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White Paper

Three Horizons

One roadmap. Now, Next, Later. No shadow queues.
The single prioritization instrument.

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Abstract

Every organization has more good ideas than it can fund, and most of them manage that surplus with two instruments: a backlog and a roadmap. The backlog holds everything anyone ever asked for. The roadmap promises what will ship and when. Between them they create two problems that never go away: a backlog so large that triage is itself a project, and a roadmap so loaded with commitments that changing direction requires a political campaign. The three horizons replace both instruments with a single, continuously maintained list divided into three bands: Now, Next, and Later. Each band carries a different commitment level, a different cost to enter, and a different governance posture. This paper defines the three bands precisely, the three altitudes at which the same three words recur (team, portfolio, and enterprise), the Effort boundary as the portfolio's true shuffle clock, the gate between Next and Now, the weekly calibration that re-sequences Now based on what the week's learning revealed, and the quarterly rebalance that shifts horizons based on accumulated evidence.

The Three Horizons

In the last portfolio we audited before redesigning it, there were four backlogs, two roadmaps, a strategic priority list, and a spreadsheet the PMO maintained separately "because the tool does not support their workflow." The total item count across all instruments was over 900. Seventeen items were actively being worked. Nobody in the organization could answer the question "what are we doing and what are we not doing?" in a single conversation, because the answer was spread across seven artifacts maintained by five different groups.

The horizons are three bands of a single prioritized list. Not three lists, not three backlogs, and not three roadmaps. One list, three commitment levels.

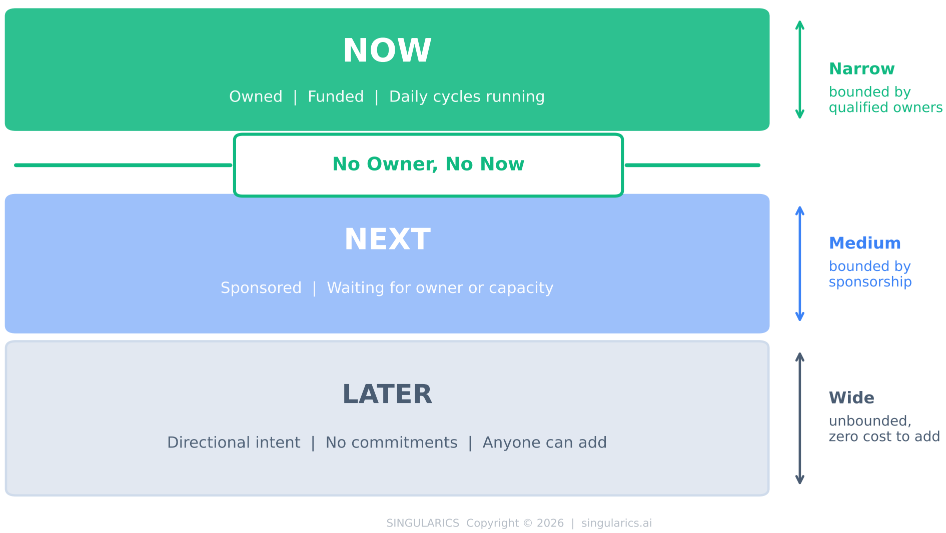

Figure 1: The three horizons with the gate between Next and Now. Later is wide because anything can be added. Now is narrow because every item requires a named Decision Owner at the committed release level.

Now

Owned AND funded, in daily cycles. Every item in Now has a named Decision Owner released to at least 60% of their working week, a committed capacity allocation from the Flow Council, and a daily cycle running. Work in Now is in flight. It consumes real people and real agent capacity every day, and it produces landed increments every day.

60% release level for every Decision Owner in the Now horizon. Below that, daily presence is impossible and the one-day cycle stalls.

The Now horizon is deliberately narrow. The number of items it can hold is bounded by the number of qualified Decision Owners the organization can release. If the organization has five qualified Decision Owners who can be released, the Now horizon can hold at most five items. No planning exercise can override this. No executive request can suspend it. Either a person who qualifies is released, or the work stays in Next. This is a feature, not a limitation. A narrow Now forces the organization to make real choices about what comes first, rather than pretending that everything can be in flight at once.

The test for whether something belongs in Now is concrete: Is there a named person who can accept the work every single day? Is the capacity committed? Is the daily cycle actually running? If the answer to any of these is no, the item is in Next regardless of what the list says.

Next

Sponsored, waiting for an owner OR capacity. Every item in Next has a sponsoring officer who has declared it worth doing, but it does not yet have a Decision Owner at the committed release level, or capacity has not been allotted, or both. Work in Next has cleared the first filter: someone with authority and budget has put their name behind it. It has not cleared the second: someone with domain knowledge and time has been released to own it.

