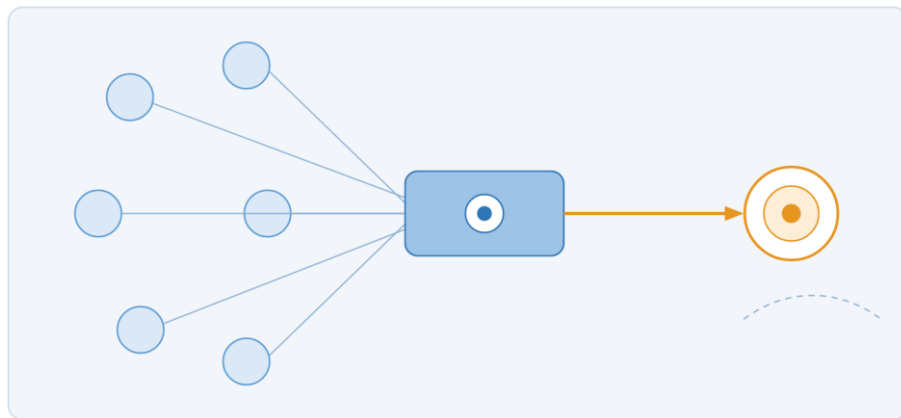


State of the art

Agile Inception

Reference map of current professional knowledge



Updated September 2026

About this document

This document is a curated map of the knowledge, practices and models in professional use as of its publication date for preparing, sizing, facilitating, and closing the initial alignment of an agile initiative, or realigning it when it changes course. For each entry, the map places it in context, indicates its degree of adoption in current professional practice and points to where to find reference information.

Use it as an observatory and reference point to check whether the professional knowledge you rely on is aligned with current practice and at the leading edge.

It is complemented by an in-depth companion guide that develops each concept and by the training and assessment platform in Skill Arena. In the [Agile Inception](#) area you can test your level of knowledge and, if you pass, obtain a diploma that provides curricular accreditation of professional competence and currency in this area.



State of knowledge

Knowledge about the inception evolves slowly at its core and very fast in its artificial intelligence layer: the two reference patterns are ten to twenty years old with no new editions, and workshop facilitation rests on decades of method and evidence, while formats (short sessions, remote and hybrid) keep shifting and the use of AI in preparation, synthesis, and prototyping changes within months. Throughout the document, the labels (ESTABLISHED, CONSOLIDATING, EMERGING) help identify the maturity of each concept:

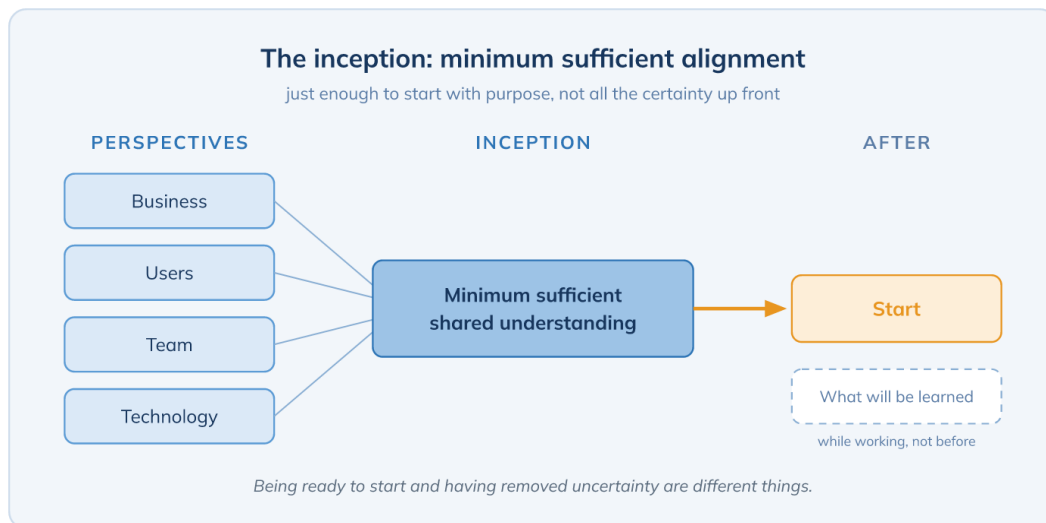
ESTABLISHED settled consensus; knowledge taken as required.

