Stop Aligning, Start Agreeing

How to keep your head when, all around, people are losing theirs.

Thursday, October 8 | 11:00 AM ET

PMI Agile Online

Dave Sharrock

Stop Aligning, Start Agreeing

How to keep your head when all about you are losing theirs

Dave Sharrock

Certified Scrum Trainer · Certified Enterprise Coach (emeritus) · IncrementOne

PMI-AGILE · AGILE ONLINE · 8 OCTOBER 2026

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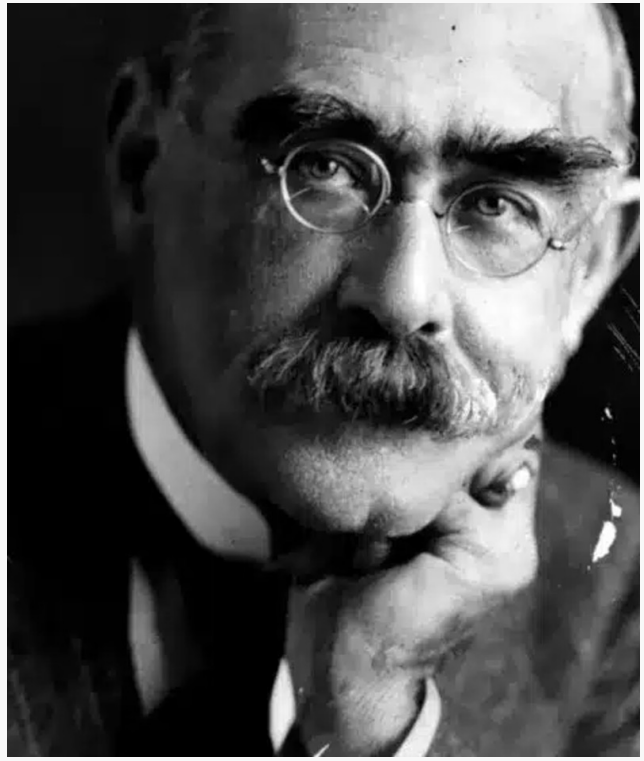
“If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you”

Rudyard Kipling, “If—” (1910)



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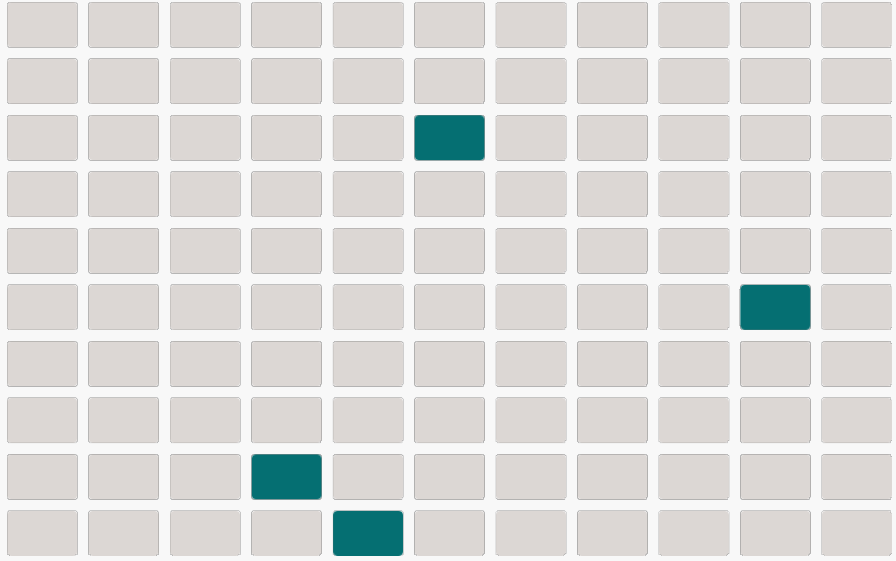
100 IT people. 100+ projects. Fewer than five finished a year.

I was on site for that one. 2012 to 2014.



