



Whitepaper

Bimodal thinking

How leaders and teams hold two schedules at once, and use the tension to cut cycle time in half

lateralworks Planning series · Fast Time To Market in practice

A CEO challenges the team to deliver in half the time. The team answers with an honest estimate built from history, risk, and unknowns. Both positions are valid, and both must be challenged. This paper sets out the practice behind that tension: how a top-down challenge and a bottom-up estimate coexist without one crushing the other, and how the gap between them becomes the raw material for dramatic, team-owned schedule acceleration. A condensed version is published as the lateralworks ideas article *Bimodal thinking*.

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Core thesis. Holding two contradictory ideas at once, control and flexibility, speed and quality, challenge and estimate, is the defining characteristic of FTTM performers. Applied to the schedule, it means a top-down challenge and a bottom-up estimate are both legitimate readings of the same project, and the fastest organizations refuse to collapse one into the other. They hold both, challenge both, and work the gap between them until the aggressive date stops being the leader's demand and becomes the team's own schedule.

Overview

Abstract

The trait that separates Fast Time To Market performers from everyone else is the ability to hold two contradictory ideas at once and act on both. They run strong control systems while staying open to change. They go fast while treating quality as a boundary that never moves. They freeze scope while promising a cadence of releases. This paper is about the sharpest and highest-stakes instance of that trait: the schedule.

Most organizations treat an aggressive top-down date and an honest bottom-up estimate as a contradiction to be resolved. One side wins. Either the leader's date is imposed and the team quietly disowns it, or the team's estimate prevails and the company accepts a pace its market will punish. Both outcomes are failures of the same kind: they collapse a productive tension into a single mode of thinking.

This paper describes the alternative, which we call bimodal thinking: the practiced ability of an organization to hold two states of the same schedule at the same time. In one mode, leadership drives a challenge date, often half the current schedule duration, grounded in market windows, competitive pressure, and what the business needs to be true. In the other mode, the team builds and defends an honest estimate grounded in past cycle times, known risks, and unknowns. The top-down date is a challenge, never a dictate. The bottom-up estimate is a prediction, never a ceiling on ambition. Both are valid, and both must be challenged.

Held correctly, the tension between the two modes does the work. It puts the team's thinking into what Edward de Bono called an unstable state, the only condition under which people escape their normal line of thought [10, 11]. Under that pressure, teams stop defending their assumptions and start attacking them: prototype rounds collapse, certifications get staggered by geography, long-lead components become risk buys, tooling starts early, and customers are brought inside the development cycle as a paid council. In the field case this paper draws on, that process took more than a year out of a product schedule, and the team, having found every pull-in itself, owned the result.

The paper sets out the concept, the supporting research from paradox theory, stretch-goal research, and forecasting science, the behaviors that keep a challenge from being heard as a dictate, the exchange in which speed is priced in risk and provisioning, a detailed field case, the lateralworks challenge process, a playbook for each side, and the boundary conditions under which the method fails. A condensed version of this argument is published as the lateralworks ideas article *Bimodal thinking* [20]; this paper is the full treatment. The case material is drawn from a 2026 lateralworks engagement with a hardware manufacturer and has been made generic [4].

The question this paper answers. How can a CEO drive for a schedule twice as fast while the team defends an estimate built on everything it knows, and how does that tension produce a dramatically shorter schedule the team owns, rather than a top-down date the team resents?

01

The foundation

**The FTTM
characteristic**

Watch a fast product organization long enough and one trait keeps surfacing: its leaders and teams hold two contradictory ideas at the same time, in working memory, and act on both. The everyday example is control and flexibility. FTTM performers run strong control systems, honest plans of record, weekly trend charts, signed risk registers, while staying genuinely open to change, rebuilding the plan the moment the facts move. Conventional organizations treat those as a dial with one setting: tighten control and lose adaptability, or stay loose and lose the plan. FTTM performers run both at full strength, and the discipline of doing so is what this paper calls bimodal thinking: two states of the same thing, held by the same people, at the same time [1, 3].

One clarification carries the whole paper. Holding both ideas means treating each as legitimate, never as correct. In the field case of Section 05, the CEO's challenge rationale failed a commercial fact check and the team's honest estimate proved more than a year too long. Both positions were wrong, in opposite directions, and that is the point: each exists to expose the error in the other. An organization that anoints either one as truth has stopped thinking.

The mechanics of why holding works are plain. A system run on one mode oscillates. All control and the process consumes the speed it was built to protect; all flexibility and nobody can see the critical path, so dates stop meaning anything. The held pair acts as a governor: each mode limits the failure of the other, and the friction between them, managed rather than suppressed, is where the thinking happens. Figure 1 shows the pairs we see most in FTTM organizations; Table 1 adds the collapse map, what it looks like when a pair falls to either pole.