CONSOLIDATING gaining adoption fast; not yet universal but already relevant.

EMERGING recent frontier; high relevance and high volatility.

Block A — What an inception is and when it adds value

Aligning people before starting or changing course, with the minimum sufficient understanding to work with purpose.



The inception as minimum sufficient alignment · ESTABLISHED

An inception is the set of conversations through which those who will decide, build, and use a product build the minimum shared understanding needed to start an initiative with purpose, or to reorient it. It produces a shared vision, a scope with explicit exclusions, the main risks, and the start-up agreements. It is a family of practices combined according to the problem, not a ceremony with a fixed script.

Why it is here now. The reason that gave rise to it at ThoughtWorks twenty years ago still holds: believing there is consensus where there is none is what sinks most initiatives, and the Scrum Manager BoK records it as a practice with essential outputs and a proportional format. No major certification names it, although all of them demand the capabilities it exercises.

Where to look. [Scrum Manager BoK — Inception](#) · [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck](#) · [Caroli — Lean Inception \(martinfowler.com\)](#)

Neither a phase, nor Sprint 0, nor discovery: the boundaries of the inception · ESTABLISHED

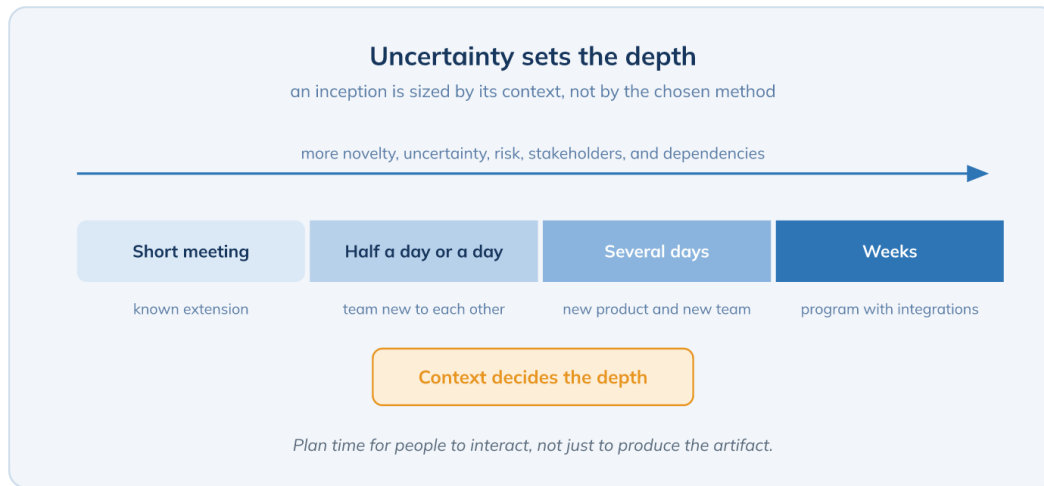
An inception is not an exhaustive analysis phase, nor a Sprint 0 that postpones the delivery of value, nor the complete definition of the product, and it does not replace continuous discovery, which is its input. It takes what has been learned about customers and the problem and turns it into a commitment to start; mixing the two leads to jumping to the solution without enough knowledge.

Why it is here now. The Sprint 0 debate (Schwaber, Cockburn, Cohn) remains open in the Scrum community, and Thoughtworks drew a sharp line between discovery and inception in 2023. Frameworks with a formal initiation phase (RUP, Disciplined Agile, DSDM, the UK GDS Discovery) show the contrast with Scrum, which defines none.

Where to look. [InfoQ — the Sprint Zero debate](#) · [Thoughtworks — Run a successful discovery](#) · [GDS — How the discovery phase works](#)

Block B — Sizing and preparing

Uncertainty sets the depth, and what is decided before the workshop conditions what can be decided inside it.



