



Escape the Tragedy of WIP



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Escape the Tragedy of WIP

- Storytelling
- What led us here?
- Diving deeper into the nature of work
- Big, slow, highly effective changes
- Small, fast, incremental changes





First, a story...

Wow. I'm tracking 37 initiatives. Weekly.



VP Product



That's over 600 items
my teams have to do in
the next six months.

I only have eight
teams.

And, I still have to
meet my product
goals for growth
and margin.





A few months earlier...

Great
idea!

Org-wide
Init



Let's do
that!

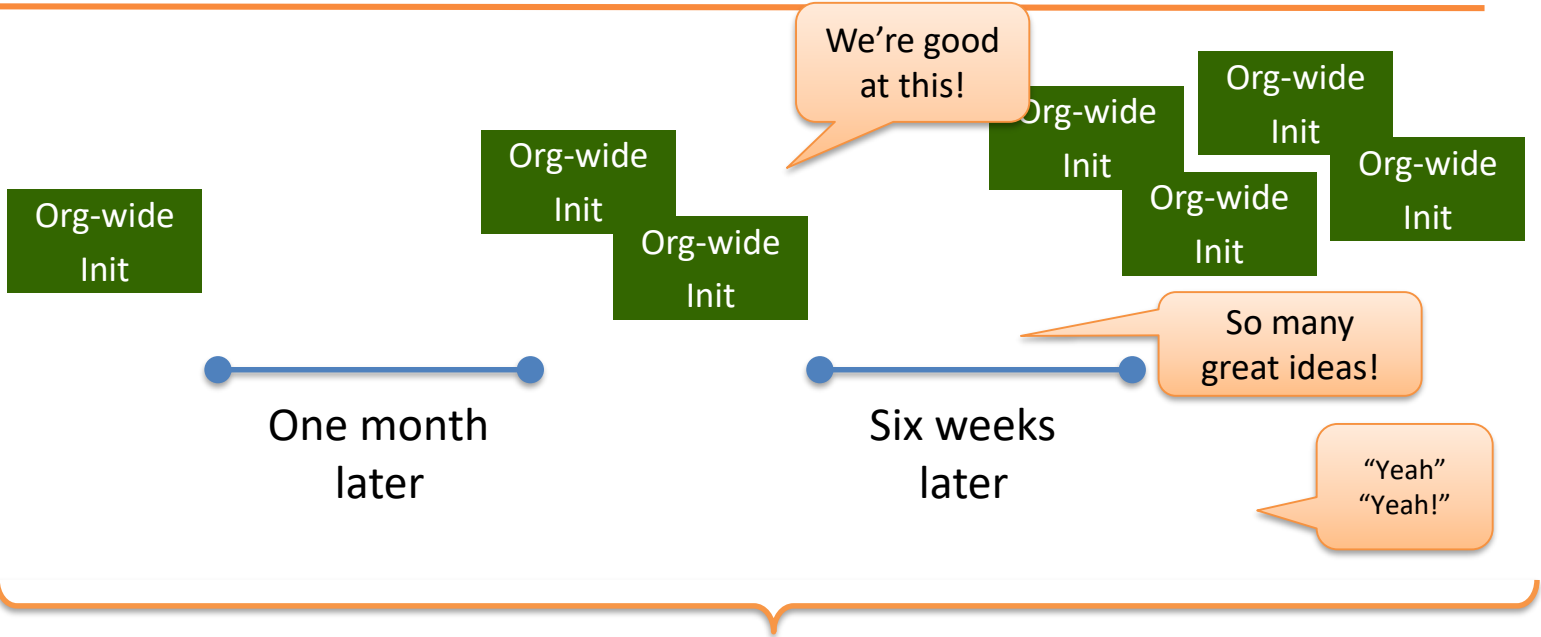
"Yeah"
"Yeah!"





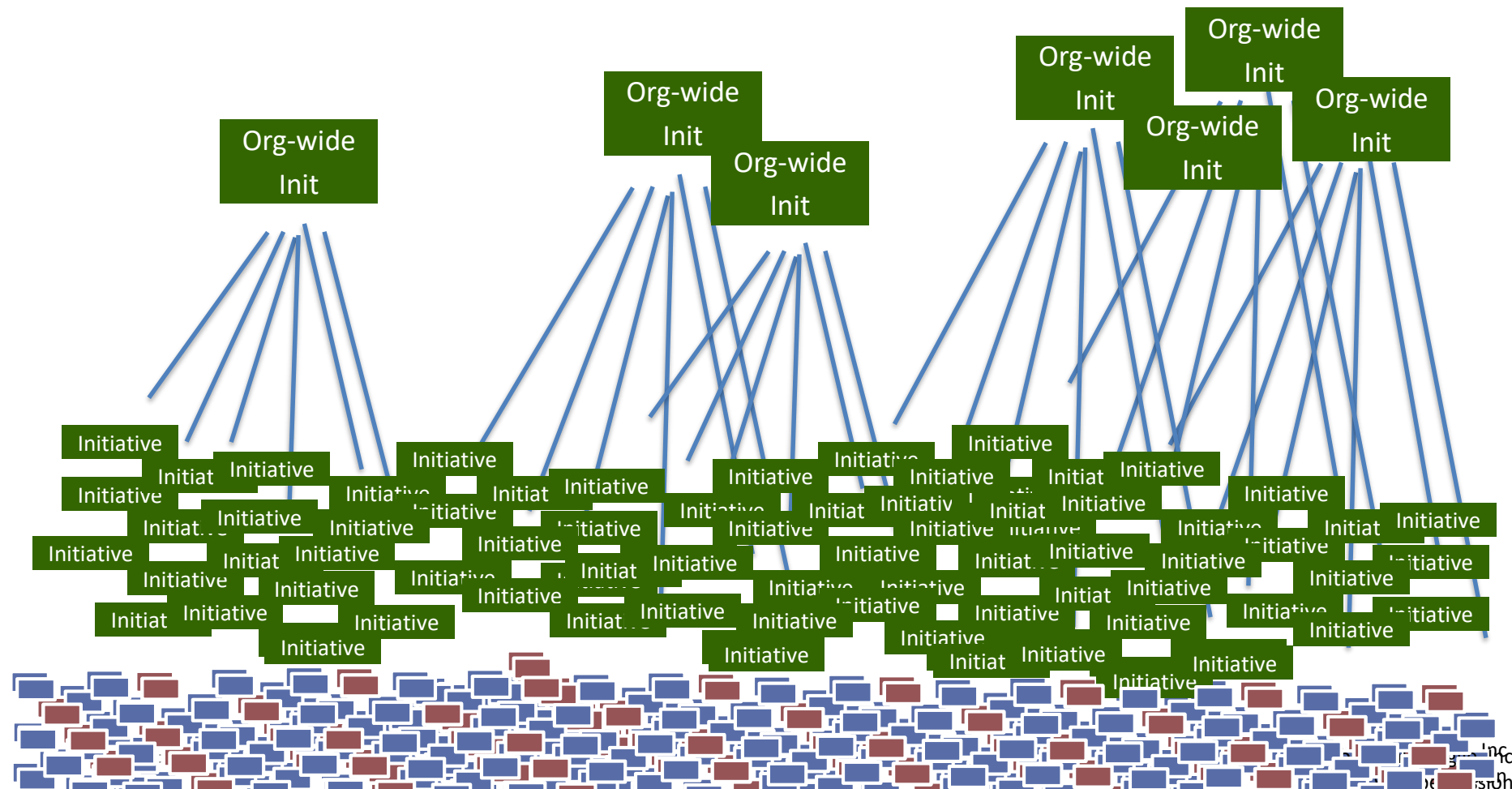
One month
later





All good ideas
All positive intentions



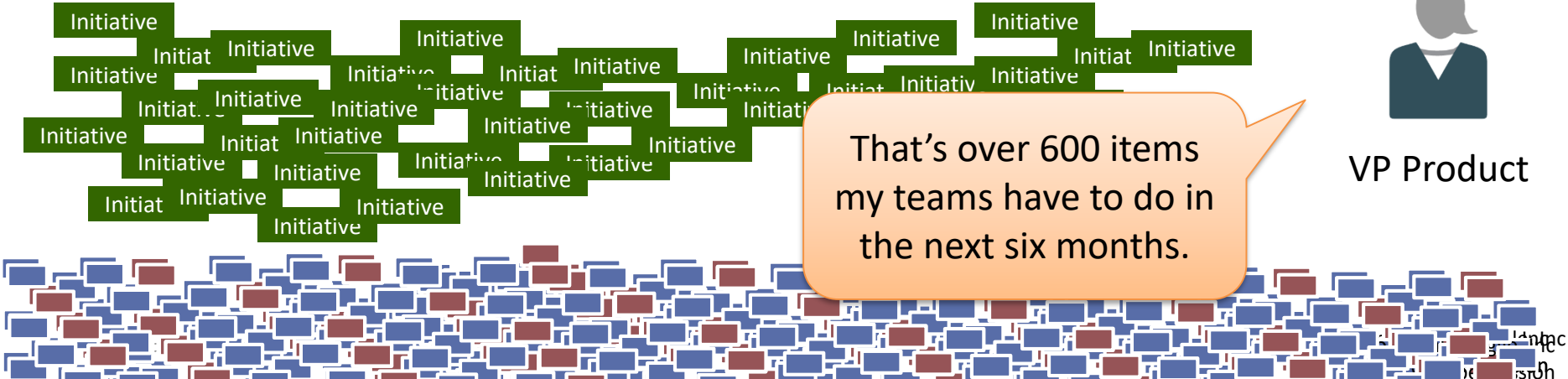


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What's a transformation leader to do?