FTTM performers hold the pair



Figure 1. Six FTTM tension pairs. The performer's move is to hold both sides live; collapse toward either pole loses the value of both.

The pair	Held, it looks like	Collapsed one way	Collapsed the other
Control and flexibility	Strong systems watch the trend and force decisions; the plan is rebuilt the moment facts change.	Bureaucracy: process consumes the speed it was built to protect [3].	Improvisation: no visible critical path, dates mean nothing.
Aggressive challenge and honest estimate	A window with dual targets; the gap named and worked down weekly. The subject of this paper.	Dictate: the team disowns a date it never believed.	Comfort: the company politely agrees to be slow.
Speed and quality	Pace comes from removed assumptions and parallel work; quality is the boundary, schedule is the variable.	Corner-cutting: recalls, and trust in the brand takes the hit.	Gold-plating: the market moves before the product does.
Frozen scope and release cadence	A locked minimum viable product ships now; deferred features ride the next release.	Staleness: nothing after launch, so the freeze is resented and leaks.	Creep: fluid scope, so no schedule ever converges.
Executive deep dive and team autonomy	The executive walks the critical path, asks why, and signs risk; the team keeps the pen.	Micromanagement: ownership transfers upward and dies there.	Absentee sponsorship: decisions wait, urgency evaporates.
Urgency and patience	Decisions and buys happen now; the schedule is located honestly before it is optimized.	Thrash: pulling in a fiction banks nothing.	Analysis: locating forever, optimizing never.

The pair	Held, it looks like	Collapsed one way	Collapsed the other
Risk appetite and rigor	Early buys and skipped steps, each one logged, criteria stated, signature attached.	Recklessness: unowned risks detonate late, then get blamed.	Aversion: every step serialized behind approval.
Confidence and doubt	Belief the date can hold, fed by a visible pull-in trend, beside a standing willingness to challenge every assumption.	Hubris: feel-good schedules that hide the gap.	Fatalism: teams that cannot picture finishing on time.

Table 1. Eight FTTM tension pairs with their collapse map. The table doubles as a diagnostic: for each pair, ask which pole your organization has quietly collapsed toward.

The rest of this paper takes the second row, the schedule pair, and shows the machinery in full: how the challenge and the estimate coexist, why the tension outperforms either mode alone, how the challenge stays a challenge, and how one organization used the held pair to take more than a year out of a product schedule the team now owns.

02

The concept

Two schedules, both true

Every serious acceleration effort begins with two numbers that disagree. Leadership names a date the business needs: a market window, a selling season, a competitive response. The team names a date the plan predicts: task by task, risk by risk, calibrated by how long this work has taken before. In a typical mid-market product organization the two numbers differ by a factor approaching two. The instinctive response is to treat this as a conflict with a winner. Bimodal thinking treats it as a structure with a purpose.

The two modes

Mode one is the challenge. Leadership looks at the work from the outside and asks what the schedule would have to be for the business to win. This mode is deliberately unconstrained by the team's history. It asks the question the inside view cannot ask: if projects like this run twice as long as they should, what would it take to run this one at the speed it deserves? The challenge is legitimate because it does not know how it will be met.

Mode two is the estimate. The team looks at the work from the inside and predicts what will happen. This mode is deliberately constrained by evidence: past cycle times, supplier lead times, certification tails, the risks already on the register, and the unknowns experience says will appear. An honest estimate is an asset. A schedule inflated to feel safe, or compressed to please the room, is a fiction, and a fiction cannot be optimized.

The discipline is refusing to let either mode absorb the other. If the challenge wins outright, the team executes a date it never believed, the schedule slips from day one, and every review becomes an exercise in explaining a gap nobody chose. If the estimate wins outright, the organization has politely agreed to be slow. The bimodal position holds both: the challenge stays aggressive, the estimate stays honest, and the gap between them is named, measured, and worked down in public.