The difference between Next and Later is sponsorship. Sponsorship is not a formality. It is the commitment of an officer's credibility and, critically, the willingness to release a business expert from their day job. The sponsoring officer is the only person who can make that release happen. Without their sponsorship, there is no mechanism to free a Decision Owner, and the No Owner No Now gate is unpassable.

Items in Next can move to Now as soon as the gate conditions are met. Items in Later cannot, because they carry no sponsor.

Later

Directional intent with no commitments attached. Anything can be added to Later, by anyone with standing to suggest it, at any time. Adding something to Later costs nothing, commits nothing, and promises nothing.

> *Later is cheap on purpose. The cost of adding an idea to Later is zero. The cost of moving it to Now is an officer's sponsorship and a Decision Owner's 60%. That asymmetry is the entire design.*

This cheapness is a deliberate structural choice. Anything can be added to Later, which is exactly why commitments live only in Now. The gap between the two is what prevents the organization from overcommitting. An executive who wants something added to Later is told yes immediately. An executive who wants something moved to Now is told the cost: name the owner, free them for 60%, and commit the capacity. That conversation is where real prioritization happens.

Later is not a dumping ground for rejected work. It is the place where the organization captures directional intent before it is ready to fund it. The quality of Later depends on whether people trust that items in it will actually be considered when capacity opens up. If they do not trust this, they will build shadow queues elsewhere, and the single-list property is lost.

The Same Three Words at Different Altitudes

Before the bands can be used precisely, one source of confusion has to be removed, because it surfaces in nearly every adoption. Now, Next, and Later recur at every level of the model, and they do not mean the same thing at each level. The three states are the same. The unit of work, the body that shuffles it, and the clock are different.

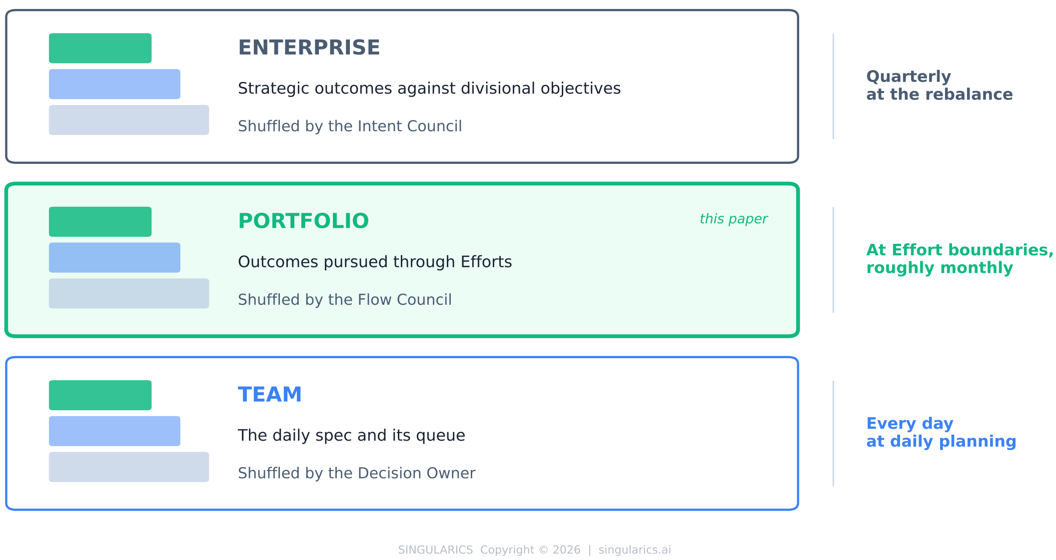

Figure 2: The same three states on three clocks. The team shuffles its spec queue every day, the portfolio shuffles outcomes at Effort boundaries, and the enterprise shuffles strategic outcomes quarterly at the rebalance.

At the team level, inside one Effort, the spec queue is the team's version of the horizons. Today's signed spec is Now, the one to three queued specs are Next, and everything else is Later. It shuffles every day at daily planning. At the enterprise level, the horizons hold strategic outcomes measured against divisional objectives, and the shuffle is the quarterly rebalance.

This paper is about the level in between: the portfolio, where the unit is the outcome and the clock is set by Effort boundaries. That clock deserves a precise statement, because it is where expectations most often go wrong.