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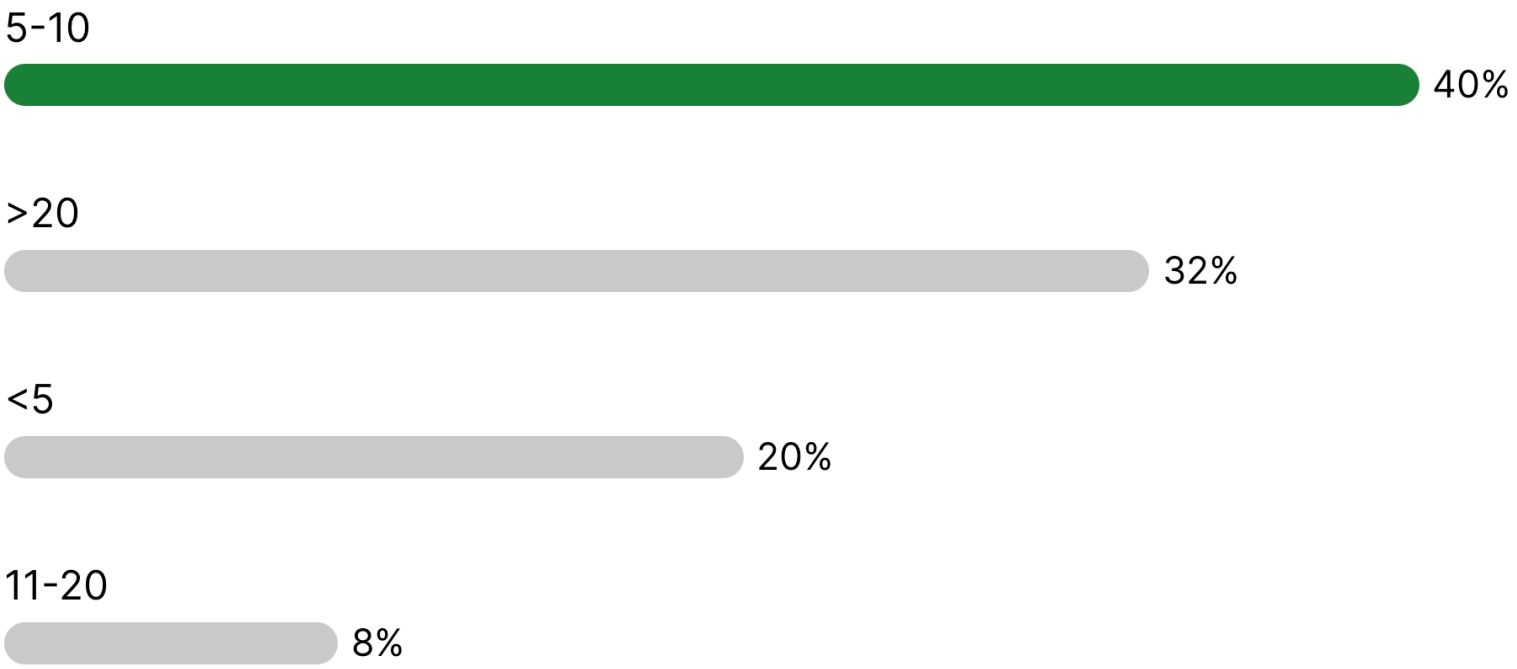
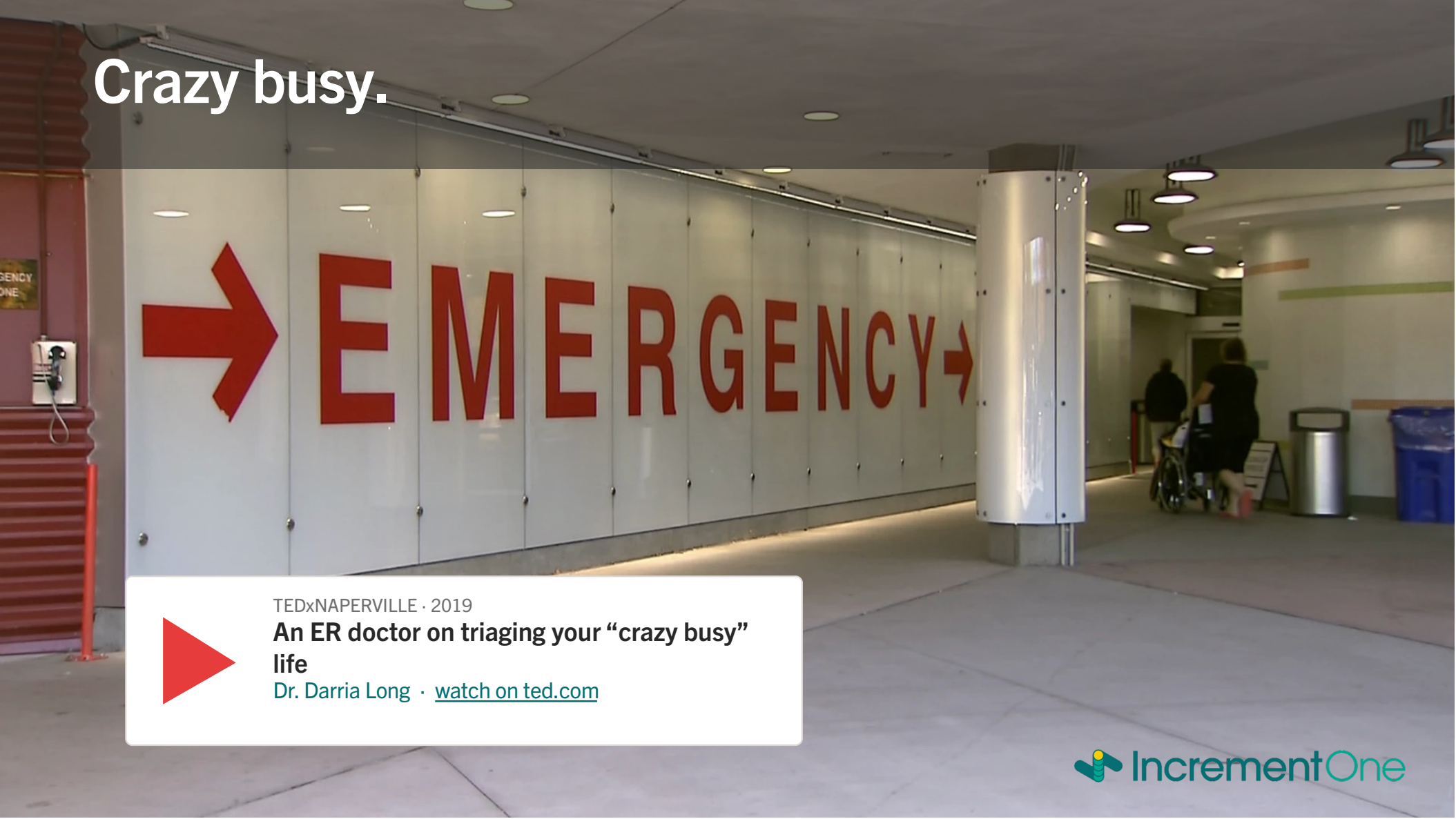
How many active projects is your team running right now?



Crazy busy.



TEDxNAPERVILLE · 2019

An ER doctor on triaging your “crazy busy” life

Dr. Darria Long · watch on ted.com

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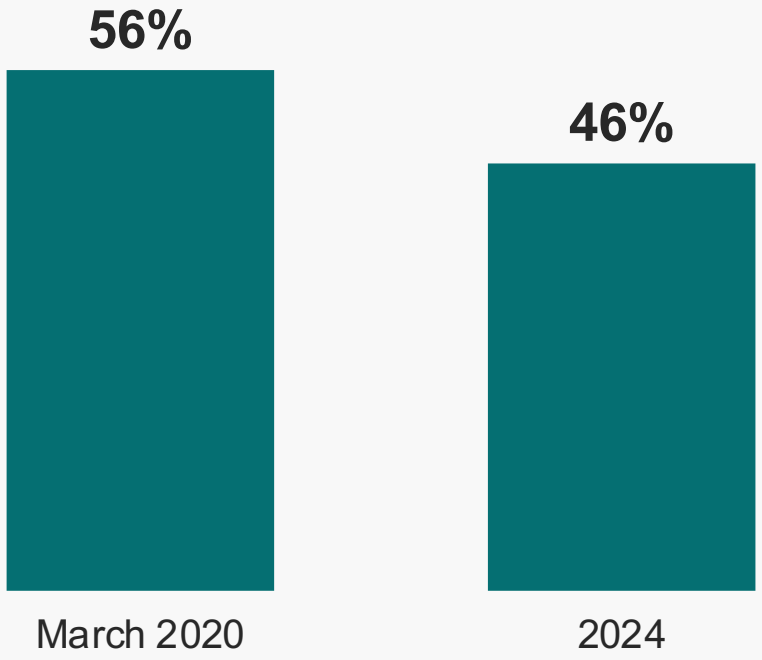
Fewer than half of us know what's expected at work



−10 pts

in employees who clearly know what's expected of them at work

Engagement over the same years: 36% → 31%

Gallup, US employees who strongly agree “I know what is expected of me at work”; 56% was the March 2020 high. Reported March 2025. Engagement: Gallup, Jan 2026.