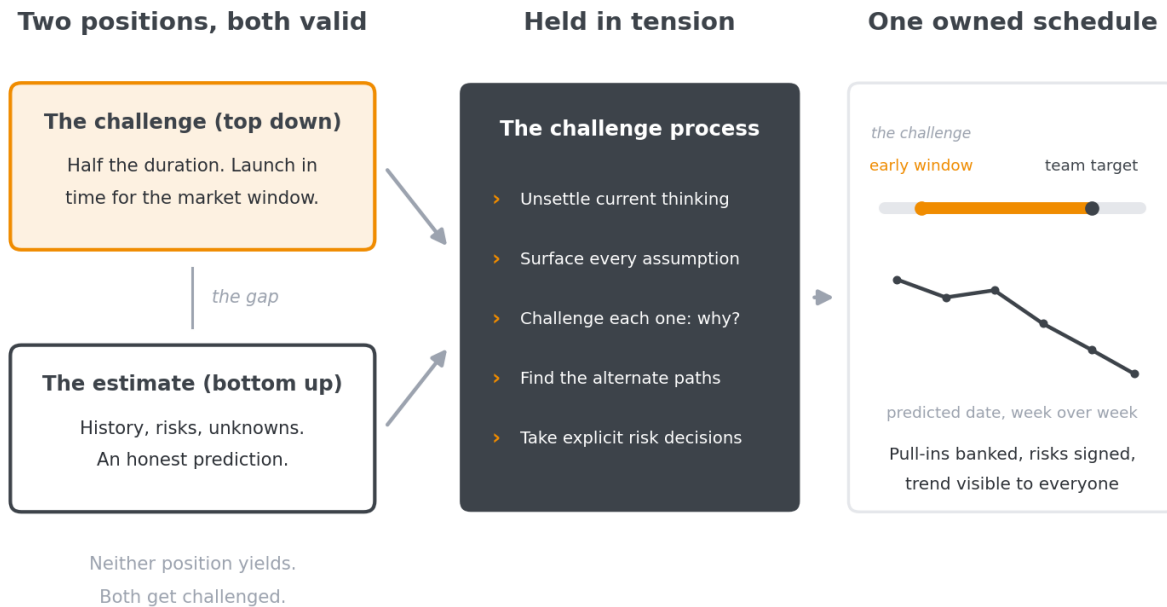


Figure 2. The bimodal model. Two legitimate positions held in tension feed the challenge process; the output is a single schedule, expressed as a window with dual targets, that the team owns and pulls in week over week.

Both legitimate, both challenged

The symmetry matters more than any other feature of the model. The team must defend its estimate under questioning: walk the critical path, justify every dependency, expose every assumption. Leadership must defend its challenge the same way: why this date, what market window it intercepts, what the company loses if the project takes two years, why the team should carry more risk. In our field work, a challenge date justified by a selling season turned out, under scrutiny, to miss that season's own logistics: product had to leave the warehouse a full quarter earlier to reach shelves in time. Challenging the challenge did not weaken it. It converted a date into a window, and a demand into a rationale the team could plan against.

One counterintuitive result follows. Most organizations start with a compressed schedule that only slips. Bimodal organizations end with a compressed schedule that continues to pull in, because compression was earned through challenged assumptions rather than declared through pressure. The direction of travel of the predicted date, week over week, is the single best indicator of which kind of organization you are.

03

The research

Why the tension works

Bimodal thinking is a field practice, and it converges with four independent bodies of research. Each explains a different part of why holding two states at once outperforms choosing one.

Paradox theory: both/and beats either/or

Smith, Lewis, and Tushman argue that the defining strategic tensions of an organization are paradoxes to be held, and that leaders who reframe either/or choices as both/and commitments outperform those who resolve the tension in one direction [5]. Their underlying theory of paradox describes the schedule situation to the letter: two demands that contradict each other, persist over time, and are both true [6, 7]. The aggressive date and the honest estimate are such a pair. Paradox research also predicts the failure mode we see in the field: under pressure, organizations collapse the tension toward one pole, either authoritarian dates or comfortable estimates, and both poles underperform the held tension. F. Scott Fitzgerald's much-quoted test of a first-rate intelligence, the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind and still function, is the individual version of the same claim [19]; Roger Martin's work on integrative thinking documents leaders who refuse to accept either option and build a third that contains the tension of both [18].

Stretch-goal research: the engineered crisis

Sitkin and colleagues describe stretch goals, targets that appear impossible under current methods, as an autogenic crisis: a crisis the organization imposes on itself to force radical, assumption-breaking search [8]. A halved schedule is that crisis. The same research carries the warning label: stretch goals produce breakthrough search in organizations with recent success and slack resources, and produce chaos and withdrawal in organizations that are already failing [8, 9]. Section 08 returns to this boundary condition. The practical implication is that the challenge must be paired with resources, protection, and a credible why, or it becomes the demoralizing dictate it is trying not to be.

Forecasting science: the inside and outside views

Kahneman and Tversky identified the planning fallacy: estimates built from the inside view of a specific project systematically ignore distributional evidence and run optimistic [12]. Lovallo and Kahneman prescribe the outside view, judging a project as a member of a class of similar projects, as the corrective [13], and Flyvbjerg turned that prescription into reference-class forecasting for major programs [14]. Bimodal thinking runs both views at once, with a twist. In a slow product organization the reference class cuts in the opposite direction from the usual megaproject story: the outside view, comparable products built by comparable partners, says the work should take half as long, while the inside view carries the accumulated overhead of how this company has always run. The challenge is the outside view speaking. The estimate is the inside view speaking. Neither is complete, which is why both are heard and both are challenged.