The portfolio's clock is the Effort boundary

Movement between horizons happens when capacity actually frees. A team is stable within an Effort and reforms only between Efforts, so the portfolio's real shuffle rate is set by how often Efforts end, which makes Effort size the portfolio's real tuning knob.

~12 genuine reallocation points per team slot per year, when Efforts are sized in weeks to a couple of months. Sometimes fewer, sometimes more. The number is a consequence of Effort size, not a target to manage toward.

Both failure directions are worth naming. Efforts sized in quarters starve the portfolio of decision points and quietly rebuild annual planning under a new name. Efforts sliced into days produce more decision points than the councils can use and turn the roadmap into churn, with the Flow Council demoted to a dispatcher.

The cadences described later in this paper layer on top of that physics rather than replacing it. Weekly calibration re-sequences Next so the order is current when a slot opens. The quarterly rebalance restructures the whole portfolio. Neither creates a reallocation the pool cannot deliver.

> *The portfolio can only re-decide when capacity frees. The shuffle rate is set by how often Efforts end, and every cadence above it is sequencing, not reallocation.*

Getting the altitudes confused produces predictable failures. Leadership that treats the portfolio like the team level asks why the roadmap did not change this week. Leadership that treats it like the enterprise level locks the Now horizon for a year. Both are cured the same way: name the altitude at the start of every horizons conversation, and say which clock it runs on.

The One-List Rule

Most organizations manage work across multiple instruments. A product backlog, a project portfolio, a strategic roadmap, a list of technical debt, a separate queue for regulatory work, and the informal list of things a senior leader mentioned in a hallway. Each instrument has its own governance, its own sequencing logic, and its own advocates. The result is that no one person can see the full demand picture, and no single forum can make a real tradeoff.

> *If the work is in two lists, the tradeoff between them is either political or invisible. One list makes every tradeoff visible and decidable in a single forum.*

The three horizons collapse all of these into a single view. Every piece of work the organization might do appears in one place, at one of three commitment levels. Tradeoffs are made explicitly, in the Flow Council, by moving items between bands or resequencing within Now.

This is also what makes shadow queues visible. A shadow queue is work that has a de facto claim on capacity but does not appear in the prioritized list. When the list is single, any capacity spent outside it is immediately obvious at weekly calibration.

The Gate Between Next and Now

The most important boundary in the system is the one between Next and Now. Crossing it is governed by a single rule.

No Owner, No Now. Nothing enters the Now horizon without a named Decision Owner released to the committed level. Work without an owner waits in Next.

This gate does four things simultaneously.

It makes cost visible

The true cost of starting something is not its budget line. It is the opportunity cost of the Decision Owner's time and the capacity committed to the daily cycle. The gate forces this cost onto the table at the moment of entry, rather than three months in when someone notices the owner is stretched across two outcomes.

It prevents overcommitment

If the organization has five qualified Decision Owners who can be released, the Now horizon can hold at most five items. The constraint is real and physical. No planning exercise can override it, no executive request can suspend it, and no creative staffing model can work around it. Either a person who qualifies is released, or the work stays in Next.

It separates aspiration from commitment

Everything in Later is aspiration. Everything in Next is sponsored aspiration. Everything in Now is commitment. The gate draws the line between what the organization wishes it could do and what it has actually funded, staffed, and started. This distinction is valuable precisely because it is uncomfortable.

It distributes authority

Later is open to anyone. Next requires an officer's sponsorship. Now requires the Flow Council's allocation and a Decision Owner's release. Each band has a higher cost of entry, and the cost is denominated in accountability rather than in process steps.

Later Is Cheap

The instinct in most organizations is to gate entry to the list itself. Intake committees, business case requirements, estimation workshops, and approval chains all exist to prevent bad ideas from consuming planning bandwidth. The three horizons take the opposite approach.

Later has no gate. Anyone with standing can add an idea. The idea does not need a business case, a cost estimate, or an officer's approval. It needs a sentence describing the outcome it would produce and a reason it might matter.

This works because the commitment gate is at the Now boundary, not at the list boundary. Adding something to Later does not commit capacity, does not promise a delivery date, and does not create an obligation. It simply records that someone in the organization believes this outcome is worth considering.

The strongest objection is that an ungated Later will fill with noise and become useless. The objection sounds reasonable and is empirically wrong. In the portfolios we have run on this model, Later typically stabilizes at 40 to 80 items. It does not grow without bound because people stop adding things that nobody will ever look at once they see that Later is actually scanned at quarterly rebalance. The quality of Later depends on whether people trust that items in it will be considered, and that trust is established by the first rebalance that actually promotes an item from Later to Next.