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Pressure narrows the options we can see

AROUSAL RISES

options in view

As arousal rises, the range of cues we use narrows

Easterbrook 1959 · review

...AND IT'S UNCONTROLLABLE

options in view

Mild, uncontrollable stress quickly impairs prefrontal control

Arnsten 2009, Nat Rev Neurosci · review

...AND TIME IS SCARCE

options in view

Scarcity of time makes us tunnel on what's scarce

Shah, Mullainathan & Shafir 2012, Science

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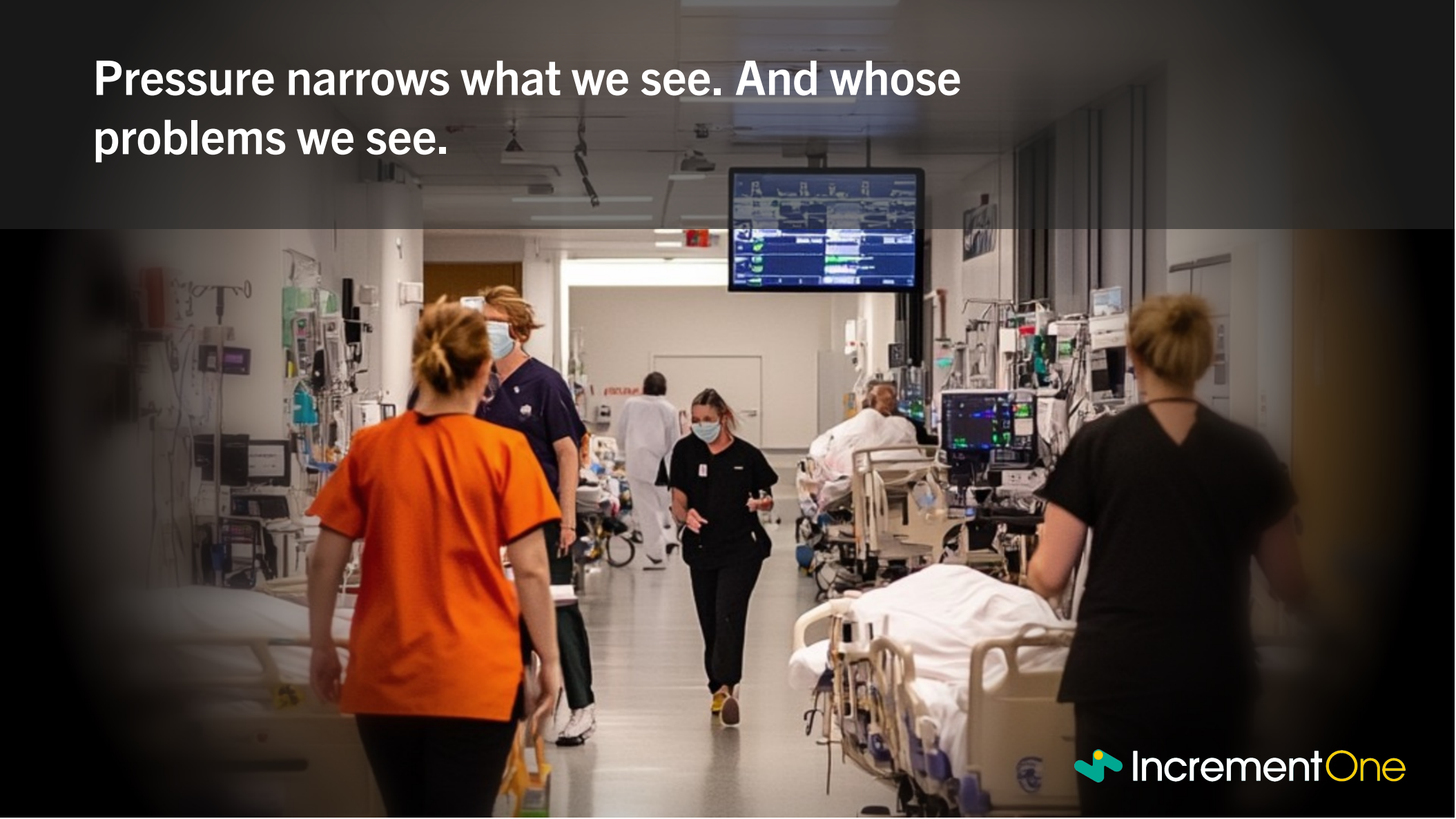
Pressure narrows what we see. And whose problems we see.
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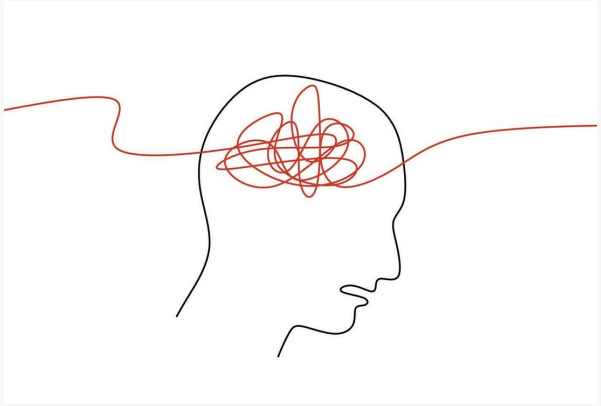
Scale 1: the brain



THE BRAIN

narrows the cues it uses

Easterbrook 1959 · Arnsten 2009 · Mullainathan & Shafir 2012

THE TEAM

falls back on what it knows

Staw, Sandelands & Dutton 1981 · BCG, HBR 2026

THE ORGANISATION

loses sight of the whole

Milwaukee, first-hand, 2012–14

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What delivery teams feel first

