Executive Creative Workshop (ECW)

An exercise to solve any problem, without unstructured discussion, by TallGrass

TALLGRASS.AI
data-driven decisions®

INTRO

Creative problem solving and clear decision-making is what separates good designers and managers from the best. The problem with anything that requires creative & critical thinking however, is that it's easy to get lost, lose focus and fall into the trap of having useless, open-ended, unstructured discussions. Projects stall, teams lose momentum, and everything goes over-budget, causing many products and services to be released late and full of compromises, all because the team is so fatigued from working on endless, unprioritized problems.

The solution:

Replace all open, unstructured discussion with clear process.

At irst this might feel weird, but the only way you're going to see the results of this is to try it for yourself. The freedom to discuss might seem conducive to creativity, or more informed decision-making, when it's in fact the enemy. Structure and discipline create the freedom needed to be creative.

The Executive Creative Workshop is an exercise is an easy way to make faster decisions and quick direction. The WCW is inspired by the core principles of the Design Sprint:

- Work together, alone

- Tangible items are better than discussion

- Getting started is more important than being right

- Don't rely on creativity

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What to use this exercise for:

Anything which requires a group of people to make decisions, solve prob-
lems or discuss challenges. It's always good to frame an ECW session with a
broad topic, here are some examples:

- The conversion low of our checkout

- Our internal design process

- Improving our ofice environment

- How we organise events

- Keeping up with our competition

- Improving sales low

- Tactics for the next sales push

Supplies you'll need:

- Rectangular sticky-notes, we like yellow

- Square sticky-notes (2 different colours, we like pink and blue)

- Sticky dots, 2 different colours

- Sharpies or whiteboard markers (has to be fat marker, so that partici-
pants are forced to write short notes)

- A Time Timer

- A nice playlist of focus music

Ideal group size

To make this exercise worthwhile you'll need a range of input and opinions, but you don't want so many people that the logistics of running the exercise gets difficult. You can technically use the ECW with just 2 people, although we usually recommend a minimum of 3. An ideal size is 4 to 6 people, and the maximum is 8 (more than this and the whiteboard gets crowded and the sticky-notes become hard to keep track of).

Total time needed

The times we've suggested in the exercise are more of a guideline and may only be relevant to the irst time you run through it. The exercise itself usually takes between 30–45 mins. For larger groups (or tackling multiple problems) all the steps can take up to 1.5 hours.

Choose a moderator

You absolutely need to select someone on the team to take the role of the moderator. They can join in on the process but they must focus on making sure discussions don't break out and they need to keep the time. We rotate this role at TALLGRASS

Steps

1. Start with things that are working

2. Capture all the problems

3. Prioritize problems

4. Reframe the problems as standardized challenges

5. Ideate without discussion

6. Prioritise solutions

7. Decide what to execute on

8. Make solutions actionable

STEP 1: Start with things that are working
🕐 10 mins

Materials: Square sticky-notes (pick a colour) and markers

Start by drawing a sailboat on a whiteboard. It needs to have water line half way down, a billowing sail, and an anchor that hangs down below the water. The top half (the wind in the sail) represents things that are moving us forward or working well, and the bottom half (the anchor) represents things that are holding us back or not going well. Make sure there's enough space for a good number of sticky-notes in each half.
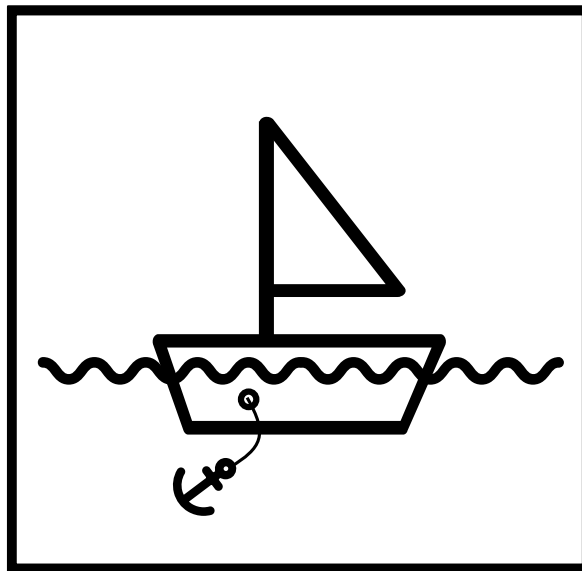