Good news!

You're not running a city transport system!

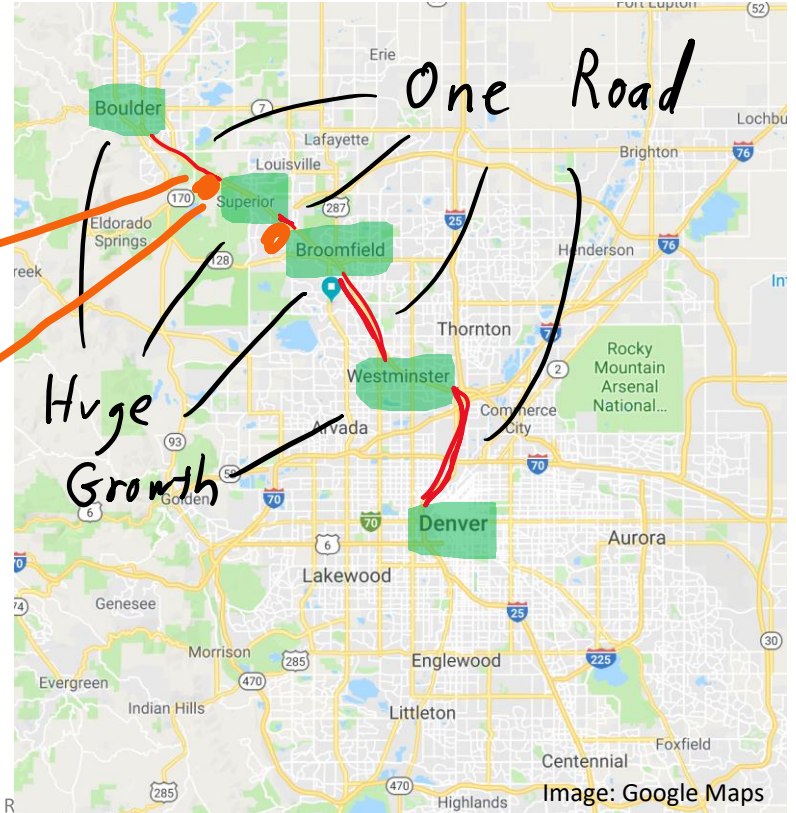
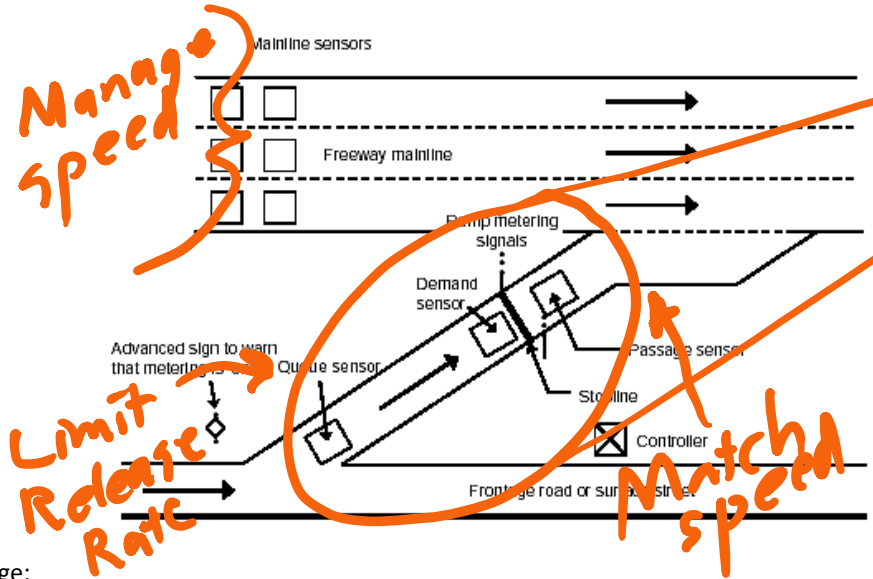


Image: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/research/operations/its/06108/images/fig3_9.gif

You are responsible!

You're (probably) running a technology organization.

You can change the system.





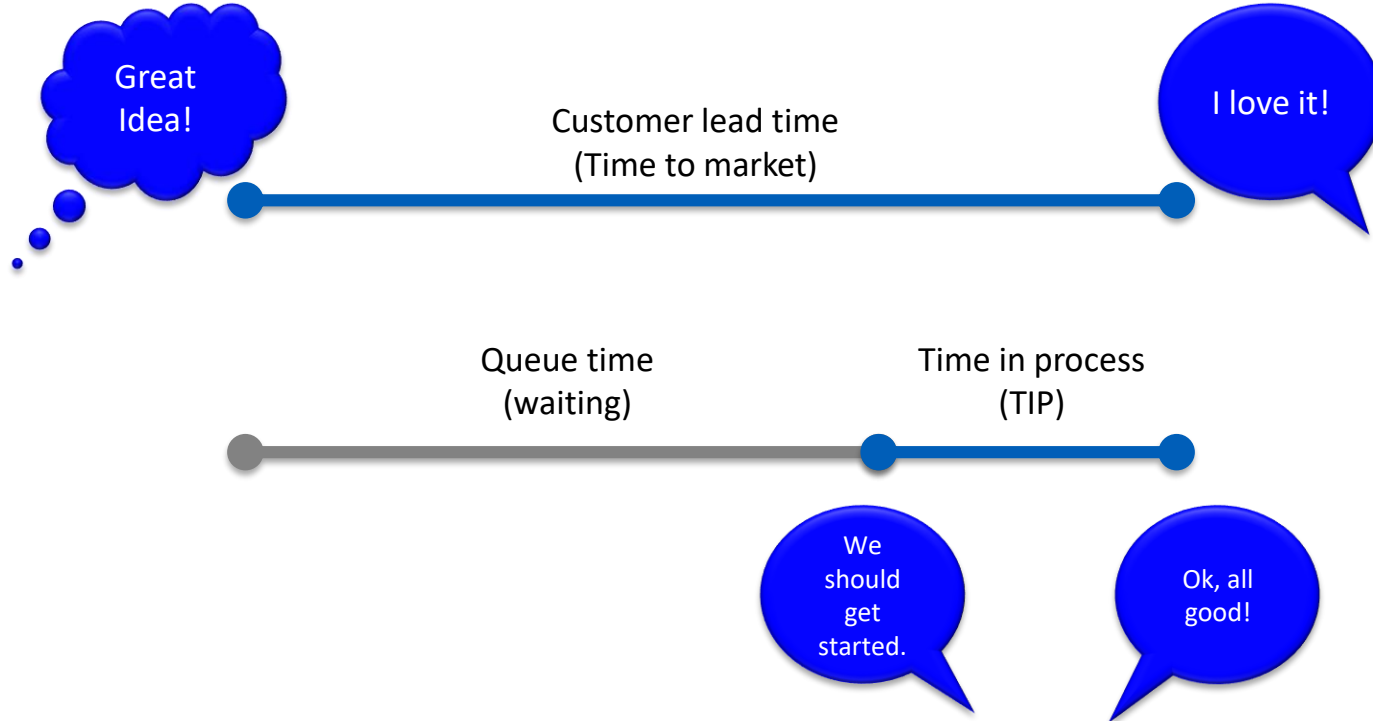
So what?

1. We've talked about WIP forever
2. We know WIP is a problem, and so do leaders in organizations
3. **Saying it's a problem doesn't help, it just shames**
4. **The real struggle leaders have is "How do we solve it?"**
5. We need to look more carefully at the HOW of solving this



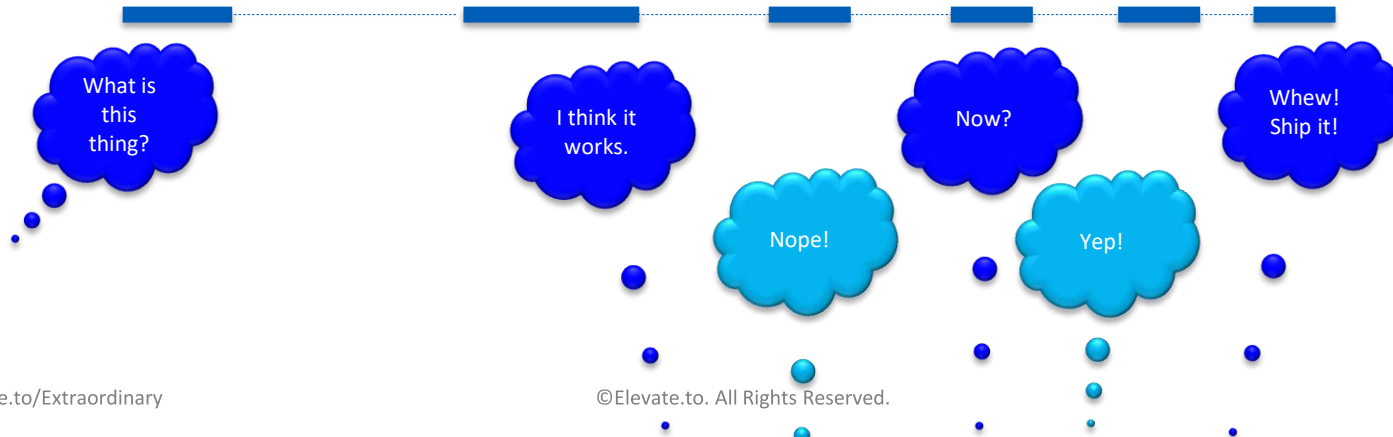
Understanding the problem

How Long Does it Take?