Paralysis — lots of talk, no action

Hyperactivity — lots of action, no progress

Tunnel vision — progress on the wrong thing

HBR

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW · JUL–AUG 2026

The False Alignment Trap

Dhar, Ellmer & Jameson · read on hbr.org

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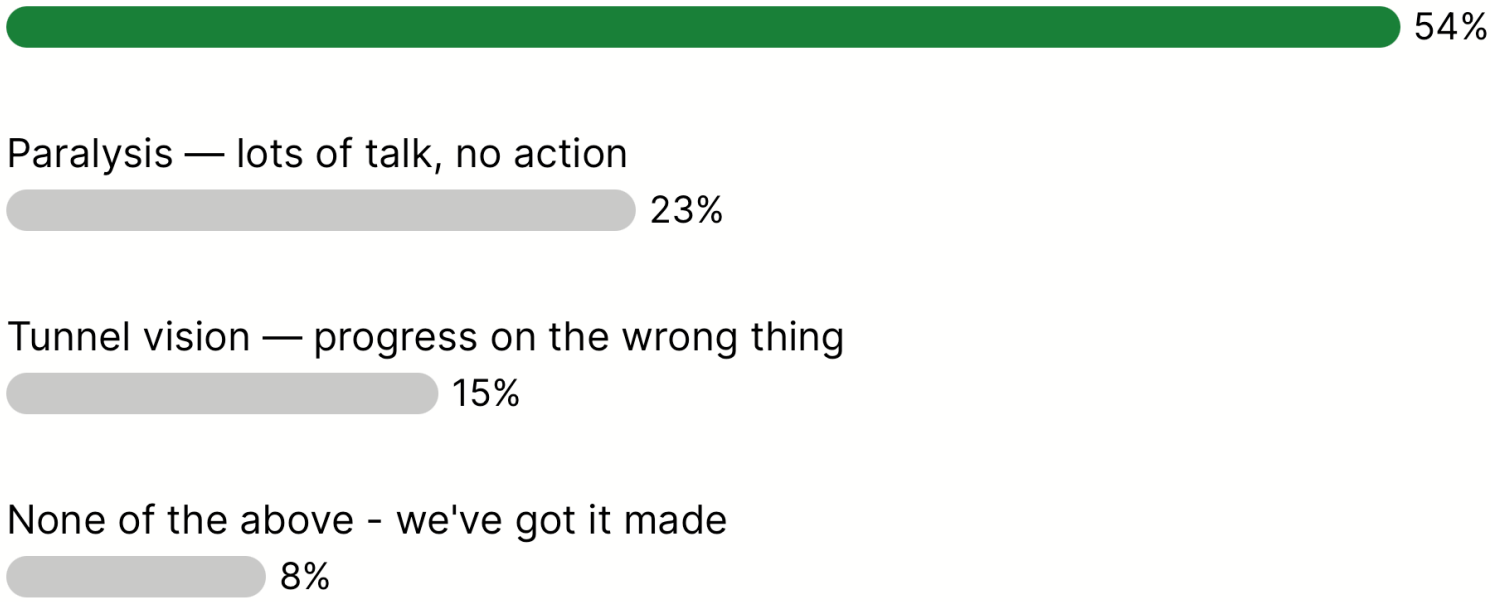
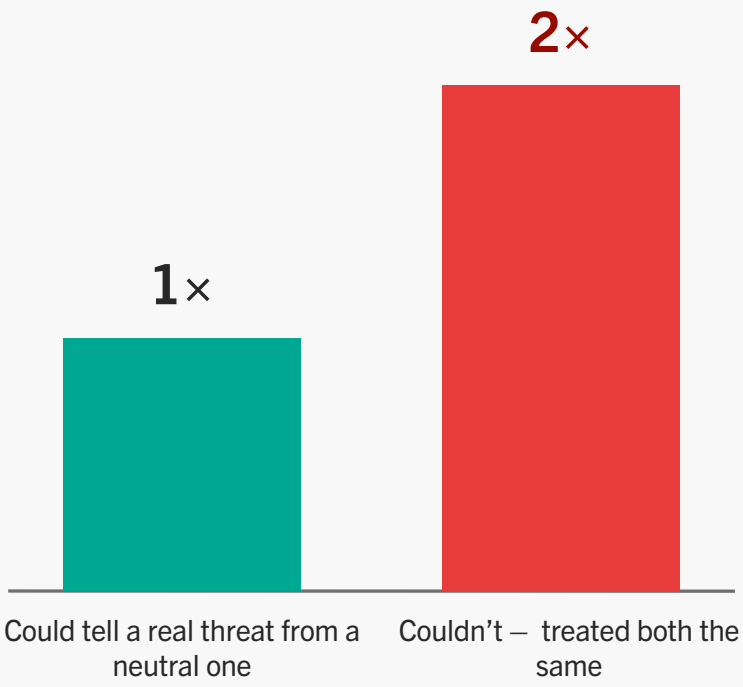
Paralysis, hyperactivity or tunnel vision: which is your team?



Can't tell a threat from noise? Twice the stress hormones.



Sorting threat from noise is the skill. Triage is how you practise it.

Ray & Sapolsky 1992, Am J Primatology — high-ranking wild male baboons; 'twice' as summarised by Sapolsky. Cited by Long, TEDxNaperville 2019.

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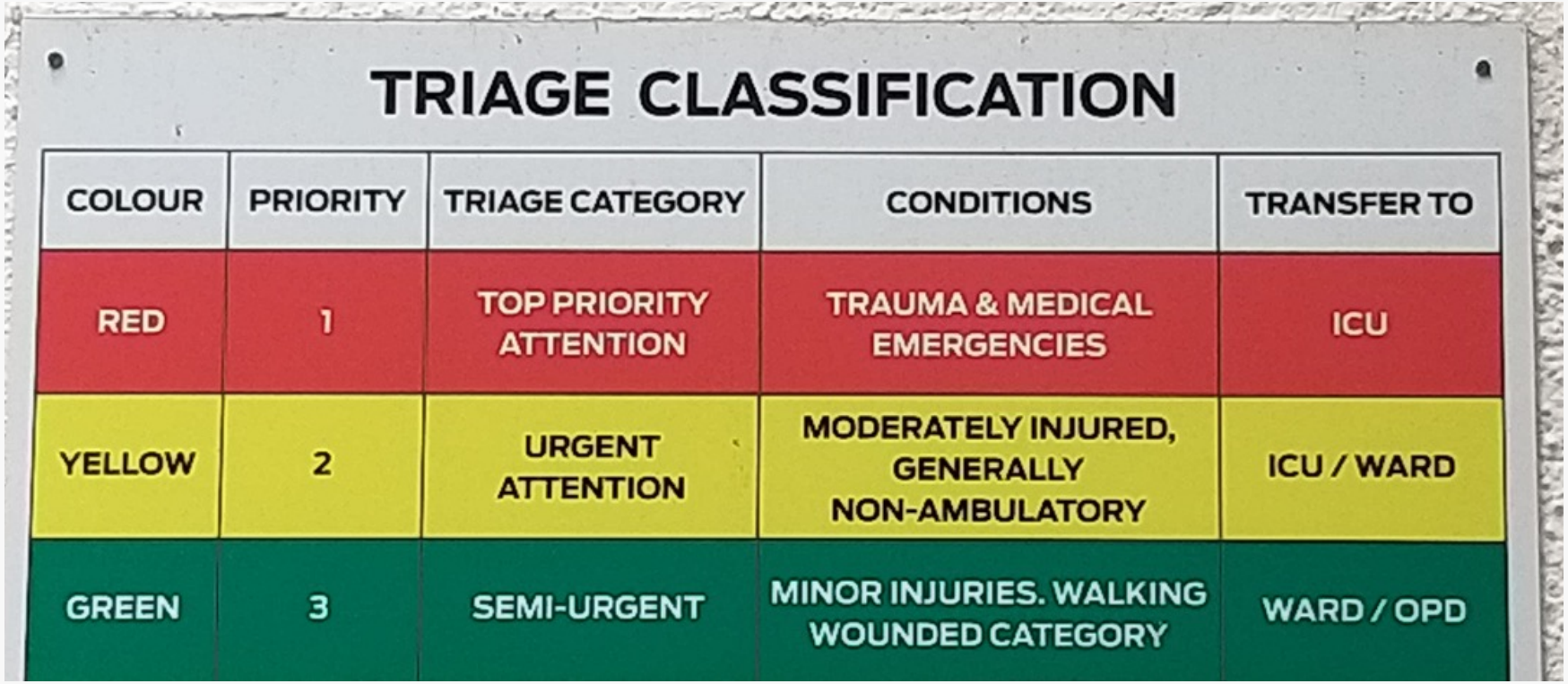
Ready Mode: triage relentlessly.