The irst step is for everybody in the team to sit at a table and (without discussion) spend 4 minutes writing all the things that are working well with the topic. These can really be anything from "we all get along well as a team" to "the quality of our designs lately has been really high". Really anything that people are happy about and want to continue. People should write one problem per sticky-note, and once the 4 minutes are up, each person will have a pile of sticky-notes in front of them.

Encourage the team to try and write as many as possible. The moder-ator now selects one person at a time to stand up at the sailboat and very quickly explain each sticky-note as they stick them in the top half. Nobody else in the team is allowed to speak here unless they don't understand something on a sticky-note. The moderator should give no more than 1 or 2 minutes per person. Make sure to not spark any dis-cussion. Only allow questions to clarify the content of a sticky-note.

ou won't actually end up using these sticky-notes going forward, but it's really important to start with the positives for two reasons:

1. Thinking about the positive things irst makes it easier to ind corre-sponding negativesoblems in the next step.

2. If the group starts with negatives immediately, the atmosphere can quickly turn to criticism and complaining, instead of problem solving.
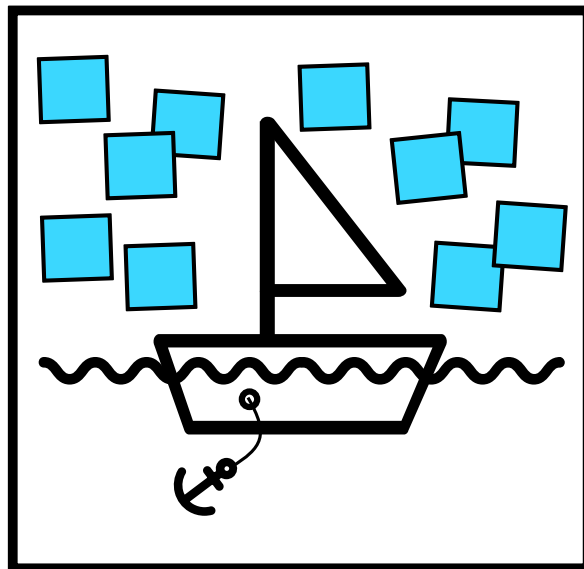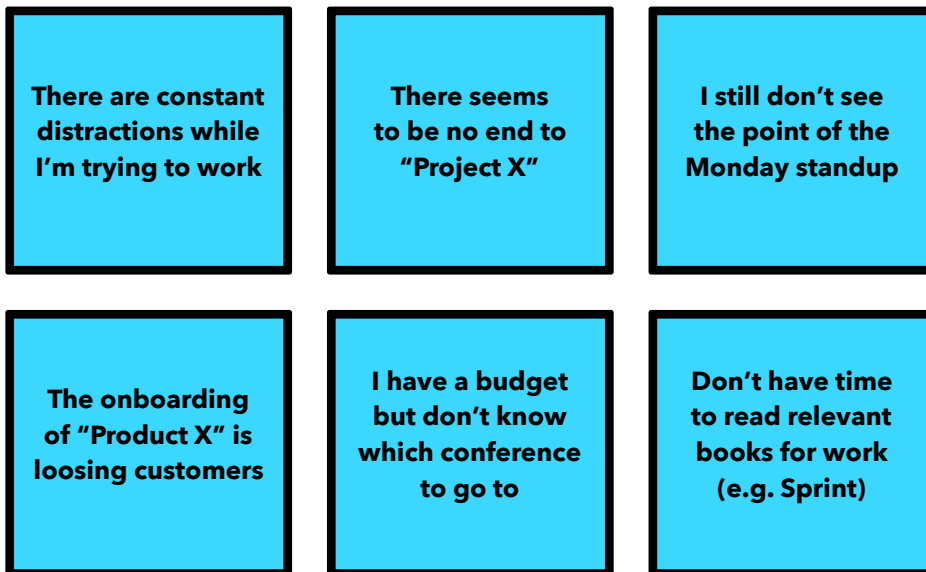
STEP 2: Capture all the problems
## 🕐 5 mins