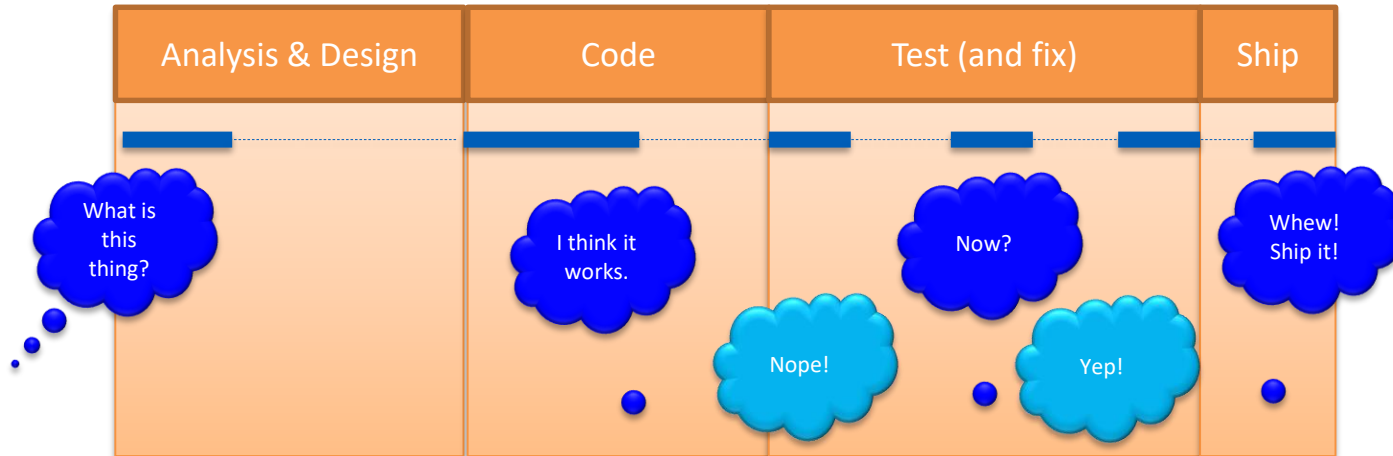
How Long Does it Take?

Time in Process
(TIP)



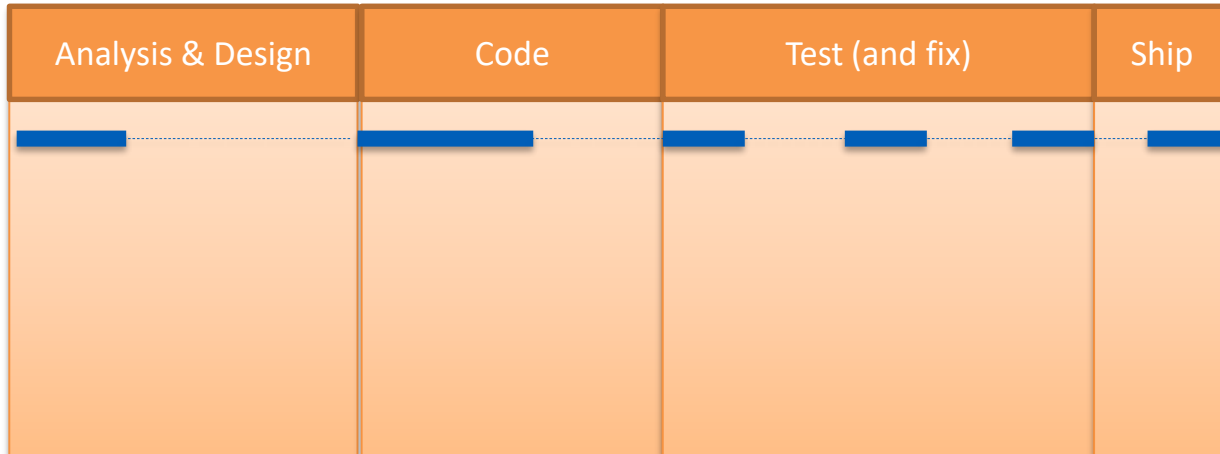
How Long Does it Take?

Time in Process
(TIP)



How Long Does it Take?

Time in Process
(TIP)



How Long Does it Take?

Time in Process
(TIP)



..... = 18 days
Wait time

———— = 2 days
Touch time



$$\text{Flow efficiency} = \frac{\text{Touch time}}{\text{Wait time} + \text{Touch time}} = \frac{2d}{18d + 2d} = 10\% \text{ efficiency}$$

What is Your Goal?



Flow efficiency

< 10% efficiency

Get things done

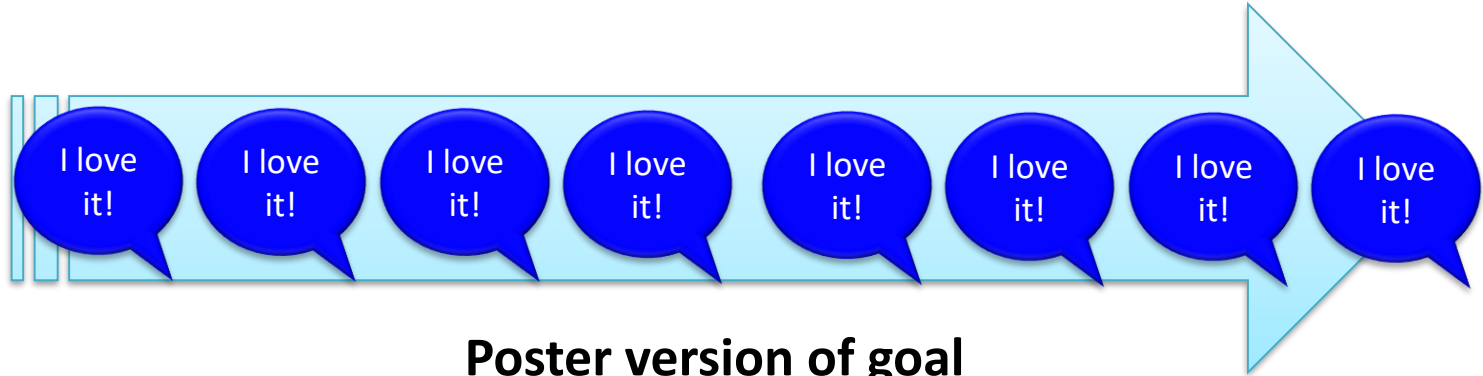


“Resource” efficiency

100% efficiency

Keep people busy

Companies want to create a flow of value



Poster version of goal

Keep value flowing!

Actual improvement goal

Create the Shortest Sustainable Lead Time (SSLT) for value delivery

We Have Lots of Work!

(Don't we have both efficiencies?)