TRIAGE CLASSIFICATION

COLOUR	PRIORITY	TRIAGE CATEGORY	CONDITIONS	TRANSFER TO
RED	1	TOP PRIORITY ATTENTION	TRAUMA & MEDICAL EMERGENCIES	ICU
YELLOW	2	URGENT ATTENTION	MODERATELY INJURED, GENERALLY NON-AMBULATORY	ICU / WARD
GREEN	3	SEMI-URGENT	MINOR INJURIES. WALKING WOUNDED CATEGORY	WARD / OPD

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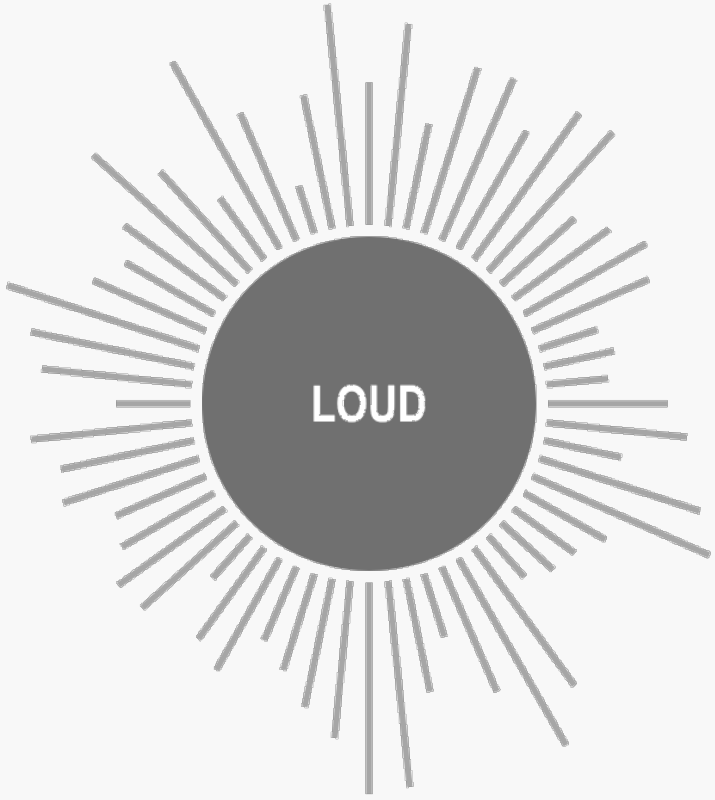
The noisiest patient is not always the reddest.



quiet

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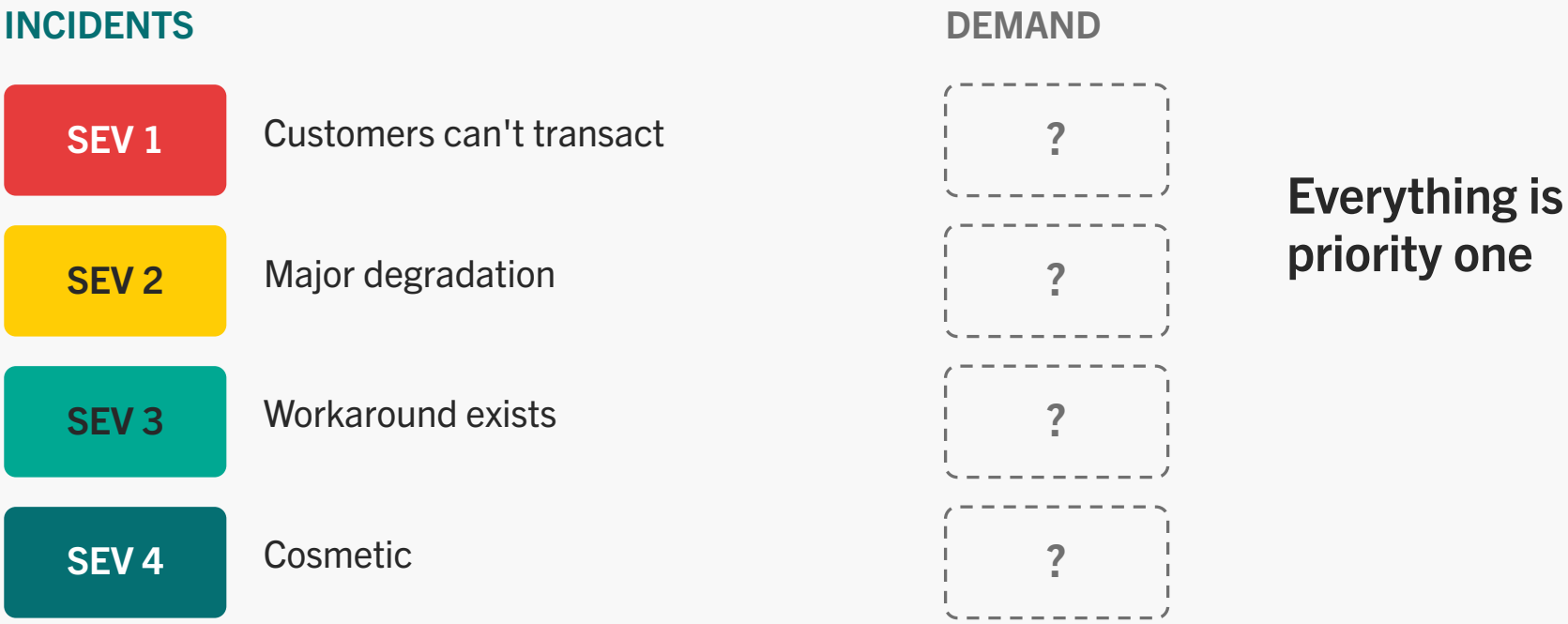
You already triage. Only when it's on fire.