Proportionality: uncertainty sets the depth · ESTABLISHED

Novelty, uncertainty, risk, complexity, the number of stakeholders, and dependencies scale the inception, from a short meeting for a known extension to an intensive workshop of several days for a new product and a new team. The result holds for a limited horizon, three to six months in the Inception Deck, and is revisited when something major changes.

Why it is here now. Documented durations range from under an hour to several weeks, and practice is moving toward short sessions (the typical facilitation session now runs around ninety minutes), which turns sizing into an explicit decision rather than something inherited from the chosen method.

Where to look. [Caroli — How to plan an inception](#) · [Scrum Manager BoK — Inception](#) · [Scrum Manager — Agile Inception: what it consists of](#) · [SessionLab — State of Facilitation 2025](#)

Preparing the inception: participants, agenda, and decision rule · ESTABLISHED

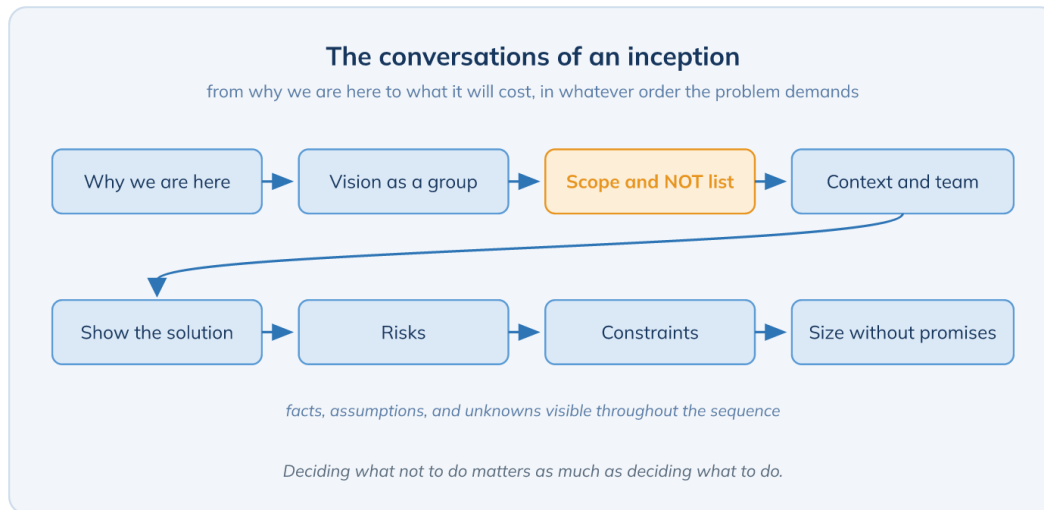
The room must hold those who will build, those who represent the users, the technical leads, and the sponsor, together with anyone able to veto scope or budget; each pattern sets its own pattern of presence (stakeholders at the opening and the close in the Lean Inception, the Decider throughout in the Design Sprint). Preparation fixes the purpose, the expected decisions, the prior information, the agenda with its timeboxes and, before starting, who decides and by what rule.

Why it is here now. Agreeing on decision authority beforehand is now an explicit learning outcome in agile facilitation (ICAgile, 2025) and the documented safeguard against the workshop that legitimizes decisions already made; the sponsor's absence is the most cited reason for decisions being overturned afterwards.

Where to look. [Workshop Weaver — Agile Inception Deck \(facilitation guide\)](#) · [Caroli — Lean Inception: participants](#) · [ICAgile — Agile Team Facilitation, learning outcomes](#)

Block C — The alignment conversations

Purpose, vision, scope, context, team, solution, risks, constraints, and size: the conversations every inception goes through, with the technique that makes them productive.



Why we are here and the vision written as a group · ESTABLISHED

The first conversation makes explicit the problem or need, the expected result, and the business objectives; when the purpose is under discussion, impact mapping helps derive the scope from the intended impacts. The vision is written as a group with techniques such as Moore's positioning template, the elevator pitch, and the product box, and is connected to the first cut of the product.