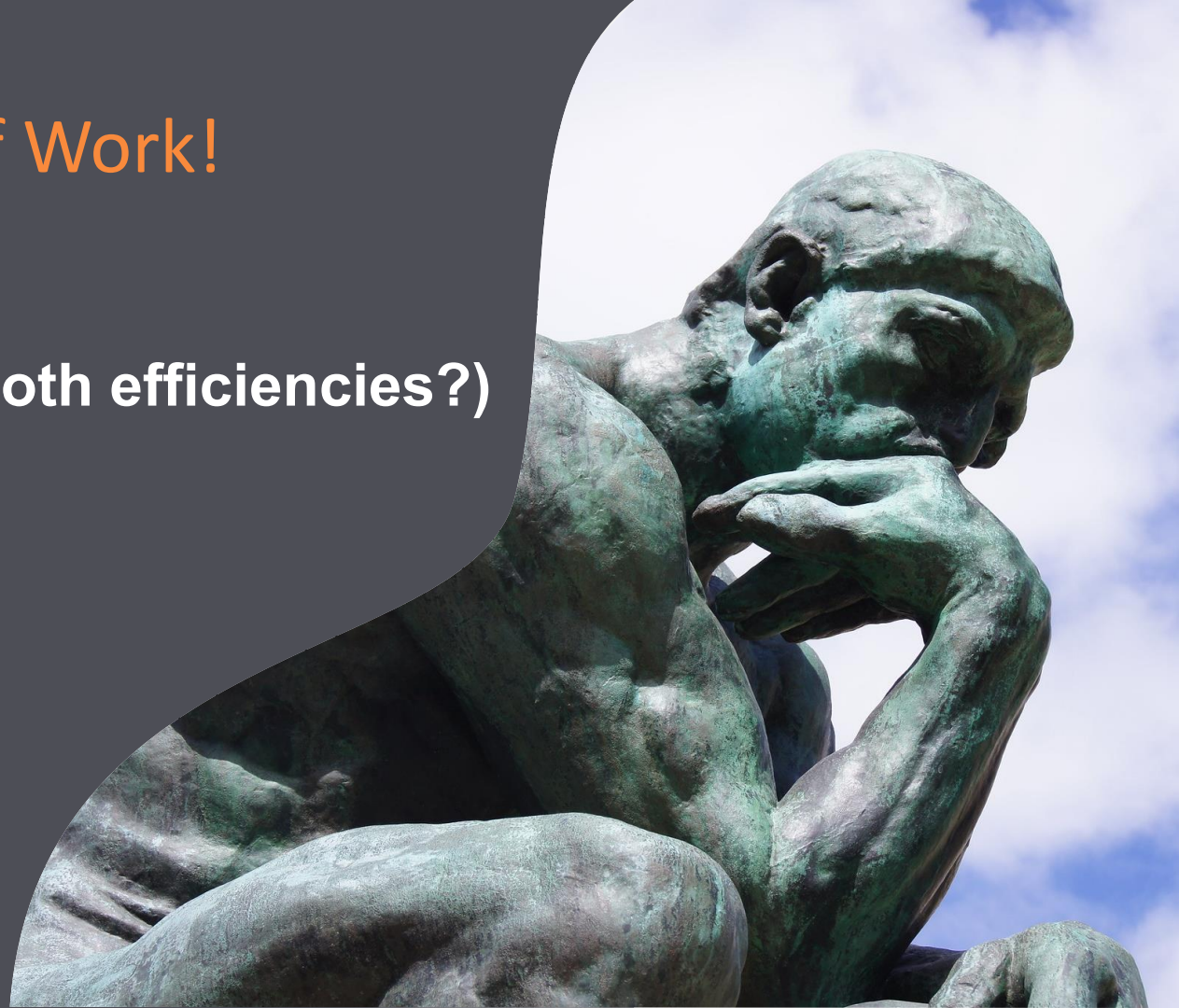


Image courtesy morguefile.com

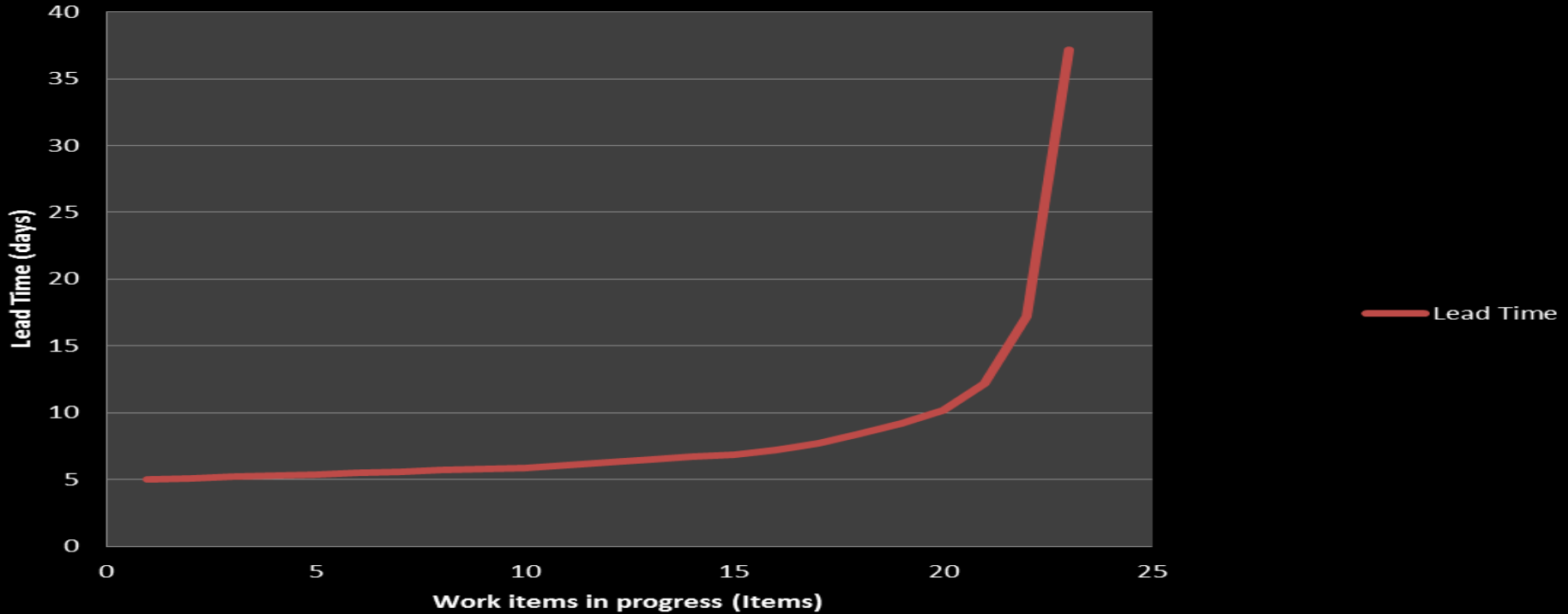




Enter the Tragedy of WIP

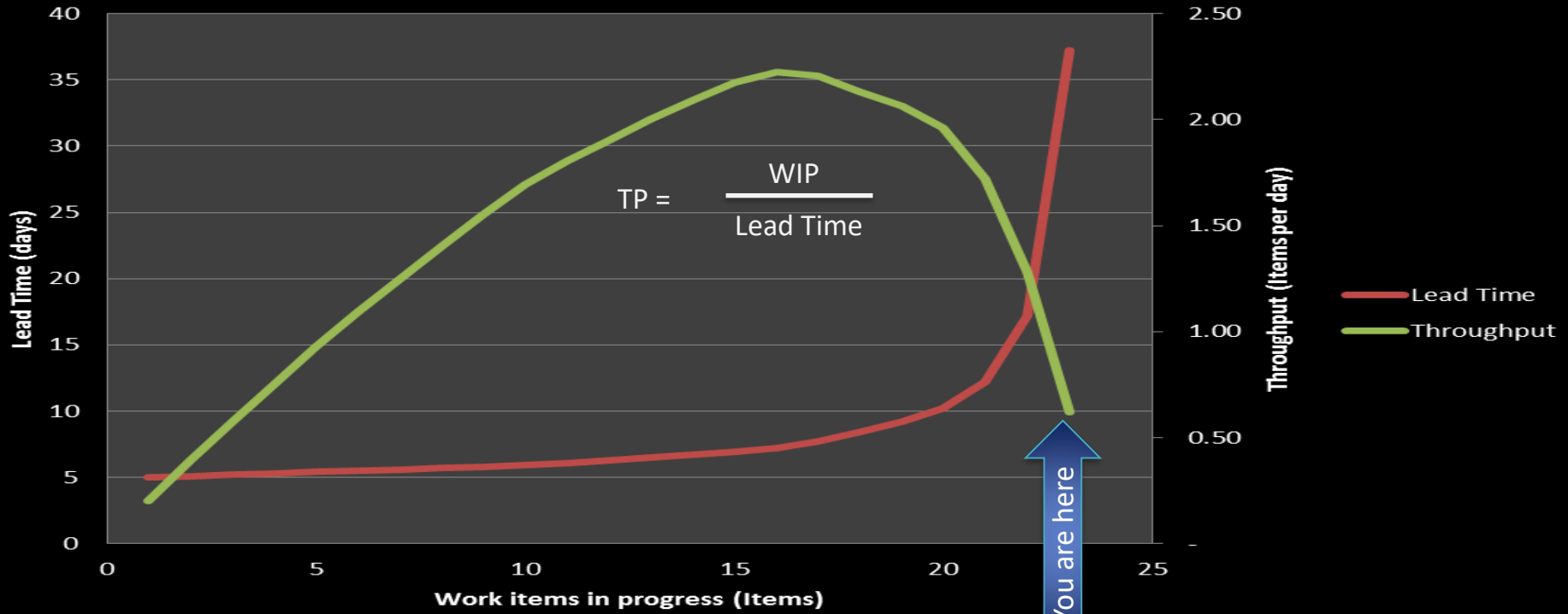
Work Interacts (through workers) ...

Lead Time vs. WIP



... and Impacts Throughput

Lead Time vs. WIP





Digging deeper:
Not all WIP is created equal

Need to reconsider approach

Repetitive

Unique



Most work items follow a very consistent pattern for implementation.