Materials: Square sticky-notes (same colour) and markers

Now the team spends 4 minutes writing all the challenges, annoyances, mistakes or concerns with the topic. Again in silence, without any dis - cussion. These can really be anything from "I don't feel like we're mak - ing progress" to "I feel like project X is getting more attention than my project". Really anything that is bugging us. Encourage the team to try and write down as many problems as possible. Our experiences shows that the most important problems arise quickly.

There are constant distractions while I'm trying to work	There seems to be no end to "Project X"	I still don't see the point of the Monday standup
The onboarding of "Product X" is loosing customers	I have a budget but don't know which conference to go to	Don't have time to read relevant books for work (e.g. Sprint)

This time the team does not read out their sticky-notes. Instead, when the 4 minutes is up, the moderator tells everyone to stand up at the same time and put all their sticky-notes in the bottom half of the sail - boat. This should take about 1 minute.

The reason this is done without explanation is to avoid any personal criticisms. Let the sticky-notes speak for themselves.
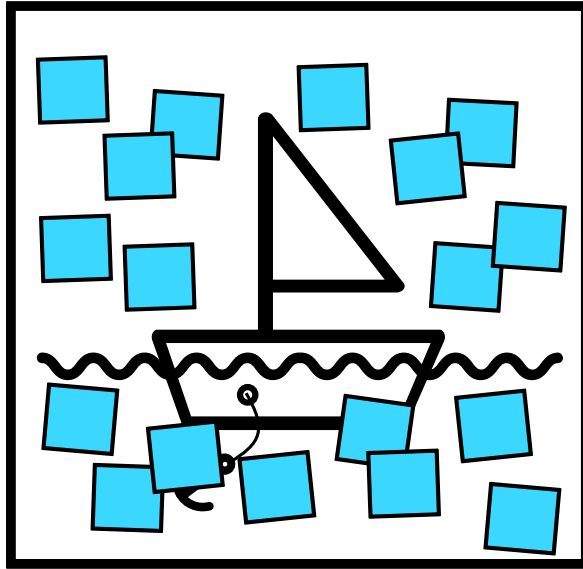
STEP 3: Prioritize problems
🕐 3 mins