Lean deployment: catchball

Hoshin kanri, the lean strategy-deployment system, formalized the same negotiation decades ago as catchball: leadership throws a breakthrough target to the level below, the receiving team tests it against reality and throws back constraints and counterproposals, and the cycle repeats until both sides commit [15]. Practitioners consistently identify skipping catchball, treating deployment as a one-way mandate, as the most common reason hoshin implementations die. Toyota's sustained performance has been attributed in part to its deliberate cultivation of these same productive contradictions, impossible goals held together with respect for the people who must meet them [16]. Bimodal thinking is catchball applied to a single schedule, at high intensity, with the CEO personally in the loop.

A note on the term. Bimodal thinking as used here means one organization holding two states of the same schedule simultaneously. It is unrelated to Gartner's bimodal IT, which assigns different work to two separate delivery organizations. The distinction matters: bimodal IT splits the modes across groups; bimodal thinking demands both modes from the same people at the same time.

04

The mechanics

**Challenge,
not dictate**

The entire method lives or dies on one perceptual question: does the team hear a challenge or a dictate? The words can be identical. In our field notes from the case in Section 05, the line that captured it was blunt: we heard challenge, yet they heard dictate. The same CEO message, intended as an invitation to think differently, landed as an imposed date, produced hurt feelings, and triggered a week of meetings to repair the reading before the work could start. What separates the two is a set of observable behaviors, on both sides.

What makes it a challenge

- **The why travels with the date.** A challenge explains why the nine months are critical, what the date means to the company, what the existential reasons for acceleration are, why the team should assume more risk, and what happens if the project takes two years. A date without a rationale is a dictate by default, whatever the intention.
- **The challenger goes to the schedule, not the status deck.** In the field case, the CEO installed the project-scheduling tool, took a tutorial, and learned to walk the critical path personally. Deep diving into the plan is the opposite of remote pressure: it is the executive version of going to where the work is, and teams read it, after the initial shock, as respect [2].
- **Questions, never solutions.** The challenger constructively questions reasoning and logic and makes the team defend its assumptions. The moment the challenger starts specifying how to meet the date, ownership transfers to the challenger, and the exercise becomes micromanagement.
- **The challenge accepts an answer.** A schedule that survives an honest, all-out attempt to meet the challenge is a validated schedule. If the team attacks every assumption and the date still cannot be met, the challenge has done its job anyway: every option for going faster is now on the table, and the question of the date is answered with evidence instead of argument.
- **Risk is underwritten from the top.** Accepted risks, early buys, skipped prototype rounds, parallel builds, are logged and signed by leadership, so that banked time can never later be turned against the team that banked it.

What makes it a dictate

- A date arrives without a rationale, or with a rationale the data contradicts, and questions about it are treated as resistance.
- The pressure lands on individuals. In the field case the CEO read one project manager absorbing the pressure alone as a weak team; the countermove was for the project leadership to respond as one voice, so no member could be singled out.

- Leadership specifies the solution as well as the date, or overrides the team's risk judgments without signing for the risk.
- The team's honest estimate is punished rather than examined, which teaches the organization to produce feel-good schedules. A feel-good schedule hides the gap until it is too late to act; an honest gap, surfaced early, is what creates the urgency to close it while time remains.

