

When targets move

Neal Mitchell | lateralworks | October 2026

A target is an external constraint. It moves for two reasons only, and the bounding box is a review trigger, not a reset. The target comes from the market window, a customer commitment, a buying season or the growth plan, never from the schedule. The team owns the schedule and the weekly forecast; the target is the contract between the team and the company, and nobody renegotiates a contract because the work got hard. A target moves when the external driver moves, or when the date has become a fiction nobody is jumping for. Either way leadership makes the call once at a gate, and the original commitment stays on the chart. Everything else is a gap to work.

What the gap is for

A fixed target is the reference line that makes the trend readable. Every week the team refreshes the plan and re-plots the forecast finish against it; the distance between them is the exposure in days and the slope is the direction of travel [1]. When the gap will not close, the team states it in days and proposes the pull-ins that would close it, with the risk priced. Leadership then chooses one of four moves: accept the risks and fund them, change the definition, retarget, or kill the project [3]. Retarget is on the list, as a decision taken in the open. A target that drifts out a week at a time is a different thing: it is an early warning of a future failure and a serious problem on the project that must be fixed. If the drift continues, leadership returns to the four moves above. Move the target by inches and the gap becomes fiction and the trend loses its memory [1, 2].

The bounding box fits the rule

Several clients run a bounding box, a practice that came out of Tektronix: a target plus limits agreed at each phase gate. It fits the rule. A limit is a review trigger, not a new target: cross one and the gate convenes. Before the definition gate the target is a window, so narrowing it at the concept and planning gates is the window closing, not a reset. The definition gate is where the window becomes a point and the contract is signed, and reopening it afterward is a public act at a gate. Inside the box the team acts without asking; a breach is a decision for leadership, taken once.

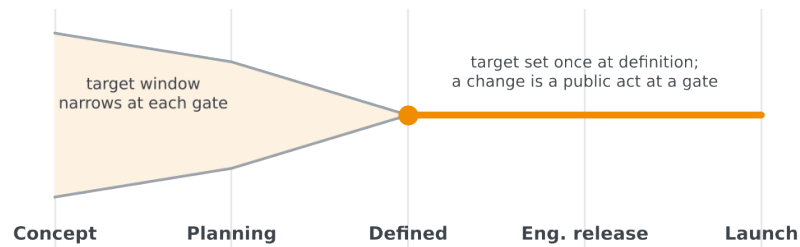


Figure 1. Recommendation: narrow the window at the early gates and set the target once at definition.

References

- [1] Mitchell, N. "Where targets come from." lateralworks, August 2026. <https://lateralworks.com/ideas/where-targets-come-from>
- [2] Mitchell, N. "When the customer slips." lateralworks, August 2026. <https://lateralworks.com/ideas/when-the-customer-slips>
- [3] Mitchell, N. "Targets are top-down; schedules are bottom-up." lateralworks. <https://lateralworks.com/ideas/targets-top-down-schedules-bottom-up>

Our recommendations

- 1 Tie every target to its external driver.
- 2 Use target windows through the concept and planning gates, and by the time you pass the definition gate make the target a single date. Keep the original commitment visible if a later gate ever moves it.
- 3 Keep the bounding box in the gate reviews and leave the production wiggglechart as it is. Limit lines on the chart would add complexity for the many people who already read it, and would suggest that targets can be reset.
- 4 When the gap will not close, state it in days, price the risk, and decide in the open: accept the risks and fund them, change the definition, retarget, or kill the project. Retarget only for the two reasons above. Once set, a target that moves loses its power to force the behavior you want.

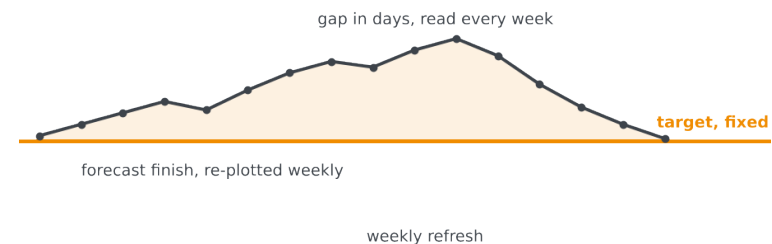


Figure 2. Recommendation: the wiggglechart stays as it is. The target line never moves; the forecast tells the truth every week; the gap between them is the management information.