Materials: Sticky-dots

The moderator gives each member 3 sticky dots—Everybody must now vote on the challenges they consider to be the most pertinent to solve, without discussion. People can vote on their own sticky-notes and can put more than one dot on one challenge if they feel strongly about it. They should not use dots on the positive sticky-notes, only the problems.
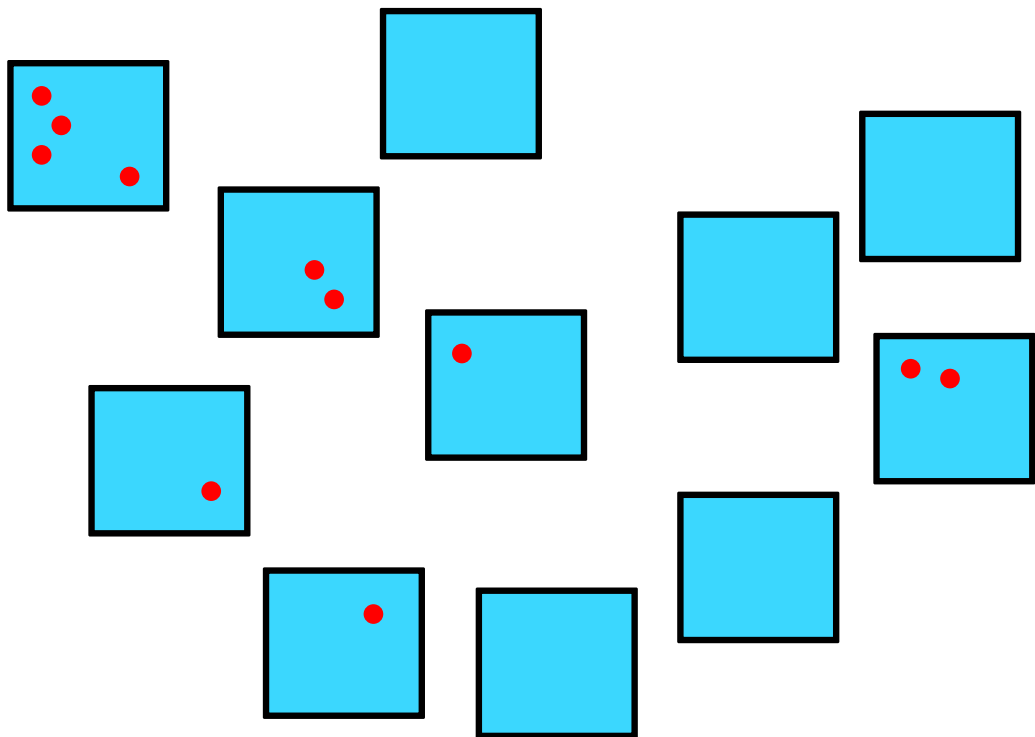
Once the 3 minutes is up, the moderator quickly takes the voted problems and arranges them in order of priority.
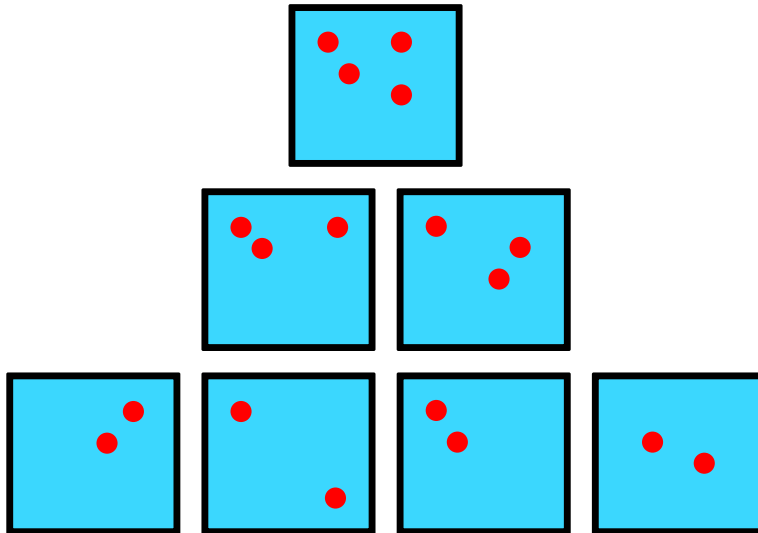
STEP 4: Reframe problems as standardised challenges
🕐 3 mins

Materials: Rectangular sticky-notes and markers

Now, the moderator is going to rewrite the top-voted problem in the form of a standardised challenge. This will help us create an array of solutions and be a little bit more broad at the start.

Let's look at an example: The top voted sticky-note here says "I have no idea what's happening on project x". Because many people have voted on it, we can see it's clearly an issue many people are having. Rephras - ing the sticky-note in a "How Might We" (HMW) format allows us to make it solvable and standardise the way the challenges are written. Here's how that problem might be re-written into a more general chal - lenge:

HMW

HMW

Make sure everyone stays in the loop with all running project

Optional Step:

 If you'd like to try to solve more than one problem, repeat step 4 for each problem you'd like to solve, rewriting each sticky-note as a HMW. Then continue with steps 5-8, identifying solutions for multiple problems at the same time. Any problems you decide not to solve now, can go into a problem backlog and can be picked up from step 4 another day.