The drop-down

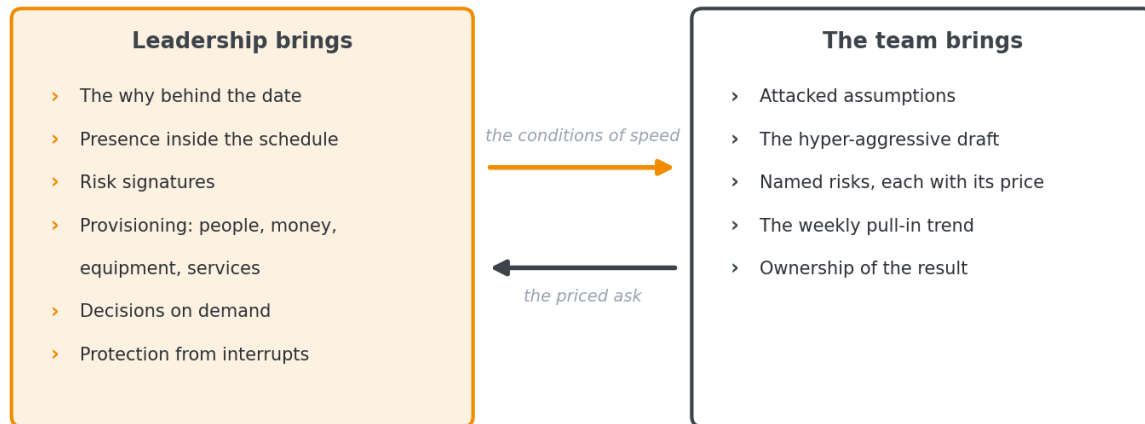
Dropping down is the delicate part. An executive inside a team's schedule is one wrong sentence away from taking it over, and a team under that pressure holds an easy exit at all times: surrender. Accept the date, stop arguing, hand the plan up. Surrender looks like agreement and costs more than resistance, because a team that has given the schedule away will execute without belief, report what the room wants to hear, and drift back to the feel-good habit the method exists to break. From that day the schedule belongs to the CEO, and so does every slip in it.

The conduct that keeps the drop-down on the right side of the line is specific. Arrive as a student of the plan: ask to be walked through the critical path rather than presenting conclusions about it. Question the logic, never the competence, and never in terms of an individual. Put suggestions on the table as offers the team can book or decline, and let the team enter the ones it accepts as its own pull-ins. Above all, leave the pen in the team's hand: the executive can challenge any line of the schedule and may not write one. The test of where ownership sits is audible in the pronouns. A team that talks about *his date* has received a dictate; a team that talks about *our schedule* and *his challenge* has kept the work. Section 05 shows that inversion happening in the field.

The exchange: speed for risk and provisioning

Done right, the drop-down opens a conversation no status review produces. The challenge gives the team standing to ask upward, and the healthiest answer to a demand for speed is a priced one: if you want it faster, we will need to assume more risk, and we will need the provisioning to carry it. Risk means the signed decisions of Section 06: buys before pilot approval, tooling before test results, parallel builds. Provisioning means what the host organization supplies a program: people, money, equipment, and services, plus decisions on demand and protection from the interrupts that pull people off the critical path [1]. The moment the team names its price, the dynamic inverts. Leadership stops pushing a date down; the team starts negotiating the conditions of the date, and both sides are suddenly working the same problem from the same side of the table. Figure 3 shows the exchange.

The exchange



A priced ask means ownership. Silence means surrender.

Figure 3. The exchange. Leadership supplies the conditions of speed; the team answers the challenge with a priced ask. The counter-ask doubles as the diagnostic: a team that names its price has taken ownership, and a team that answers with silence has surrendered. Silence should worry a CEO far more than pushback.

The unstable state

A well-carried challenge does something a comfortable review never does: it puts the team's collective mind into what de Bono called an unstable state. His research on lateral thinking holds that established patterns cannot be restructured from within; escape requires an outside provocation that the current pattern cannot absorb [10, 11]. A demand for half the duration is such a provocation. While the team is comfortable, it optimizes within its assumptions; destabilized, it has no choice except to question the assumptions themselves. The leader's job is to create the instability and then protect the people inside it. The team's job is to use the instability on the plan rather than on each other. Amy Edmondson's work on psychological safety explains why the protection is load-bearing: people interrogate their own assumptions in public only where candor is safe [17].

Field note

When the executive drops to ground level

“What happens when executives drop down to ground level once in a while? Not micromanagement, not disempowerment, just basic communication behavior.”

lateralworks field notes
Hardware acceleration program, 2026

05

Evidence

The field case

The case is a mid-market hardware manufacturer running a portfolio of connected-product programs with an overseas ODM partner. Details that would identify the company, its people, or its products have been removed; dates and durations are kept because they carry the point [4]. The core project was, by the team's own reading, an industrial-design refresh plus a wireless connectivity module: work the organization and its partner knew how to do, with little technological or market risk. The plan of record ran well past two years. The CEO challenged the team to launch in roughly nine months, about half the honest schedule, to intercept the next selling season.

The reaction, and the repair

The first reading was a dictate. The challenge produced hurt feelings, defensive meetings, and a leadership debate about whether the CEO was micromanaging. Two things repaired it. First, the rationale work: the date was interrogated in the open. Why this date? Which buying cycle does the launch intercept? What does the company lose with no new product next year while low-cost competitors move up the market? The scrutiny corrected the challenge itself, replacing a single symbolic date with a launch window and dual targets: the CEO's challenge date as the early edge of the window, the team's commitment as the target, both landing inside the year that mattered. Second, the deep dive: the CEO installed the scheduling software, took a tutorial, and began walking the critical path in the team's own plan, asking why each driving task existed and what decision criteria stood behind each wait. The VP of product development did the same. What began as pressure from above became a shared examination of the same artifact.