Items tend to be very different from each other in how they are implemented.

Ability to foresee arrival

Reactive

Planned



Work arrival rate and timing is not under control of the team.

Work is generally able to occur in a sequence and timing knowable in advance by the team.

Uniformity of business purpose

Disparate

Goal-aligned



Incoming work tends to come from many sources with many different associated business goals



Incoming work is generally aligned to a single set of business goals

Predictability of completion

Exploratory

Defined-path



Completion of the work requires an iterative approach and the solution cannot be accurately predicted in advance.

Correlates to Cynefin complex

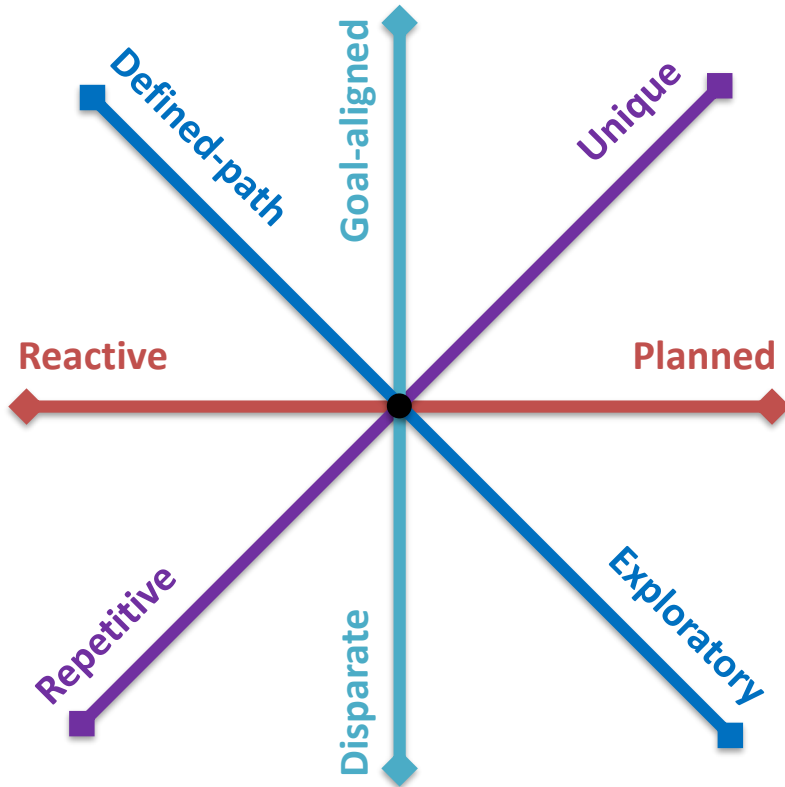
Completion of the work can follow a defined path and the nature of the solution is known in advance.

Correlates to Cynefin complicated



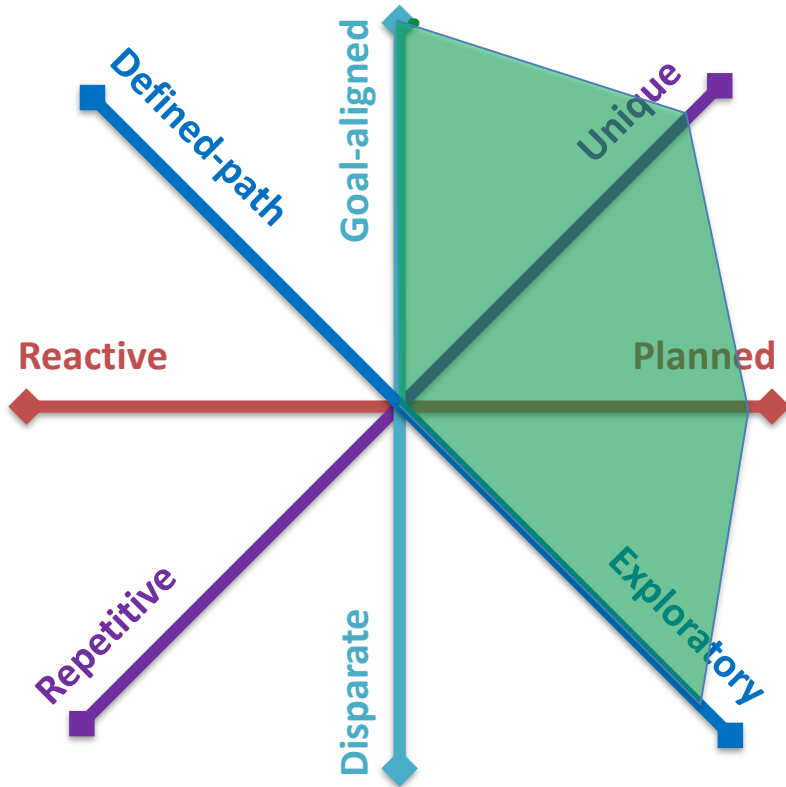
Patterns define team mandates

Understand team's work profile



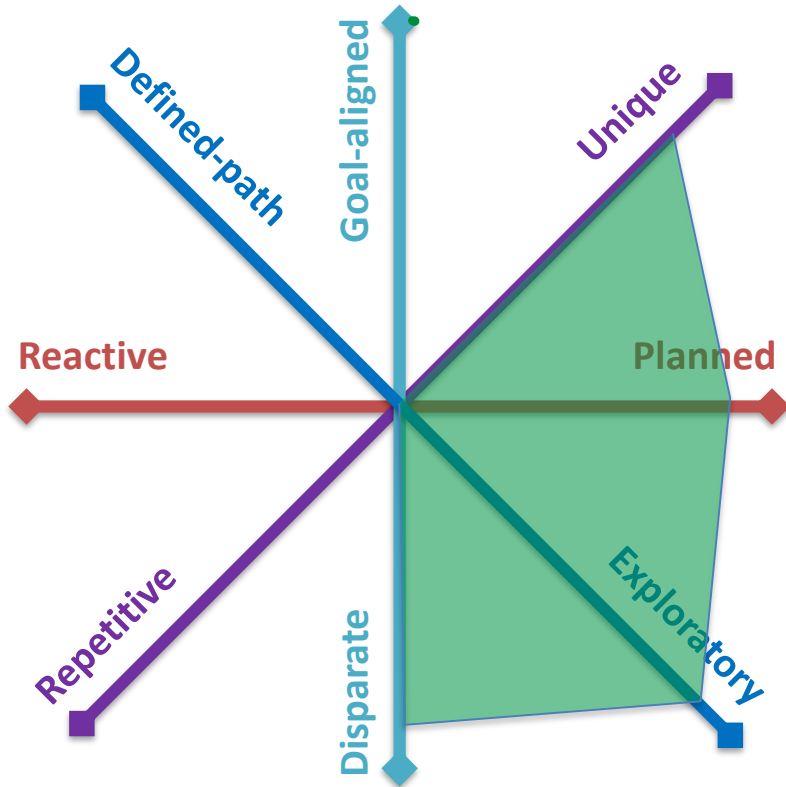
- Map a team's actual work patterns
- Look for multiple patterns in play
- Note the % of time/items in each pattern.

Example: New product feature team



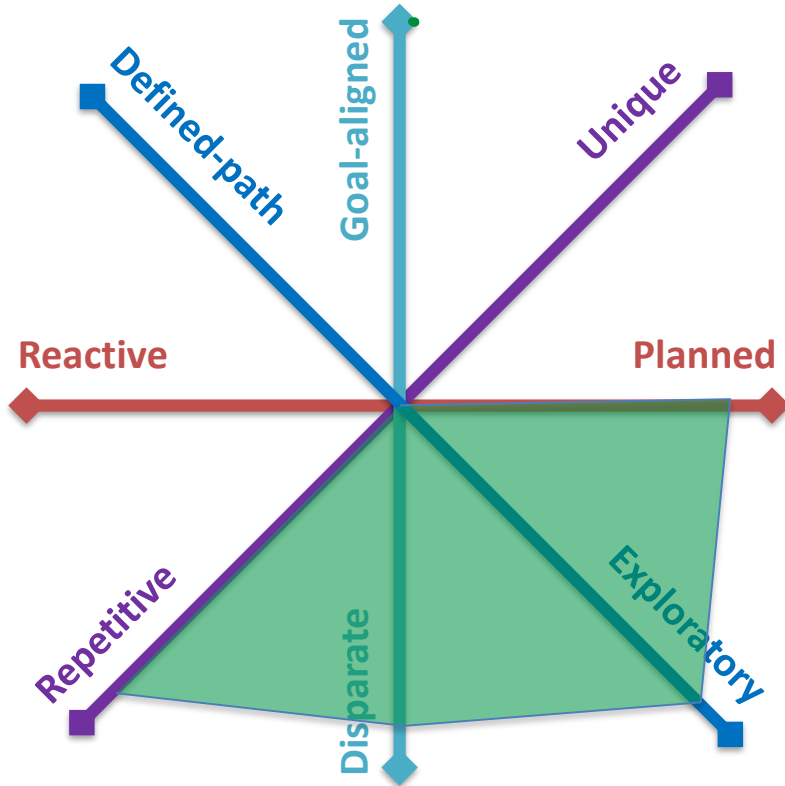
- **Goal-aligned:** Most work is focused on advancing a specific product's missions
- **Unique:** Each feature is different and requires a different path/approach
- **Planned:** There is generally a roadmap of features and desired outcomes
- **Exploratory:** Features require exploring user/stakeholder needs, iterating, and figuring things out