STEP 5: Ideate without discussions
🕐 6 mins

Materials: Square sticky-notes (the other colour) and markers

Now each team member is given 5 minutes to write multiple solutions (1 per sticky-note) for the HMW, in silence, without any discussion. Removing discussion here also ensures a variety of solutions. It's impor - tant for the moderator to tell the team members here that we're aiming for quantity over quality – Later we can curate. Solutions don't have to be written in any particular way – but they must be understandable to people reading. There is no individual presenting of solutions as this creates a bias towards the best presenters.

Once the 5 minutes is up everybody sticks their ideas on the surface (wall, whiteboard, whatever) as fast as possible, no need to be neat – just stick them anywhere. This should only require 1 minute.

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Mid-week check in to discuss all projects	Invite full product team to project "kickoffs"	Start using something like Slack!
End of week "Retro" with all teams	Short, informative "mini podcast" about what's going on in the company!	Physical "project board" showing all current work + deadlines, etc.

STEP 6: Prioritise solutions
🕐 5 mins

Materials: Sticky-dots and rectangular sticky-notes

First, another round of voting. The moderator now gives each team member 6 dots and 4 minutes to vote on the solutions they think would best solve the HMW.
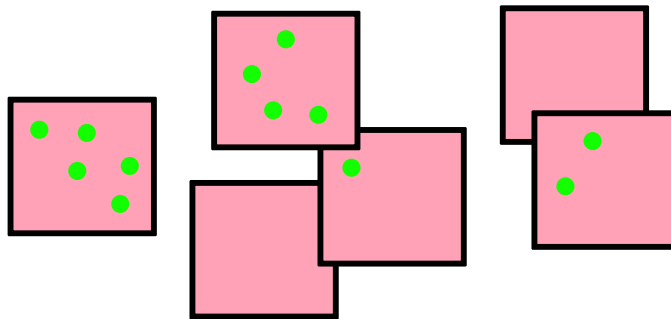
Just like we did with the problems, the moderator now makes a prior - itised list of solutions—Ignore anything with just one vote. You will now have something that looks like this:
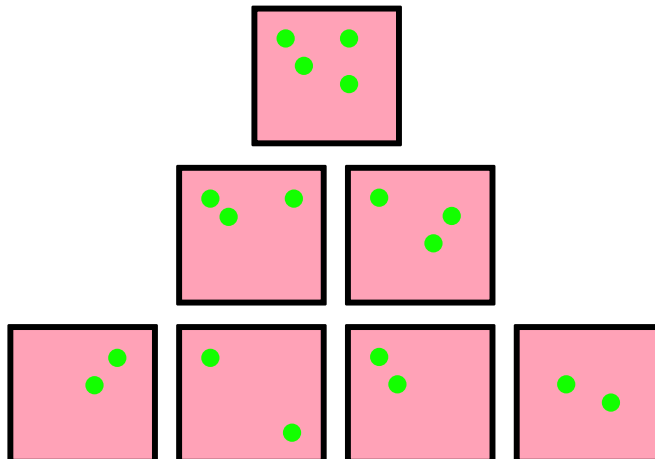
STEP 7: Decide what to execute on
🕐 10 mins