Why it is here now. It is the common foundation of the Inception Deck and the Lean Inception, which share the same vision template, and the part of the inception that every product certification requires practitioners to know how to do. The concept of product vision is taken as known; what matters here is the technique for building it together.

Where to look. [Caroli — writing the product vision as a group](#) · [Adzic — Impact Mapping](#) · [Scrum Manager BoK — Impact mapping](#)

Scope, NOT list, and visible assumptions · ESTABLISHED

Saying what the product is not and what it does not do matters as much as saying what it is and what it does. The NOT list with its column of unresolved items, or the "is, is not, does, does not" matrix, fix a scope with explicit exclusions and deliberately postponed elements; in the same conversation, facts, assumptions, and unknowns are separated and open items are recorded with an owner.

Why it is here now. A vague list of exclusions is the most common door to silent scope creep, and facilitation practice insists on making the "no" explicit (Min Specs). Assumption mapping and prioritization are taken as known; in the inception it is enough to make them visible.

Where to look. [Caroli — É, não é, faz, não faz \(is, is not, does, does not\)](#) · [Scrum Manager BoK — Agile inception deck](#) · [Liberating Structures — Min Specs](#)

Context, neighbors, and the team that also aligns · ESTABLISHED

The community around an initiative is usually larger than it seems, with actors, stakeholders, systems, and dependencies worth building bridges to from the start. When the team is new or has changed, the inception also includes its own alignment, with working agreements, an initial Definition of Done (DoD), and a team canvas, in the line of agile chartering (purpose, alignment, and context).

Why it is here now. It is the clearest gap in the Inception Deck, which looks at the product and the project; Larsen and Nies's agile chartering covers it, and the Scrum Manager BoK includes agreements on sprint start-up and communication among the essential outputs.

Where to look. [Larsen and Nies — Liftoff \(2nd ed.\)](#) · [Agile Alliance — Project chartering](#) · [Team Canvas](#)

Showing the solution, risks, and constraints · ESTABLISHED

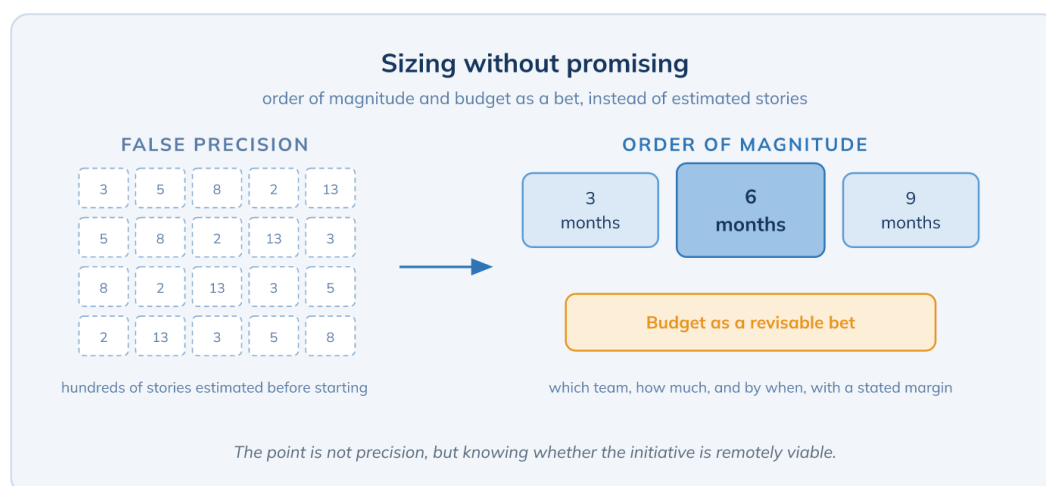
The solution is discussed at a high level, in a one-page diagram that separates the technical decisions that must be made now from those that can wait; in complex domains, Big Picture EventStorming gives the end-to-end business view. Risks are made visible while the group is calm (what keeps us up at night, pre-mortem), and constraints of time, budget, regulation, technology, and organization are made explicit with trade-off sliders, which show what gives way if something squeezes.