> *Organizations that gate entry to the list end up with two problems: ideas that should have been captured disappear, and the gate itself becomes a bottleneck that consumes the time of senior people for no productive purpose. Gate the commitment, not the idea.*

The benefit is that Later becomes a genuine inventory of what the organization might do. The Flow Council can scan it for themes, spot convergences, and pull items forward to Next when a sponsoring officer appears. The inventory is always current because the cost of adding to it is zero.

How This Replaces Backlog Management

A traditional backlog grows without bound, because every refinement session adds stories and no one has the authority to delete them. Grooming sessions exist to manage the growth, and they are among the most wasteful recurring meetings in any delivery organization.

The three horizons eliminate the need for backlog grooming by making the backlog's job explicit and cheap. Later is the backlog. It holds everything. It does not need grooming because nothing in it carries a commitment. The only items that need active management are the ones in Now, and those are managed daily by the Decision Owner and weekly by the Flow Council.

Next is the short list of candidates for promotion to Now. It is managed at weekly calibration and quarterly rebalance. Its size is naturally bounded by the number of officers willing to sponsor work, which is a small number.

0 grooming sessions required. The three horizons eliminate backlog refinement as a standing ceremony. Items in Later are unrefined on purpose. Items in Now are refined daily by the Decision Owner.

The practical result is that the hours previously spent grooming a backlog are returned to the organization. The Decision Owner spends 45 to 90 minutes per day on spec work for the item they own, which is more effective than a weekly grooming session because it is focused on the one item that is actually in flight.

Also retired

Name the specific practices that the three horizons replace, because until they are explicitly retired, people will run both and wonder why neither works.

The prioritized backlog. Replaced entirely by Later. The backlog's function was to hold everything in rank order. Later holds everything without rank order, because ranking hundreds of items is wasted work when only five will be in Now at any time. Ranking is real only for the items in Now and Next, and those are small enough to rank in a conversation.

Backlog grooming and refinement sessions. Replaced by the Decision Owner's daily spec work. The grooming session existed because the backlog needed continuous maintenance to stay usable. Later does not need maintenance because nothing in it carries a commitment. Now is maintained daily by the owner. Next is maintained weekly by the Flow Council.

The quarterly roadmap. Replaced by the quarterly rebalance. The roadmap promised delivery dates for items that had not started. The three horizons promise only that items in Now are in daily cycles. The quarterly rebalance resets which items are in Now based on evidence, not on a plan made three months ago. The decision rule is explicit: if you need to know when something will ship, the answer is "it is in Now and producing daily increments" or "it is not in Now and has no ship date." There is no third state. Executives who need dates can observe the daily increment rate and extrapolate, which is more accurate than a date assigned before work started.

The estimation workshop. Replaced by the constraint of Now. The estimation workshop existed to predict how long things would take so the roadmap could promise dates. When the commitment is to a daily cycle rather than to a date, estimation is unnecessary. The question is not "how long will this take?" It is "is there an owner, is there capacity, and does the daily cycle close?"

The Weekly Calibration

Weekly calibration re-sequences Now based on what the week's learning revealed. It is the mechanism that turns a static plan into a responsive one without losing coherence.

Every week, the Flow Council reviews the Now horizon and makes three decisions.

Re-sequence Now

The order in which items in Now receive attention is re-examined against what the week's work revealed. The question is not "are we on track?" It is "did this week's evidence change what should come next?"

An outcome that landed five clean increments and is approaching closure may need less fleet capacity next week, which can be redirected. An outcome that hit a blocker three days in a row may need a domain expert rotated in from the network, a spec rework session, or a return to Next. An outcome where the Decision Owner's daily presence dropped below 80% gets the release-level conversation: either the sponsoring officer restores the commitment or the outcome returns to Next.

The sequence within Now is not fixed at the start of the quarter. It is a living order that responds to evidence, recalibrated weekly. This is fundamentally different from a roadmap, which promises sequence months in advance and treats any change as a disruption. Here, change is the mechanism.

Promote or defer

If capacity has been released because an outcome closed (and release is an explicit, minuted Flow Council action), the Flow Council pulls the highest-priority item from Next into Now, provided the gate conditions are met: a named Decision Owner, a capacity commitment, and a sponsoring officer's release.

If an item in Now has stalled because its Decision Owner is unavailable, it returns to Next until sponsorship is restored. This is the release lapse pattern. The outcome does not continue with a deputy beyond a day or two, because the alternative is a proxy owner and a cycle that stops closing without anyone noticing.