Materials: Whiteboard (or surface to draw the Effort/Impact Scale) and markers

Now that you have a list of solutions that should solve the most impor-tant problem/s, it's important to know how much effort is required to execute the solutions so you can really decide which ones can be tried quickly and which ones might take more time to implement. Here we use a simple effort/impact scale to determine which solutions are sim-ple enough to try right away, which are more effort and should be add-ed to a project backlog, and which perhaps shouldn't be addressed at all.
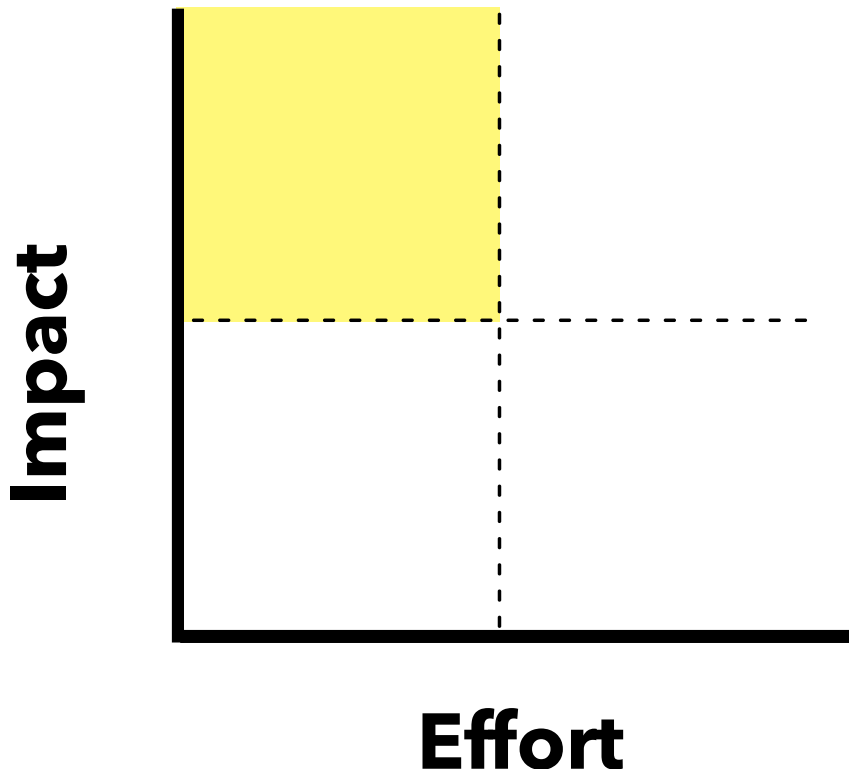
The moderator needs to be very proactive at this step, as it is the only one that has a tendency to open up discussion. The moderator will now take each solution one by one and add them to the effort/impact scale. "Effort" is how much time and energy we think it will take to implement, and "impact" is the degree to which we think it would solve our problem.

So here's what moderator needs to do:

1. Draw the Effort

2. Start with Impact:

      a. Take the top voted solution sticky-note

      b. the Effort

      c. and simply ask

3. The moderator should then move the sticky-note up or down the Impact axis until the team members stop saying higher or lower. Often some small discussions break out here, so the moderator has to be dili - gent in inding a consensus and stopping any conversations extending past 20 seconds

4. Once the impact has been determined, the moderator uses the same method for effort: saying fort higher or lower.

5. This time the moderator moves the sticky-note left or right, until the group stops saying higher or lower

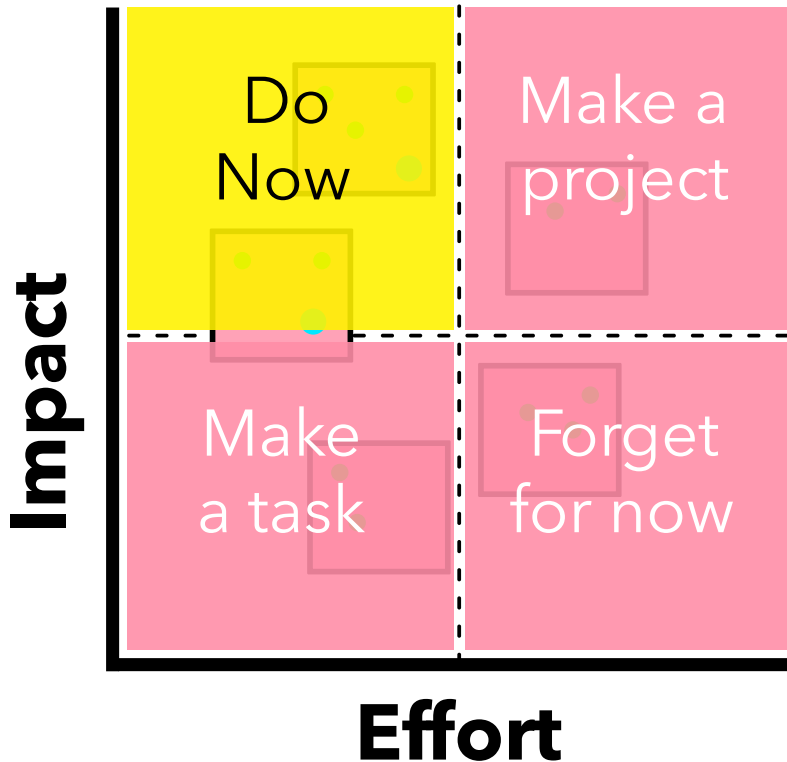**6.** Repeat the process for the other top-voted solutions