Why it is here now. These are the conversations the Inception Deck turned into canon and that practice has enriched with techniques from other disciplines, such as Klein's pre-mortem, whose psychological basis (imagining the failure as already happened) gives a voice to informed dissenters.

Where to look. [Klein — Performing a Project Premortem \(HBR\)](#) · [Avanscoperta — EventStorming](#) · [Rasmussen — The Agile Inception Deck](#)

Sizing without promising · CONSOLIDATING

The inception answers the sponsor's questions of how much it will cost, how long it will take, and what team is needed, but as an order of magnitude, not with precision: the Inception Deck itself warns that the point is not accuracy but knowing whether the initiative is viable. Breaking everything down into estimated stories produces false precision, and the budget is treated as a bet that is revised with what is learned.

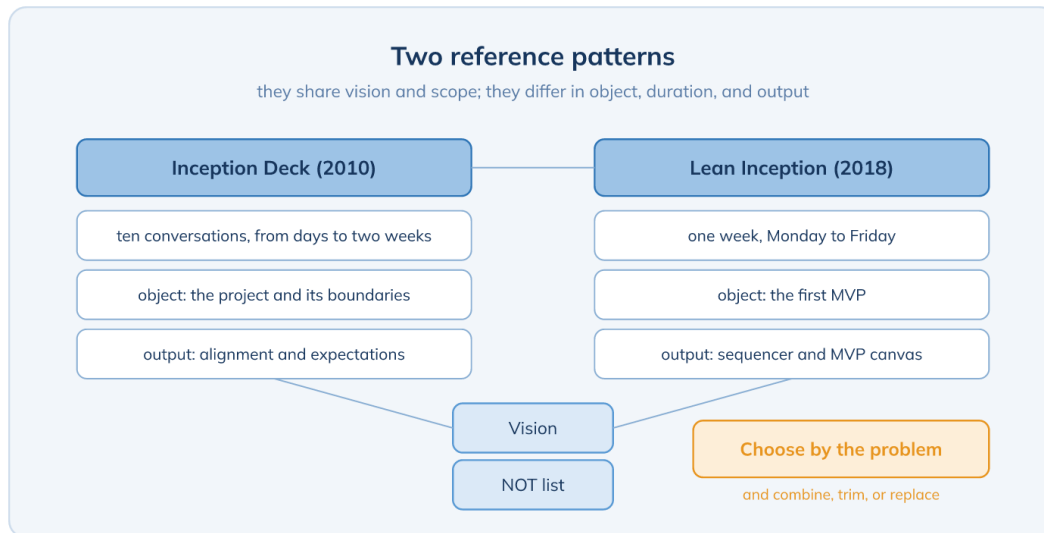


Why it is here now. The critique of early estimation (Dan North, #NoEstimates) has taken hold in the discourse, but practice still estimates the initial cost in most initiatives, so the two ways of doing it coexist. Agile estimation is taken as known.

Where to look. [North — The Perils of Estimation](#) · [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck](#) · [Ambler — project initiation survey \(2013\)](#)

Block D — The reference patterns and their toolbox

Two canonical patterns and a map of neighboring techniques, to choose by the problem and not by the method.



The Inception Deck: ten conversations and their flexible use · ESTABLISHED

Born at ThoughtWorks and published by Jonathan Rasmusson in 2006, then canonized in *The Agile Samurai* in 2010, the Inception Deck gathers ten conversations, from "why are we here" to "what is it going to cost", each with a one-slide output. Its principles are that less is more and that the deck is a living document, revisited when something major changes. It is adapted by choosing conversations, with one-hour express and remote versions.

Why it is here now. It remains the most cited start-up pattern and has had no revision or "version 2.0"; its failure modes are well documented by those who facilitate it (compressing it until the answers turn superficial, running it without the sponsor, filing it away after the start).

