

The Planning Onion

A 90-minute session that puts strategy, portfolio, quarter, sprint and day on one wall, traces a sprint item upward, and names the danglers.

DURATION	GROUP SIZE	WHAT YOU BRING	WHAT YOU LEAVE WITH
—	— people	A rough document per layer in scope: current strategy, portfolio, quarter plan, sprint backlog, and standing daily practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A filled onion showing commitments and owners at each layer - A vertical-slice trace from a random sprint item up to strategy - A categorised dangler list with kill-or-anchor decisions - Review cadences committed per layer, with owners and first dates

WHO TO INVITE

- **Facilitator.** Runs the clock, holds layer discipline, and protects the vertical-slice phase from slipping into layer-internal debate.
- **Delivery lead(s).** Mandatory; one per squad. Owns the mapping between layers for their team's work.
- **Product lead.** Carries the quarter and portfolio layers and the competing-initiatives conversation.
- **Team leads from squads in scope.** Carry the sprint and day layers; without them, the inner rings are guesswork.
- **Founder or exec (optional).** Attends briefly for strategy and portfolio phases if the outer layer is in scope; leaves before danglers.

USE WHEN

Sprint work, quarter plan and strategy feel disconnected but nobody's mapped it

A new strategy has landed and you want to see if it shows up in execution

Initiatives have run for weeks with no visible output and unclear status

You're about to plan a new quarter and need to sanity-check the inputs

AVOID WHEN

No strategy exists yet – write one first in a different session

Only one layer is actually in scope – use sprint planning instead

Leadership is excluded so the outer layer can only be fiction

The real problem is broken review cadences – fix those directly

How the session runs

● Phase 1 – Frame the onion and agree layers in scope (10 min)

Draw the five concentric rings and walk the canonical layers in one sentence each. Name which layers are in scope today and mark any as fixed so debate about them gets parked.

● Phase 2 – Fill each layer individually (20 min)

Five minutes per layer. Participants silently write what currently lives at their layer on sticky notes – strategy, portfolio initiatives, quarter commitments, sprint backlog, daily practices – then place them on the ring.

- **Phase 3 – Walk the layers outside-in (20 min)**

Read each outer-layer note aloud and ask what the next layer in looks like in service of it. Draw a line for every traced connection; unconnected notes become candidate danglers.

- **Phase 4 – Vertical slice test (15 min)**

Pick a genuinely random sprint item and trace it upward, layer by layer, to a strategic choice. A broken chain names the layer most in need of attention; repeat on a second and third item if time allows.

- **Phase 5 – Find the danglers (15 min)**

Catalogue each unconnected note and decide: kill it, add the missing layer above, schedule the missing layer below, or mark it as a legitimate cross-cutting concern with alternative accountability.

- **Phase 6 – Commit to review cadence (10 min)**

For each layer in scope, write a cadence card naming when it gets revisited and by whom. Confirm the first date on a calendar so the layers don't drift back into danglers next quarter.