Everything is priority one

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What makes a triage rule well-formed

1 OBSERVABLE

seen in seconds, not argued

2 FEW AND ORDERED

a handful of yes/no questions

3 CATEGORICAL

a colour, not a score

4 AGREED IN ADVANCE

shared before the pressure

5 A NAMED STOP

black exists on purpose

6 RE-APPLIED

fast over perfect; re-triage

START triage, Hoag Hospital & Newport Beach Fire Dept 1983 · Sull & Eisenhardt, Simple Rules · Green & Mehr 1997

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How one portfolio made its rules visible

RISK & REGULATORY	STRATEGIC	TACTICAL	BAU
Must-do	**First priority**	**Second priority**	**Run, not change**
Regulatory mandates and resolver targets	Tied to board commitments. 3+ groups → central intake and quarterly planning	Value delivered vs capacity used. Fewer than 3 groups → business-unit intake	Repeatable work managed inside one business unit
→ red: in, no debate	→ in the plan, if it fits	→ competes for what's left	→ not on the portfolio

All work must be defined to be prioritised — problem, solution, benefit, cost.
Requests sent straight to functions quietly ate the capacity the plan needed.

A Canadian financial services company, 2024 quarterly planning (anonymised). Dave Sharrock, first-hand.

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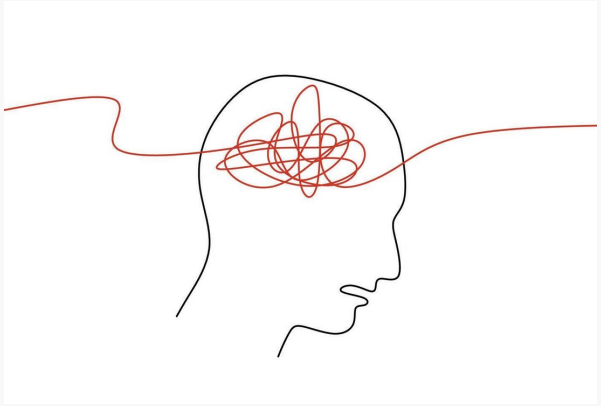
Scale 2: the team



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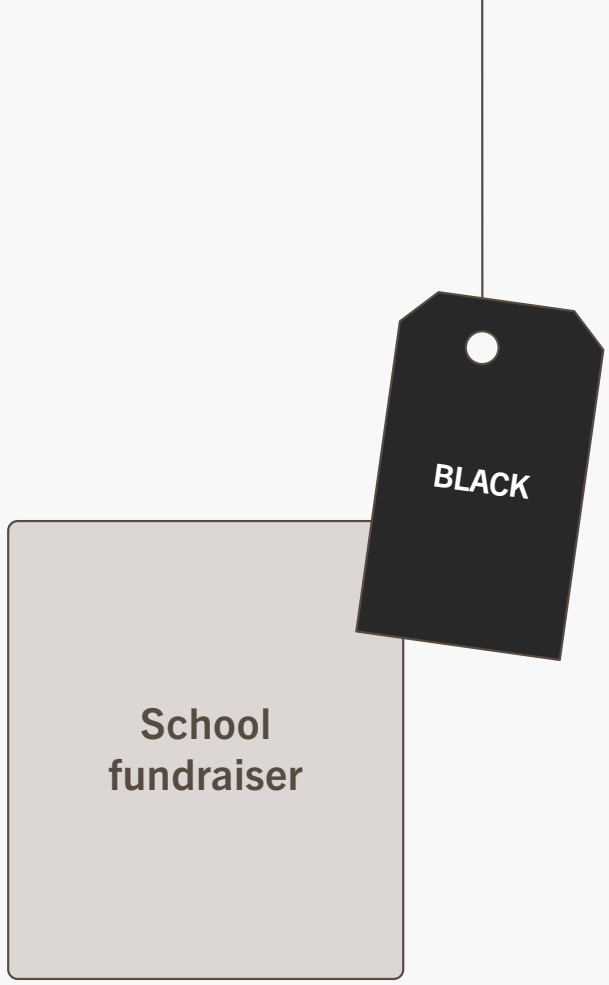
Her black tag: stepping down from the school fundraiser.



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The hard black tag isn't the fundraiser.

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Tag black by rule, not by mood

TAG BLACK IF ANY ONE IS TRUE

NO TRADE OFFS	No sponsor will give anything up to keep it
WINDOW CLOSED	Its value date passes before we could start
THREE CYCLES	In the waiting room three cycles; never turned red
DUPLICATE	Something else already delivers the outcome
"FOR JOAN"	It exists to placate someone, not to deliver

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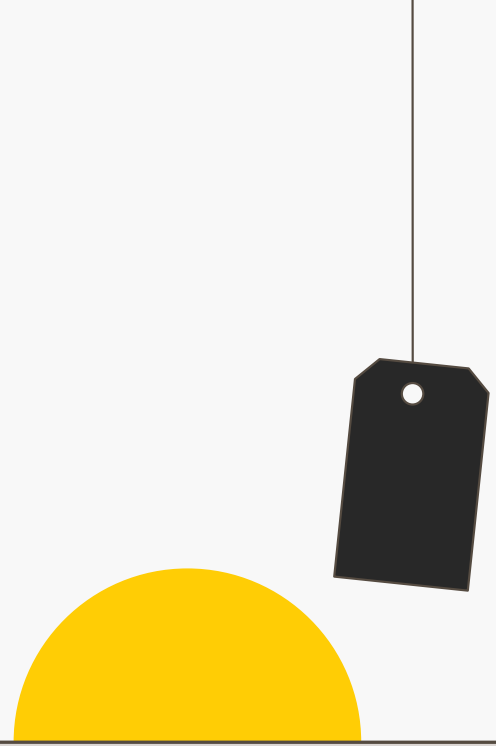
Rules made before the pressure make hard calls survivable.