Example: Customer Love / Small Enhancement



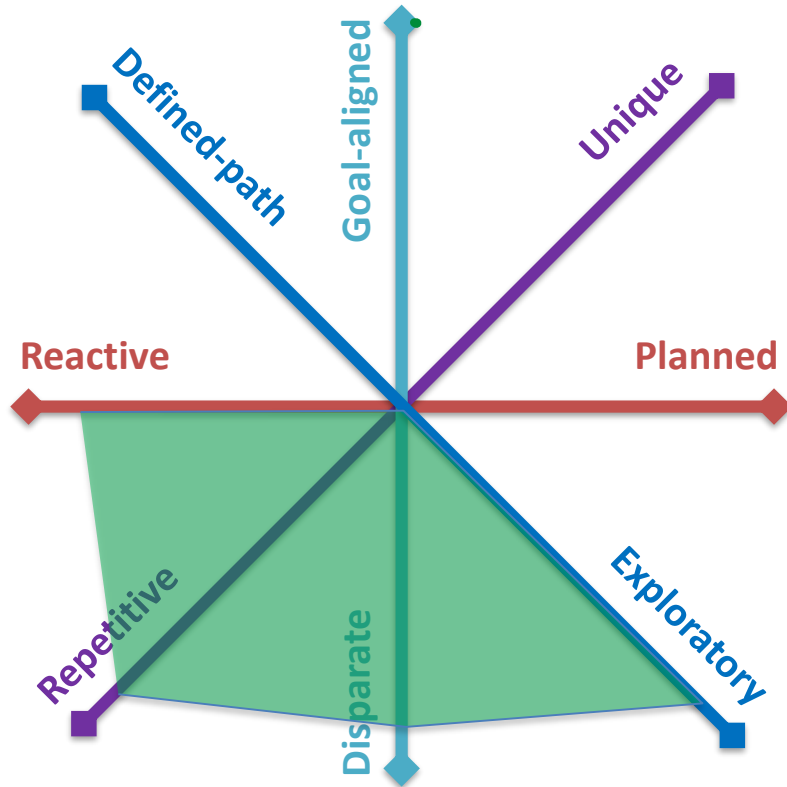
- **Disparate:** Work tends to be scattered across many themes
- **Unique:** Each enhancement is different and requires a different path/approach
- **Planned:** There is generally a roadmap of planned changes
- **Exploratory:** Items require exploring user/stakeholder needs, iterating, and figuring things out

Example: Predictive data modeling team



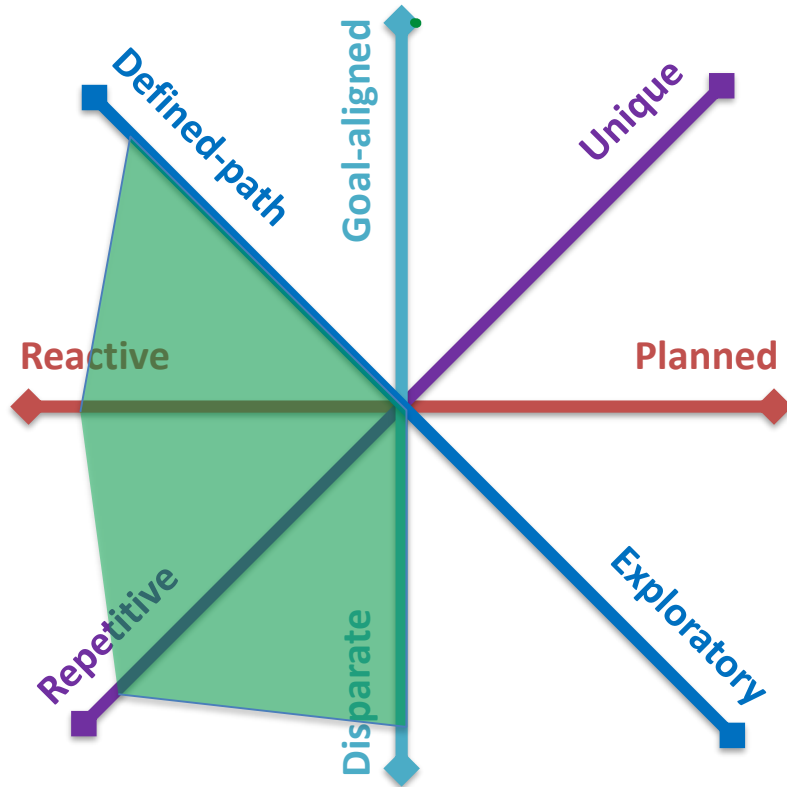
- **Disparate:** Work tends to be scattered across many themes
- **Repetitive:** Each model follows very similar meta-pattern for implementation approach
- **Planned:** There is generally a roadmap of required models/predictors
- **Exploratory:** Items require exploring the data, predictors, iterating, and figuring things out

Example: Bug SWAT / customer escalation team



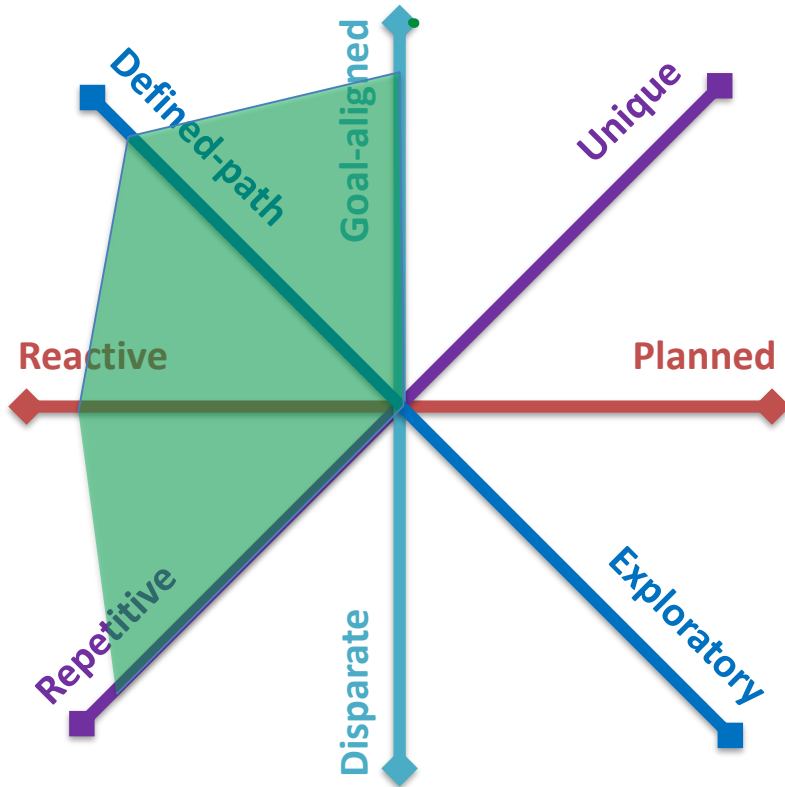
- **Disparate:** Work tends to be scattered across many themes
- **Repetitive:** Each issue follows very similar escalation, triage, and routing path. “Same fire drill”
- **Reactive:** No advance visibility in what the next most important issue will be, nor when it will arrive
- **Exploratory:** Solving each problem requires lots of “does this work?” tests

Example: OSS license review/rationalization



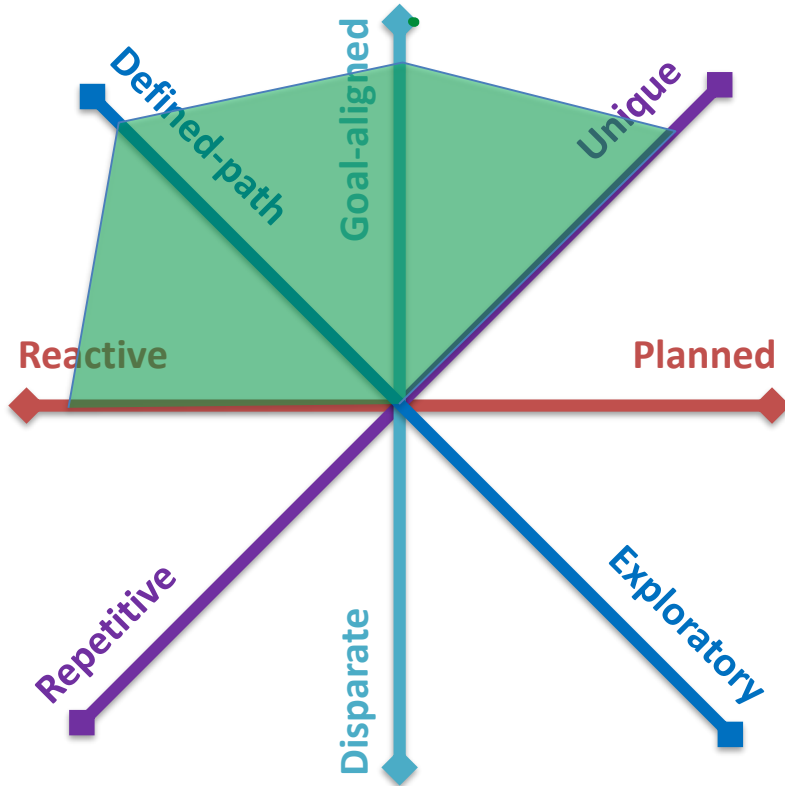
- **Disparate:** Work tends to be scattered across many themes
- **Repetitive:** Each issue follows very similar request and interaction path
- **Reactive:** No advance visibility in what the next request will be, nor when it will arrive
- **Defined-path:** The decision tree is fairly well-understood and the requirements are pre-defined