Surface shadow work

Any capacity being spent outside the Now horizon is identified and either brought onto the list or stopped. This is the discipline that keeps the single-list property alive. Shadow work is not malicious. It is usually a well-intentioned response to a request that bypassed intake. The correction is to route it through the list, not to punish the people doing it.

The weekly calibration is where shadow work becomes visible, because the Flow Council checks capacity consumed against capacity planned. If the numbers do not reconcile, something is consuming capacity that is not on the list. Finding it and naming it is the most valuable thing the calibration does some weeks.

The Quarterly Rebalance

Once per quarter, the Intent Council reviews the entire list against strategic intent. This is where horizons shift based on accumulated evidence rather than on projections.

> *The quarterly rebalance is the only forum where the Intent Council looks at the full demand picture. Weekly calibration is a Flow Council activity. Quarterly rebalance is a strategic activity.*

The rebalance asks three questions.

Is the Now horizon aligned with the divisional objectives? If the five items in Now are all operational improvements and the strategic priority is market expansion, the portfolio has drifted. The rebalance corrects this by resetting what belongs in

Now. This is not a failure of the Flow Council. The Flow Council sequences within the direction the Intent Council sets. If the direction was ambiguous, the drift was inevitable.

Has Later changed shape? New themes, convergences, and obsolete ideas are identified. Items that have been in Later for two quarters without attracting a sponsor are reviewed for removal, not because they are bad ideas but because their continued presence creates noise. An item that has survived three quarterly reviews in Later without moving to Next is either a good idea whose time has not come or a bad idea that nobody wants to delete. The rebalance forces the distinction.

Is the capacity plan realistic? The number of Decision Owners who can be released, the fleet capacity available, and the domain expert guild are reconciled against the ambition in Next and Now. If the plan requires eight Decision Owners and only four can be released, the plan is wrong and the rebalance adjusts it. This is where the constraint becomes visible at the strategic level rather than being managed tactically by the Flow Council.

The output of the rebalance is a refreshed horizon list, a revised capacity plan, and, where necessary, a change in strategic direction that flows down through the Flow Council's weekly calibration.

How horizons shift

The quarterly rebalance is where the accumulated evidence of a quarter's daily cycles changes the shape of the portfolio. Three movements are common.

Later to Next. An item in Later has attracted a sponsoring officer during the quarter, usually because work in Now revealed a dependency or an opportunity that was not visible before. The rebalance formalizes the sponsorship and moves the item to Next.

Next to Later. A sponsored item in Next has waited two quarters without entering Now, because the Decision Owner was never released or the priority shifted. The sponsor is asked whether they still intend to fund it. If not, it returns to Later. This prevents Next from becoming a shadow backlog of stale commitments.

Now to closed. An outcome in Now has met its acceptance criteria and the Decision Owner has proposed closure. The rebalance confirms closure, releases capacity, and records the result. Capacity released at the rebalance enters the next quarter's pool immediately.

Failure Modes

Everything is in Now. The organization refuses to move items to Next, because every executive believes their initiative is active. The tell: the Now horizon has more items than it has Decision Owners at the committed release level. Items are "in Now" but nobody is doing daily spec work on them. We have seen this in every adoption. The typical pattern is a Now horizon of 15 items with 5 available Decision Owners. Ten items are "active" with no daily cycle running. The fix: enforce No Owner No Now. If there is no Decision Owner at 60%, the item is in Next by definition, no matter what the list says.

Later becomes the backlog it replaced. Items accumulate in Later without anyone scanning them. The list grows past the point where anyone can read it in a sitting. The tell: the quarterly rebalance spends more time on Later than on Now and Next combined. The fix: any item in Later for two quarters without attracting a sponsor is reviewed for removal. Later is a living inventory, not an archive.

Next becomes a waiting room. Sponsored items sit in Next for multiple quarters because no Decision Owner is ever released. Sponsors lose faith that sponsorship leads to execution. The tell: the average age of items in Next exceeds two quarters. The fix: this is a capacity problem, not a process problem. Either release more Decision Owners or reduce the number of sponsored items. The answer is not to weaken the gate.

Shadow queues persist. Work happens outside the list because someone with authority asked for it directly and nobody wanted to say no. The tell: capacity consumed does not reconcile with capacity planned at weekly calibration. The fix: surface the shadow work, route it through the list, and have the conversation about what it displaces.

The weekly calibration is skipped. Nobody notices immediately, because outcomes in Now keep running on their daily cycles. The tell: the Now horizon has not changed in a month even though outcomes have closed and capacity has been released. Released capacity is not being redeployed. The fix: weekly calibration is the minimum cadence for a functioning portfolio. It is not optional.

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