The unstable state does its work

Within days of the deep dive, and while the executives were still debating roles and structure, the teams did what destabilized teams do when they are protected: they attacked their own assumptions. In a facilitated challenge workshop they surfaced every belief holding the schedule up, wrote each one down, classified each as essential, differentiating, boundary, or avoid, and put a why against every one. Then they drafted what they themselves named hyper-aggressive schedules, built on explicit, signed risk decisions rather than hope. Section 06 details the assumptions and what challenging them produced.

The results

- The lead program, already carrying a 156-day pull-in from earlier schedule scrubs, drafted a plan pulling launch in a further 228 days, moving it from early the following year into the selling season the challenge named. Combined, more than a year came out of the schedule.
- A sister program, challenged the same way, located a plan roughly 499 days earlier than its prior prediction, converting a launch two calendar years out into one the following year.

- The pull-ins were banked into the plan of record, the master schedule the whole program plans against, as they were won, each with its risks logged and signed, and rendered weekly on a trend chart so the whole organization could watch the predicted date move toward the target. These are plan-level gains with launches still ahead; the durability of each one rests on the signed risk log and the weekly trend that will show any giveback early.

Whose schedule it became

The decisive observation is about ownership. The compressed schedule was drafted by the team, presented by the team, and defended by the team, with the CEO's own suggestions credited inside it, worth an estimated ten to twenty days, so that the challenger owned part of the pull-in too. The team then invited the CEO into its schedule reviews and standups and shared more schedule data than he asked for. Executives back off when they see the team knows. The pressure that began as top-down demand ended as the team's own proof that the work could go faster than it ever had, which is what the challenge was asking for. That inversion, from *his date* to *our schedule*, is the observable signature that bimodal thinking worked.

06

The method The challenge process

The challenge process is the lateralworks working method that converts an unstable state into banked schedule time. It is run as a facilitated session with the whole core team, and it trains the team to repeat it on every subsequent project. Figure 4 shows the loop; the steps below are how the workshop runs it.

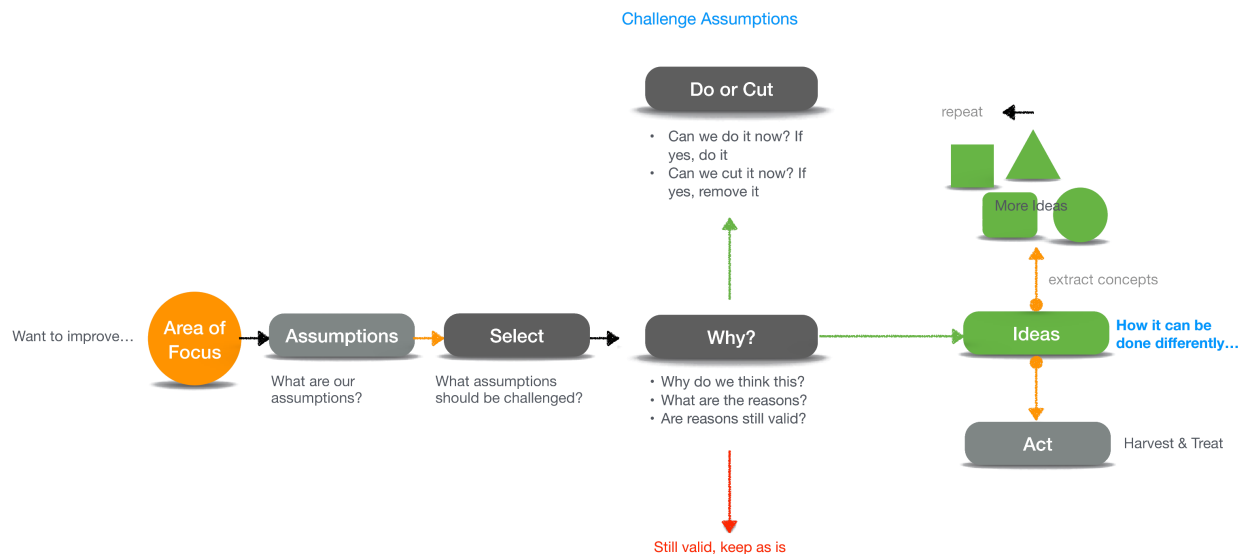


Figure 4. The challenge process as a loop, as the workshop runs it. An area of focus surfaces the assumptions; the ones worth challenging are selected and interrogated with why. An assumption that survives the questioning is kept as is. One that does not either goes straight to do or cut, or becomes an idea for how the work can be done differently, which is harvested, acted on, and fed back for another pass.