Example: L1 support team



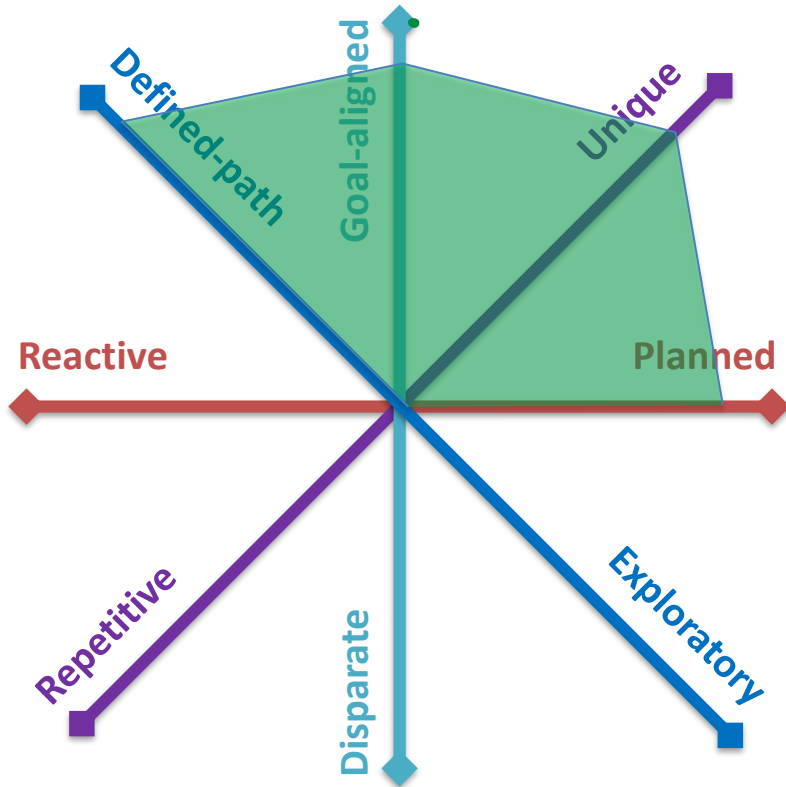
- **Goal-aligned:** Support teams tend to be focused on a specific category of issues or requests
- **Repetitive:** Each issue follows very similar request and escalation path
- **Reactive:** No advance visibility in what the next request will be, nor when it will arrive
- **Defined-path:** The decision tree for each type of issue/request is well-understood

Example: Employee relations team



- **Goal-aligned:** Support teams tend to be focused on a specific category of issues or requests
- **Unique:** Each incident requires very personalized handling based on the situation
- **Reactive:** No advance visibility in what the next request will be, nor when it will arrive
- **Defined-path:** The decision tree for each type of issue/request is well-understood (despite unique handling)

Example: “Project” team, e.g. Data Center deploy

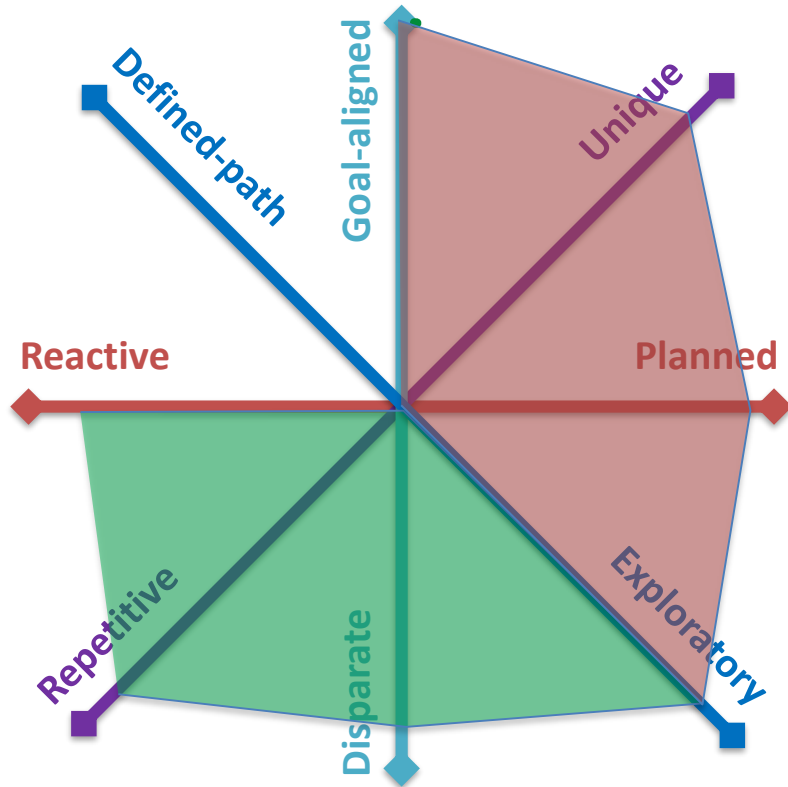


- **Goal-aligned:** Completely focused on a singular goal associated with project
- **Unique:** Each project is generally distinct and requires a different path/approach
- **Planned:** These are generally planned, including scheduling multiple interacting suppliers.
- **Defined-path:** To the extent possible, the overall plan and timing can be defined in advance.



Don't mix mandates

Example: Bug SWAT / customer escalation team

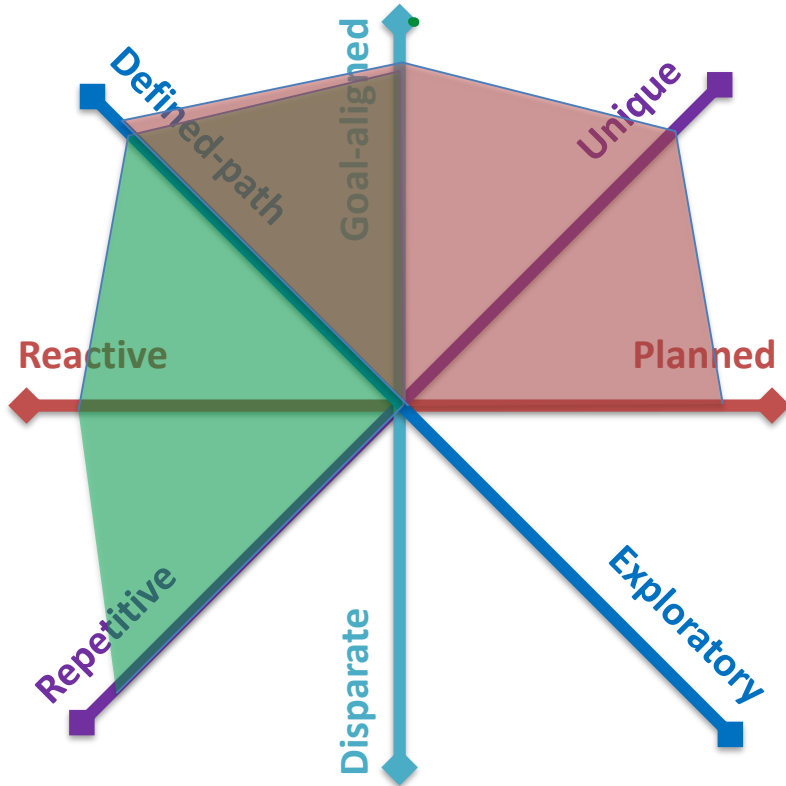


“You fixed that huge customer problem! Thank you! Can you turn that into a complete production-ready feature?”