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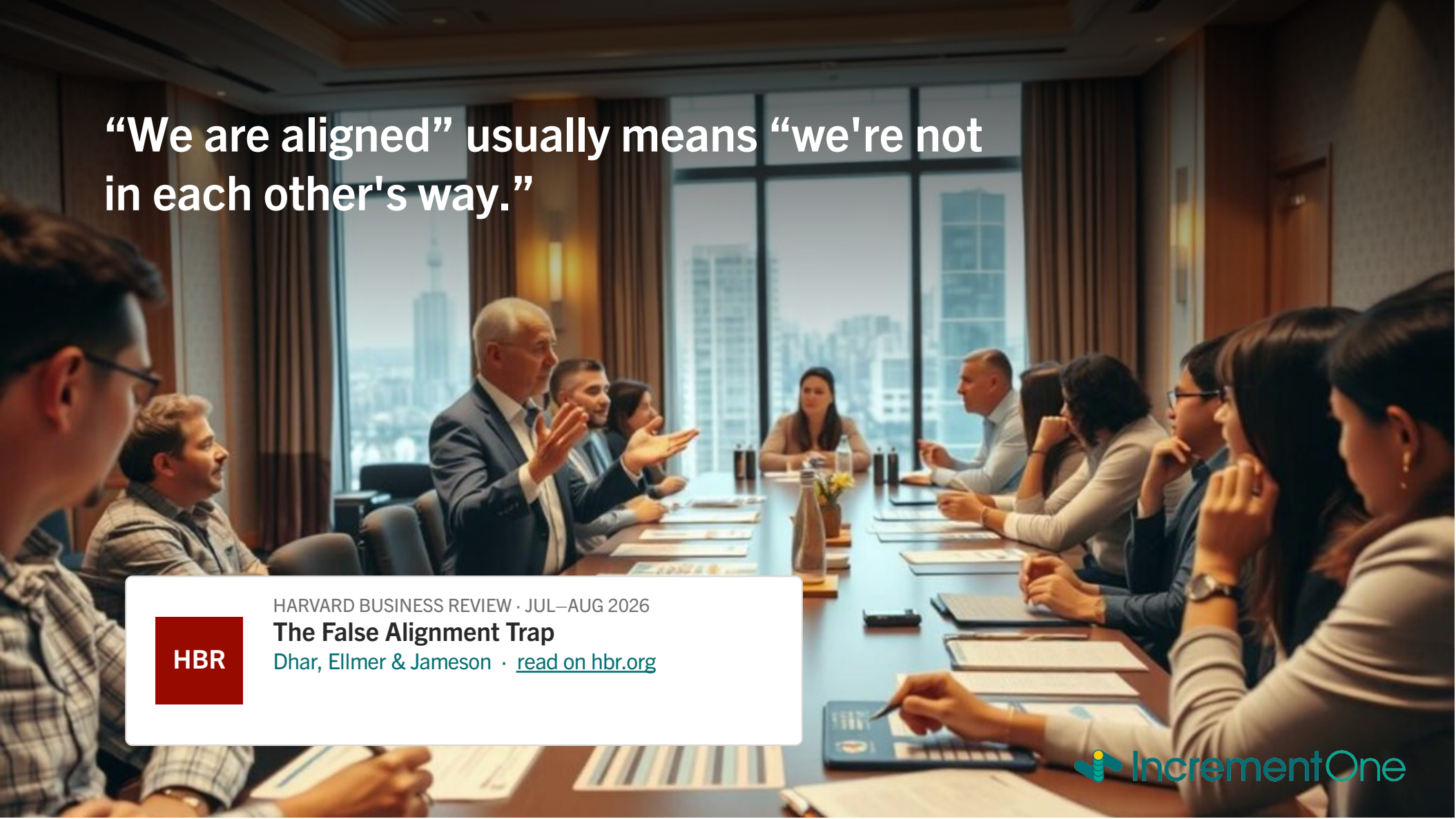
“Patients’ treating physicians will not make triage decisions.”

— Model crisis-triage policy, University of Pittsburgh (White et al.), 2020

The hardest calls — black included — go to a triage officer, trained in advance, applying rules agreed before the crisis.


“We are aligned” usually means “we're not in each other's way.”
HBR
HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW · JUL–AUG 2026
The False Alignment Trap
Dhar, Ellmer & Jameson · read on hbr.org
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13 executives. One plan. Three companies.

10 of 13: “very clear” or “clear” on how the company would change

8 of 13: believed the team was aligned

Asked to write it down: three different companies

Same system, just bigger

Standing alone, no parent

New markets, new people

Dhar, Ellmer & Jameson, “The False Alignment Trap”, HBR Jul–Aug 2026 · one BCG case

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“Aligned”: five dollars.

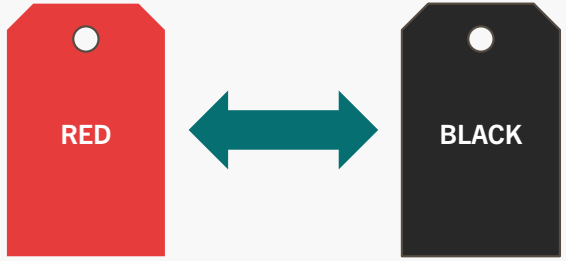
The cost test

ALIGNMENT

Everyone nodded

Nothing given up

AGREEMENT



Someone named a trade-off

…and the people it impacts are agreed

The test: what did anyone give up?

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Alignment is everyone nodding. Agreement is someone naming what they'll give up.