1. **Create the instability.** The challenge date is on the wall, with its rationale. The facilitator's framing: treat the date as the provocation that makes new thinking possible, whatever the team decides it becomes.
2. **Surface every assumption.** The team writes down everything it believes must be true about the project: requirements, partners, certifications, tooling, markets, price, quality, timing. Nothing is too obvious to write down; the most expensive assumptions are the ones nobody has said out loud.
3. **Classify.** Each assumption is sorted: essential (the product fails without it), differentiating (it wins the market), boundary (a real external constraint), or avoid (a risk or a self-imposed rule). The sorting itself starts arguments worth having.
4. **Challenge each one with why.** Why this price point? Why this date? Why no simpler display? Why both regions at once? Why does tooling wait? An assumption that survives is a validated

requirement; one that does not is schedule.

5. **Find the alternate paths.** For every assumption that falls, the team designs the faster path it was blocking, with the risk named.
6. **Take explicit risk decisions.** Each alternate path is a signed risk decision, entered in the register, with leadership's signature on the acceptance. Banked time protected this way cannot later be turned against the team.
7. **Bank and display.** Pull-ins go into the plan of record as they are won, and the predicted date is trended weekly. A visible pull-in trend rebuilds a team's belief that finishing on time is possible at all, which for teams that have only ever seen slippage is half the battle.

What the team challenged, and what it found

Table 2 shows the assumption set from the field case, generalized. Every row began as a sticky note on a wall; every row ended as either a validated requirement or banked schedule.

Assumption as stated	What challenging it produced
Launch requires hard tooling; you cannot launch on soft tooling.	The tooling sequence was rebuilt. Hard tooling starts at design release instead of after prototype approval; soft tooling starts testing wherever the certification lab accepts the parts.
Alpha and beta prototype rounds are required.	Formal prototype rounds collapsed. Hard tooling initiates when mechanical design completes; the pilot run proceeds in parallel with first-article verification, as a signed risk.
Full international certification is required at launch.	Certifications staggered by geography. The home market launches first on its own certification path; the region needing the long-tail hazardous-location certification follows.
All regions launch together.	Launches staggered by market importance, which pulled the critical certification tail off the first launch entirely.
The richer display, touchscreen, and rechargeable battery are still open questions.	Features that pushed launch out a year, or conflicted with hazardous-location certification, were cut from the minimum viable product and deferred to the release cadence.
Component orders wait for pilot approval.	The longest-lead components, the wireless module and the board, became early risk buys with explicit decision criteria and leadership sign-off.
The ODM's constraints are fixed: one partner, limited resources, a 24-hour communication cycle, no long-term on-site presence, holiday shutdowns.	Engagement moved weeks earlier, technical documentation drafted in-house to front-load the handoff, and a local consultant model replaced the assumption of resident staff.
There is no time to validate value with customers.	A paid, retained customer council was created to evaluate requirements during specification and design, then served as the alpha and beta test population, collapsing validation time that had lived on the critical path.
The launch date itself.	Interrogated like every other assumption: why this date, which buying season, what happens with no launch next year. The answer converted a symbolic date into a window with dual targets.

Table 2. The assumption wall from the field case, generalized. Each challenged assumption either survived as a validated requirement or converted into banked schedule time through a signed risk decision.

Two features of this table repay attention. First, the largest pull-ins came from assumptions nobody had classified as decisions at all; they were simply how things are done here. Second, the customer council converted the most defensible objection to speed, that going fast means skipping the customer, into an accelerant: paying customers to sit inside the development cycle removed the validation steps from the critical path and improved the requirements at the same time. Speed and rigor turned out to be another both/and, not a trade [5].

07

Practice The playbook

Bimodal thinking asks for disciplined behavior from both sides at once. The two lists below are the operating rules that emerged from the field work. They are short because the difficulty is never in knowing them; it is in holding them under pressure.

Rules for the leader carrying the challenge

1. **Deliver the why with the date.** Existential reasons, market windows, the cost of a two-year pace. If you cannot articulate the why, the challenge is not ready to issue [3].
2. **Go to the schedule.** Learn the tool, walk the critical path, attend the reviews. Ask the questions that make the team defend its logic: what is the decision criteria, what would make you buy now rather than wait [2]?
3. **Challenge everything, specify nothing.** Offer suggestions as suggestions; let the team accept or reject them, and let the team book the ones it accepts as its own pull-ins.
4. **Sign the risk.** Every accepted risk carries your signature. The team is betting on your protection; underwrite it in writing.
5. **Pay for speed.** When the team answers your challenge with a priced ask, more risk to sign, provisioning to supply, that is the challenge landing correctly. Fund it. Treat silence, a team that asks for nothing, as the warning sign instead.
6. **Take the answer.** When the team shows a schedule that survives the challenge process, believe it, credit it publicly, and back off. Nothing converts skeptics faster than a challenger who accepts evidence.
7. **Keep the pressure on assumptions and off people.** One meeting that singles out an individual converts the whole program from challenge to dictate, and the repair costs a week you do not have.