“Yes, of course...”

boom

Example: L1 support team

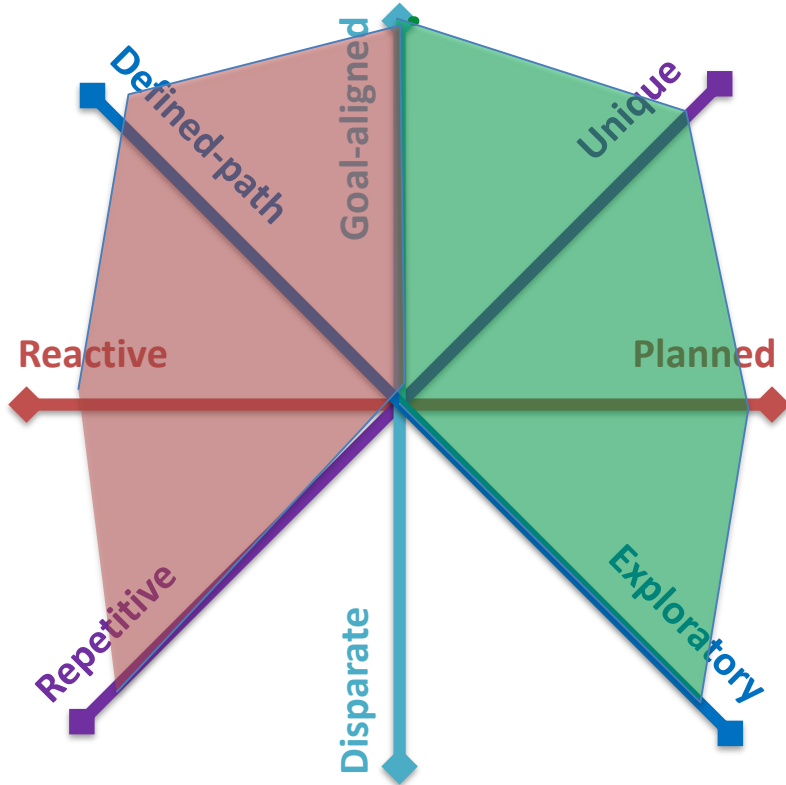


“You seem to have some spare capacity. Can you use that extra time to build some better frameworks to make your area easier to maintain?”

“Yes, of course...”

boom

Example: New product feature team



“You built this, so we think you should take over all the bug fixes for it, and also operate it. Can you do that?”

“Yes, of course...”

boom



Large-scale, directional
solutions to WIP pollution

Strategy #1

Generate alignment on outcomes & intent

- People make better decisions when they know the goals
- Fewer people have to be involved in decisions
- Fewer validation cycles of “Is this right?”

Objective & Key Results (OKRs) are one simple tool

Writing these is fast and easy ... IF you have clarity and cohesion as a leadership team;
Otherwise, it's time for the hard work.



True North

A **Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal** to inspire the organization



Key strategies

Our best collective decision on the most likely ways to achieve our True North



Strategy backgrounds

An A3-T or Strategy Canvas per strategy detailing:

- Background
- Current conditions
- Target conditions
- Root cause & analysis
- Likely initiatives w/ sponsors
- Initiative timeline / roadmap
- Metrics / evidence
- Follow-up

Strategy #2

Practice reduction in depth

- Clean the top to dramatically simplify the bottom
- Limiting WIP applies at every level
- Generating focus is a key role of every exec

Strategy #3

Inspire permission and safety when decentralizing

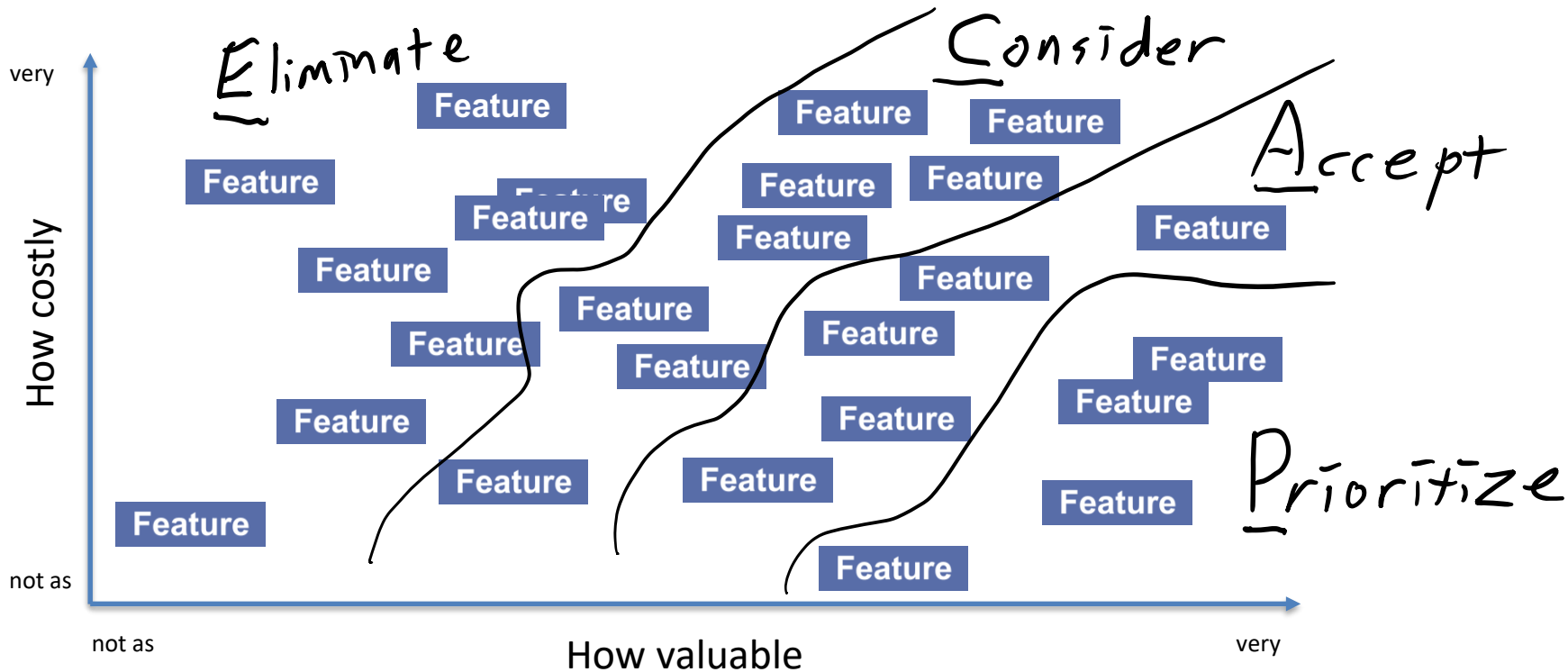
- Encourage safe-clarity behaviors
 - Back-brief
 - Work fit challenges
 - Learn from failure
 - Encourage experimentation
- Self-limiting behaviors: “put it down gently”



Tactics: Reduce stress to
increase capacity

Tactic #1

Eliminate excessive backlogs



Tactic #2

Clarify organizational change

- Communicate purpose, especially for small changes
- Introduce A3/OKR for large change initiatives
- Manage those change initiatives on a board, visualize how many there are

Objective

e.g. Own the Exchanges

Key Results

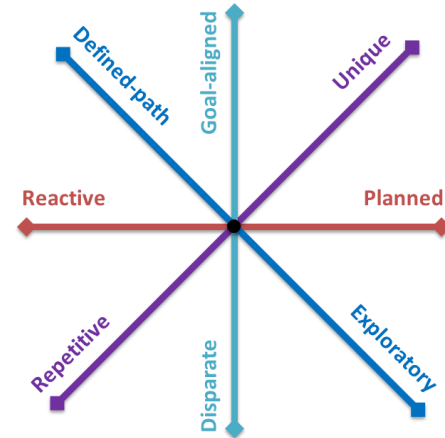
- *Best in class new member experience by external raters*
- *Lowest cost to member vs. top 3 competitors*

The image shows a detailed A3-T form for a team charter. The title is 'Proposed team charter' with a subtitle 'AS-T Theme: Design New Products without Delays'. The form is divided into several sections: 'PROBLEM STATEMENT' with a flowchart, 'TARGET STATEMENT' with another flowchart, 'ANALYSIS' with a flowchart, 'PROPOSED ACTION' with a list of bullet points, 'IMPLEMENTATION PLAN' with a table of tasks and dates, and 'CHECK AND ACT (verification and follow up)' with a Gantt chart. At the bottom, it includes a date field 'Date: xx/xx/xx' and a reporting unit 'Reporting Unit: Engineering tactical team'.

Tactic #3

Write team charters

- Make the mandate clear and unambiguous
- When things change, reflect on the change, be intentional, and make decisions based on that reflection.
- Challenge yourself INCREDIBLY hard before adding a differently shaped mandate
 - First, reimagine the value stream around the team
 - Then, consider if it is worth the disruption to add mandates



Summary of six approaches

Bigger, systemic fixes

- Generate alignment
- Reduction in depth
- Inspire permission and safety

Quick win fixes

- Eliminate excessive backlogs
- Clarify organizational change
- Write team charters

Bonus: Shift one mindset

Work with leaders to shift the culture
from “**prove you can't fit it in**” to “**prove you can fit it in**”
before accepting or refusing work



So what?

1. We've talked about WIP forever
2. We know WIP is a problem, and so do leaders in organizations
3. Saying it's a problem doesn't help, it just shames
4. The real struggle leaders have is "How do we solve it?"
5. **We need to look more carefully at the HOW of solving this**

Pick a team

Model their work

Write their charter

Contact me!



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