Once the top voted sticky-notes have been added to the scale, you'll have something that looks like this:
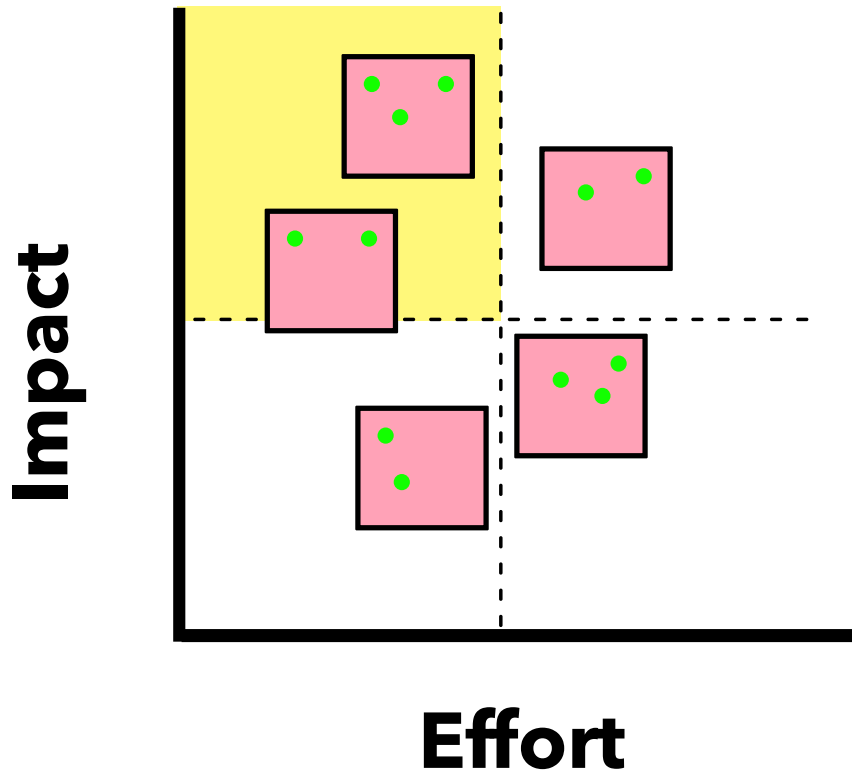
Now you have a clear overview of which high-impact solutions could be executed on and tested very quickly (In the yellow sweet-spot on the top left), and which high-impact solutions will take more effort (top right). The moderator should now quickly mark all sticky-notes in the sweet-spot with a contrasting dot so we can identify them later.
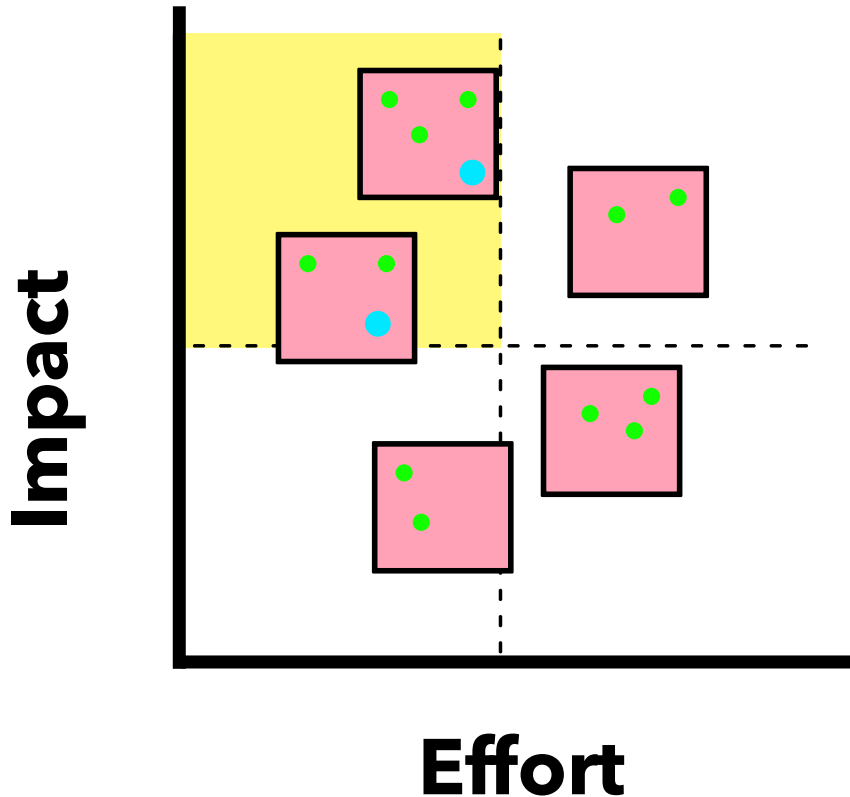
When we were at the LEGO ofice running a series of these ECW work **-** shops, we saw that they were using a simple way of categorising each of the four quadrants. They use these deinitions to decide how and when to action all those top ideas:

