agents as actors with their own goals and limits, including them in the personas and user journeys, and adding the agent experience (AX) as the fourth axis of the review alongside business, technical, and user experience, because "a poor agent experience leads to agent failure, just as a poor user experience drives users away". He adds that the build, measure, learn cycle is even more necessary, because agents' behavior varies in production, and that thin slices are the way to learn early.

**First the why, then the screen.** The AI prototype is a great instrument for the inception when it arrives after aligning problem, goals, and scope, and a big problem when it arrives before. The order of the conversations has not changed; what has changed is the cost of skipping it.

### What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Decide when to bring an AI prototype into the inception and how to use it to test assumptions without anchoring the group.
- Distinguish building to learn from building to earn and explain why a prototype is not a product.
- Recognize the risk of AI-accelerated shadow IT when a prototype is taken for a product.
- Include AI agents as actors in personas and journeys, and the agent experience in the review, in products that incorporate them.

### Common mistakes and antipatterns

**The prototype before the why.** The room aligns on a screen and discovers afterwards that it solved a different problem.

**From prototype to production.** The prototype generated in the inception is deployed without reliability, telemetry, or security.

**Ignoring agents as actors.** In a product with agents, journeys with only people leave out the actor that fails most.

### Further reading

- [Cagan — Prototypes vs Products](#)
- [Thoughtworks — Technology Radar, techniques](#)
- [Caroli — Lean Inception for AI agents](#)
- [Figma — Figma Make general availability](#)

## BLOCK G · THE INCEPTION IN THE AGE OF AI

## Chapter 22. Evidence-based risks and the principle of use · EMERGING

*What recent evidence shows about AI in group decision-making and the principle that governs its use in the inception.*

### Introduction

The inception is a workshop whose value consists of surfacing different views and reconciling them, and generative artificial intelligence is a technology that tends to homogenize. That tension is not an intuition: it is measured by a series of studies from 2024 to 2026 worth knowing before deciding what role to give it in the room. In this chapter we gather that evidence, the risks that follow from it, and the principle of use that closes the skill.

### 22.1 What the evidence shows

Homogenization. A study published in *Science Advances* in 2024 found that AI-assisted ideas make each individual contribution better and the collective's contributions more similar to each other, a social dilemma between individual gain and loss of diversity; another paper from the same year also showed that those who use AI feel less responsible for their ideas, and a 2026 review in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* describes the homogenizing effect of the models on expression and reasoning. Automated facilitation. An experiment with 1,475 participants, published in 2026, showed that a facilitator based on a language model increases equitable participation and the information shared, but does not improve the quality of the decision, and the automatic devil's advocate does not change minds. Automation bias. The fluency of natural language leads to accepting outputs without examining them, and the extraction of decisions and actions is what meeting assistants get wrong most. Confidentiality and consent, covered in chapter 20, complete the picture.

### 22.2 The risks for an inception

From that evidence follow the workshop's own risks. The false sense of alignment, when an automatic summary smooths over disagreement and presents as consensus what was an open discussion. The loss of dissent in the synthesis, for the same reason. The homogenization of contributions, if the group works with AI before having thought on its own. Invented information in minutes and summaries. And the delegation of human decisions to a tool that, according to the evidence, does not improve them. The countermeasures are those of block E applied with more rigor: silent individual work before any help, recording divergences as such before asking for a synthesis, marking what was generated by AI, and reviewing everything before it circulates.

### 22.3 The principle of use

The principle is simple and coincides with what the agile institutions say, from Scrum.org, which insists that AI-driven speed does not equal agility, to the Scrum Guide Expansion Pack, according to which "AI can recommend, but humans always decide", and the Agile Business Consortium, which reserves for AI "a limited supporting role". In an inception, AI prepares, structures, and documents, and alignment happens between people. AI proposes; people decide and answer for it.

**What AI makes cheaper and what it does not.** AI makes cheaper everything in an inception that is production, that is, documents, canvases, prototypes, and minutes. It does not make cheaper what gives it meaning, which is aligning people and deciding what not to do, and that is why it shifts the value of the workshop, and of the practitioner, toward what remains human.

## What you should be able to do

Having mastered this chapter, a professional is able to:

- Explain the evidence on homogenization, automated facilitation, and automation bias and its consequences for an alignment workshop.
- Recognize the risks specific to the inception with AI (false alignment, loss of dissent, invention, delegation) and apply their countermeasures.
- Record divergences as such before asking for an automatic synthesis.
- Formulate and defend the principle of use: AI prepares, structures, and documents, and alignment happens between people.

## Common mistakes and antipatterns

**Summarizing before disagreeing.** The automatic summary of the notes presents a consensus that did not exist, and the disagreement resurfaces in the sprint.

**Thinking with AI before thinking alone.** The group converges on the same ideas and the inception loses exactly the diversity it was after.

**Delegating the decision.** Asking the tool to prioritize or decide replaces the conversation that was the object of the workshop.

## Further reading

- [Anderson et al. — homogenization of ideas with AI](#)
- [Alsobay et al. — AI facilitation of groups \(CSCW 2026\)](#)
- [Scrum Guide Expansion Pack — AI and Scrum](#)
- [Fisher Phillips — consent and meeting assistants](#)

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