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Active poll

23

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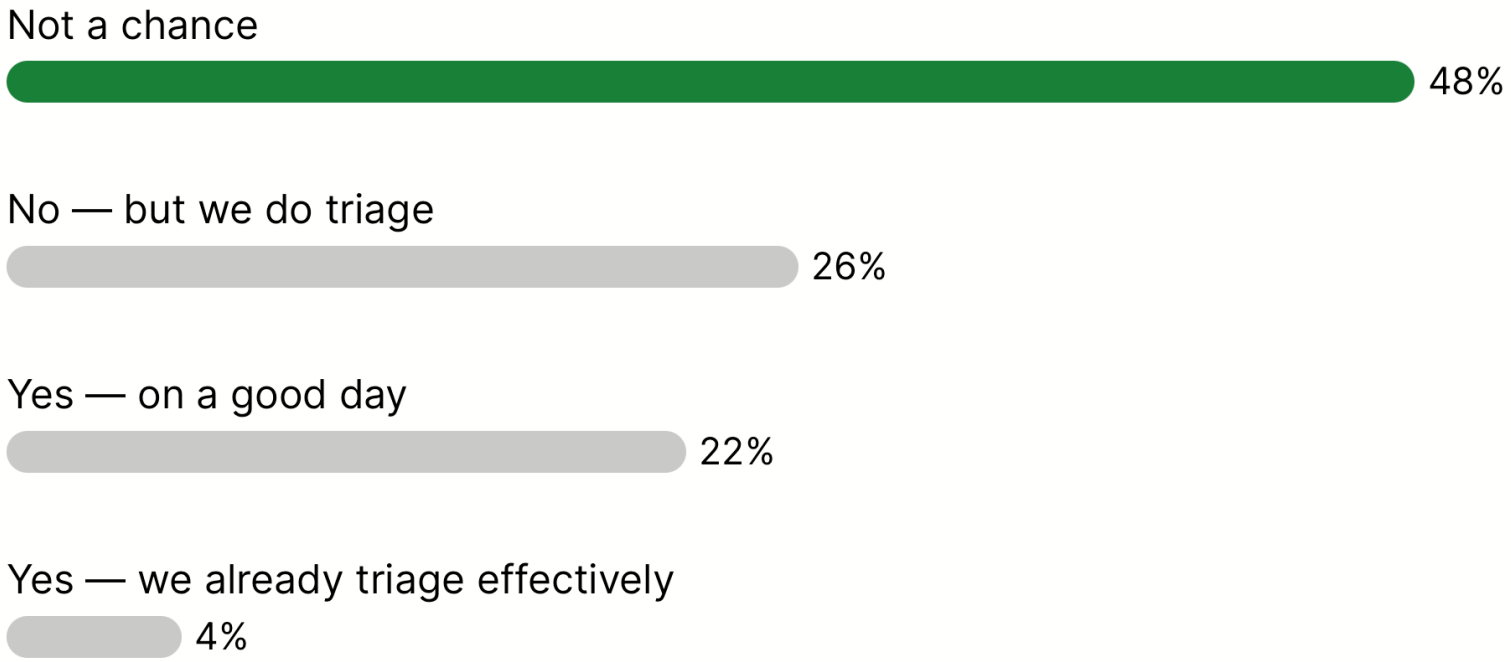
Could your backlog be triaged in thirty seconds an item?



Plan the next 30 days, not the whole backlog

THE WHOLE BACKLOG

Plan all of it: everything is priority one, every re-plan hurts

THE NEXT 30 DAYS

Red: must-do

Priority 1 | Priority 2 | Priority 3

~2 sprints of capacity — the cost is visible at once

Everything else → not this month, maybe next month

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Not this month. Take a seat. We'll call you.
GROW
STEP 3
STOP
PLEASE HAVE A SEAT & WAIT TO BE CALLED BY THE NURSE
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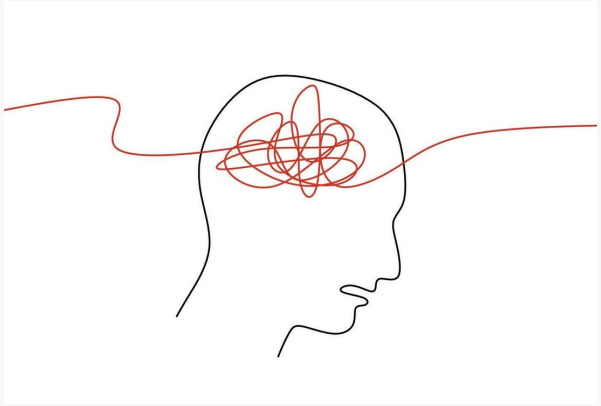
Scale 3: the organisation



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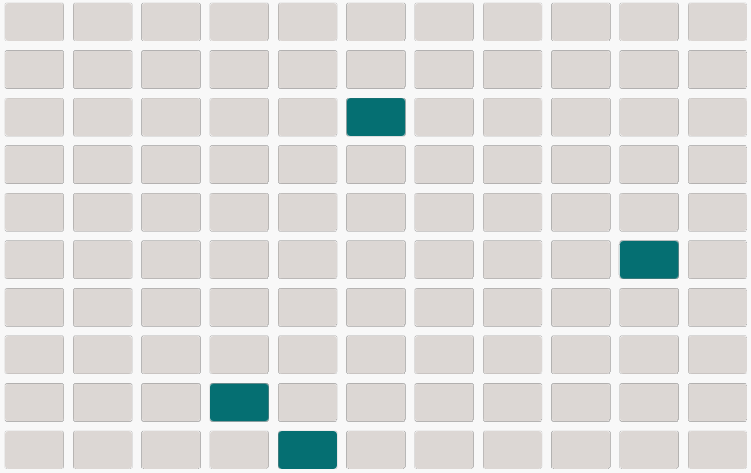
Milwaukee, resolved

BEFORE



100+ in progress

fewer than 5 finished a year

AFTER

5+ VPs agreed what came off

5 in progress

5–10 finished a quarter

Dave Sharrock, first-hand, 2012–2014. An observation, not a controlled study.

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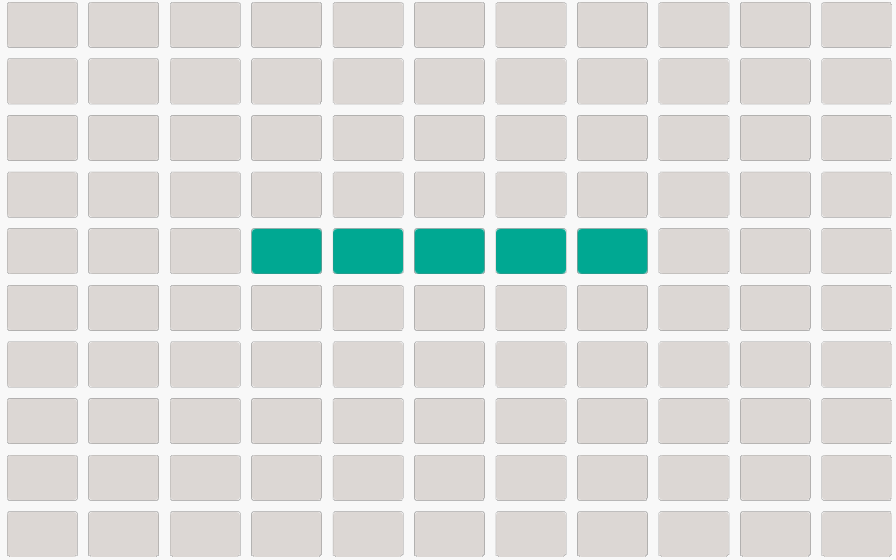
More than five VPs agreed what came off.



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Triage relentlessly.
Agreement has a price.
Plan only for near term.

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Thank you.

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