

Planning brief

Four weeks to a baseline

Planning is the only phase of a program that cannot slip, because the instrument that measures lateness is the thing being built. Put a clock on it. One to two weeks to build the macro plan, two scrubs with the core team, four weeks from the first planning meeting to a signed baseline, with every partner that owns critical path work in the room from day one.

Week	What happens	Done when
1 Build it	Core team in the room, and every organization that owns critical path work, on day one. Macro plan built top down: about 50 activities, start to finish, in three to four hours. A template gets a first draft in an afternoon.	A continuous line exists from today to the launch.
2 First scrub	Near-term work decomposed to tasks of one to five days. Detail past a few weeks stays coarse on purpose. Learning cycles go in at durations the team will defend.	Gap to target computed for the first time.
3 Second scrub	Critical path runs unbroken end to end. Risks enter as tasks or as duration, not as a footnote. Owners named on every critical path task.	The second gap is within about a week of the first.
4 Sign it	Target set. Milestone names locked for the whole portfolio. Baseline snapped, schedule published, and the people in the room sign up to it.	The weekly refresh runs the following Monday.

The test at week 3. Compute the gap after the first scrub, then again after the second. If the second scrub moved the gap by about a week, the third will move it by a day. You are converged, so snap the baseline. If the second scrub moved the gap by two months, do not book a third scrub. Something structural is wrong with the target, the scope, the resourcing or the technology, and week three is a cheap time to find that out.

Why the clock exists. A four-week milestone slip in month nine sets off a recovery plan, a schedule review and a call with the customer. Four extra weeks perfecting the plan in month one costs the launch date the same four weeks and sets off nothing. At a cost of delay of \$100k a day that is \$2m, against no budget line and no metric. More planning time does not buy more information. It buys more processing of the same information, because the unknowns are sitting in the work, not in the room.

The gate

Good enough is a second scrub that does not move the gap

Publish test

- The critical path runs unbroken from today to the target, with no hand-typed dates.
- Every critical path task has an owner who has seen it.
- Every organization that owns critical path work has been in the room.
- Learning cycles are in the plan, at durations the team will defend.
- The known big risks appear as tasks or as duration, not as a footnote.
- The second scrub moved the gap by about a week or less.

None of these is accuracy. The schedule will be wrong. It is supposed to be wrong, and then less wrong every week.

What the baseline locks

The target. It comes from outside the team: the market window, a customer commitment, a buying cycle, the growth plan. Never from your own schedule.

The milestone names. Pick the two or three milestones every program in the portfolio will track and name them once. Free in week two, expensive in month six.

The first point of the trend. That is the whole of it. Task detail past a few weeks, learning-dependent durations and the lower critical paths all stay loose.

Partners and other divisions

Any organization that owns critical path work and does not sit in your building is a partner: a contract manufacturer, a design house, a test facility, a division in another country, an internal group with its own queue. Bring them in on day one. A schedule that contains someone else's dates without their agreement is not a schedule. It is a request.

When you do not need the clock. A team that already moves does not need an artificial deadline on its planning. Four weeks is a countermeasure to a specific condition: careful people producing careful work slowly, a lot of review, a lot of preparation aimed at not being wrong, and nobody able to say what the planning phase is costing.