Rules for the team answering it

1. **Take up the challenge as one voice.** The project leadership responds as a unit, never as individuals, so no member absorbs the pressure alone.
2. **Locate before optimizing.** Keep the estimate honest and capture the risks and unknowns first; pulling in a fiction banks nothing. The gap, honestly stated, is the raw material.
3. **Ask for the rationale, and test it.** Rationalize the target against commercial data. A challenge that survives your scrutiny deserves your effort; one that does not gets corrected, which strengthens it.

4. **Answer with data, never argument.** The hyper-aggressive draft, the risk register, and the trend chart are the reply. Use the schedule as the tool to convince your own team it can be done.
5. **Name your price.** Meet the demand for speed with the conditions of speed: the risks you need signed and the provisioning, people, money, equipment, services, decisions, you need supplied. The priced ask converts a dictate into a negotiation and keeps the schedule yours.
6. **Convert the date into a window with dual targets.** The challenge date becomes the early edge, the team commitment the target. Naming the early window after the challenger acknowledges the challenge and keeps the team pulling toward it.
7. **Bank every pull-in and show the trend.** Lock gains into the plan of record as they are won, because unknowns will claw some back, and display the weekly trend so belief compounds.
8. **Bring the challenger inside.** Invite the executive into reviews and standups, walk the critical path together, ask for help on the hard constraints, and share more schedule data than is requested. Executives escalate when they suspect the team does not know; they relax when they can see that it does.

08

Limits **Boundary conditions**

The method has edges, and pretending otherwise would make this paper a sales document. Four conditions govern whether the tension produces acceleration or damage.

The organization must be able to afford the crisis

Stretch-goal research is unambiguous: seemingly impossible targets energize organizations with recent success and slack resources, and they disorganize organizations that are already losing, which are, paradoxically, the ones most tempted to reach for them [8, 9]. A company in genuine crisis does not need an autogenic one layered on top. The field case worked in part because the underlying business was healthy and the products still gained share; the challenge was about winning faster, and everyone could feel the difference.

The why must survive scrutiny

A challenge whose rationale collapses under the team's examination, and which is then enforced anyway, is a dictate wearing a challenge's clothes, and teams detect the costume instantly. The bimodal discipline cuts both ways: leadership must genuinely accept corrections to its own position, as the field-case CEO did when the selling-season logic pointed to a window rather than a single date. Targets that cannot be traced to a rationale are optics, and a team measured against optics learns to produce feel-good schedules, the exact pathology the method exists to cure.

Safety is load-bearing

The unstable state is productive only inside a container of psychological safety [17]. Teams interrogate their own assumptions in public to the degree that honest gaps, surfaced risks, and failed experiments are treated as contributions. The signed risk register is the structural expression of that safety: it converts protection from a promise into a document. Where leadership has previously punished honest estimates, the first challenge will be heard as a trap, and the repair work of Section 05 comes first.

Control must not eat the speed

Acceleration attracts governance. Every review, gate, and checklist added to protect the new pace trades away some of it, and the accumulation is invisible from inside any single meeting [3]. The bimodal organization applies the challenge process to its own process: every control gets a why, and controls that cannot answer are schedule. The instrument that keeps this honest is the same weekly trend of the predicted date; when the line stops falling, something, often a new control, is consuming the pull-in.

Closing note. The question is never whether the top-down date or the bottom-up estimate is right. Both are right, in the only senses that matter: the business needs the first, and the evidence supports the second. The organizations that move fastest are the ones that can hold that contradiction in working memory, week after week, and let the discomfort do the thinking. The tension is the method, and the schedule pair is one row of Table 1; every other row carries the same machinery and its own story. More at lateralworks.com [1].

Where to go next

The condensed version of this argument is published as the lateralworks ideas article [Bimodal thinking](#) [20], which carries the same three figures in short form. Two companion papers go deeper on the machinery this one assumes. *The scheduling debate* [21] takes up the target-versus-plan question directly, including who owns the plan and what happens to a gap that goes underground. *Critical thinking and the challenge process* [22] is the full-length treatment of the challenge method summarized in Section 06, and of the wider use of challenge to break technical problems, not only schedule gaps.

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