	Effort (low → high)
Do Now	**Make a project**
Make a task	**Forget for now**

Impact (high → low), Effort
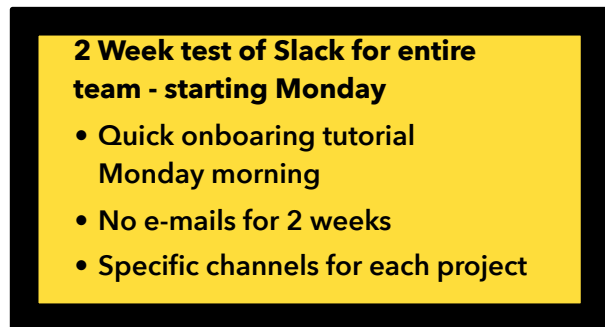
STEP 8: Make solutions actionable
🕐 5 mins

The moderator now takes the "sweet-spot" solutions from the Effort/ Impact scale asks the team and to come up with 3 actionable steps to - ward testing the solution. The person who wrote the solution can start with a suggestion. A good guiding principle is that the action steps to test out the idea should be able to be completed in a timeframe of 1-2 weeks.

Remember, these actions steps shouldn't outline the entire solution. Only a small version of an initial test to validate if the idea will work.

Don't overthink it. The irst step should be the most frictionless step, which could be done immediately. This also motivates people to just get started.

Don't get discouraged if the solution doesn't work after a couple of weeks. Not all solutions will solve the problems. This exercise is made to get the team used to solving problems and trying out approaches without overthinking or over-discussing.

Let's look at one example:

Start using something like Slack!

2 Week test of Slack for entire team - starting Monday
- Quick onboaring tutorial Monday morning
- No e-mails for 2 weeks
- Specific channels for each project

Once all these solutions are written up, your team now has actionable tasks that can be committed to. As for the solutions that didn't make it in to the "sweet-spot", you can put all the higher effort solutions (from the top-right quadrant) into your backlog so they don't get forgotten. What you might see happening is that the sweet-spot actions actually end up solving problems in a way that the higher effort solutions become obsolete!