Where to look. [Rasmusson — The Agile Inception Deck \(2010\)](#) · [Rasmusson — Agile Project Initiation Techniques \(2006\)](#) · [Scrum Manager BoK — Agile inception deck](#) · [Workshop Weaver — facilitation guide](#)

The Lean Inception: the week, its activities, and its rules · ESTABLISHED

Paulo Caroli's Lean Inception concentrates alignment on the first MVP into one week, with vision, "is, is not, does, does not" matrix, goals, personas, user journeys, feature brainstorming, technical, UX, and business review, feature sequencer, and MVP canvas, plus a kick-off and a final showcase for stakeholders. Its rules are specific, with an uncertainty traffic light, effort and value scales, six rules for the sequencer waves, and seven blocks in the canvas.

Why it is here now. It is the most adopted inception pattern in the Spanish-speaking world and in Brazil, with a book in Spanish, an official Miro template used more than eleven thousand times, and a presence in the BoK; its author advises against going below three days and, if forced down to two, requires keeping the sequencer and the canvas.

Where to look. [Caroli — Lean Inception \(martinfowler.com\)](#) · [Caroli — the sequencer rules](#) · [Caroli — The MVP Canvas](#) · [Scrum Manager BoK — Lean inception](#)

Lean Inception variants and the step to the backlog · CONSOLIDATING

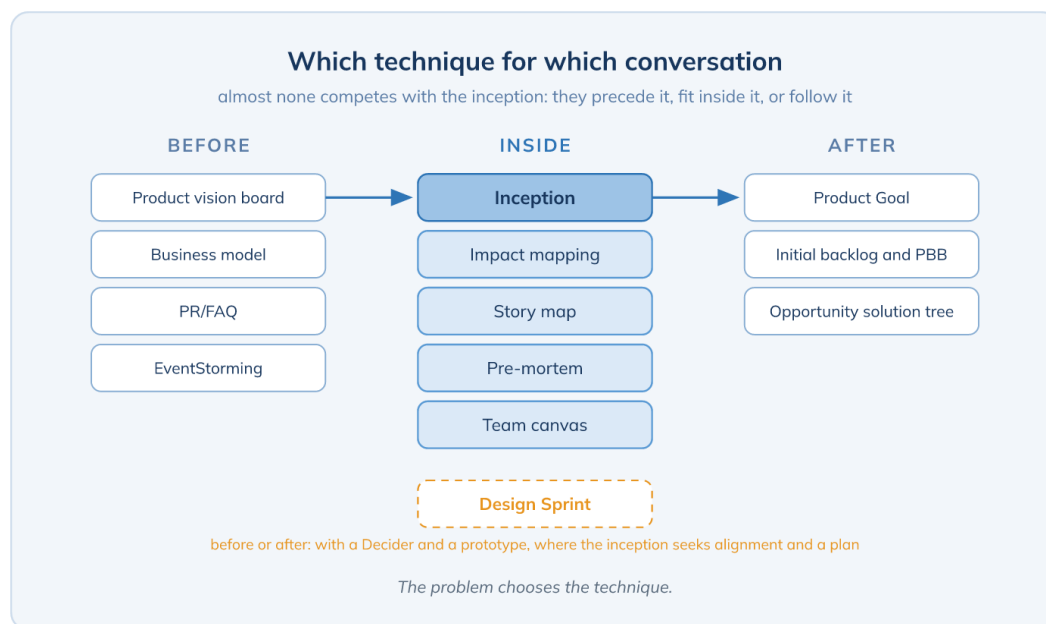
The pattern has branched into an inception without an MVP for technical platforms (risks, commitments, path to production, roadmap), a two-day format, a remote version with official templates, and adaptations to data science and outside software. Its natural continuation is product backlog building (PBB), which turns the sequencer's features into user stories.

Why it is here now. The variants and PBB have less than five years of documented track record, and the 2024 adoption report shows that remote and hybrid formats keep growing; the second edition of the book, announced in 2021, has not been published.

Where to look. [Caroli — Two-day Lean Inception](#) · [Caroli — agenda for an inception without an MVP](#) · [Caroli — From features to user stories \(PBB\)](#) · [Caroli — State of Lean Inception 2024](#)

Which technique for which conversation · ESTABLISHED

Almost no neighboring technique competes with the inception: some precede and feed it (product vision board, business model canvas, PR/FAQ, EventStorming), others fit inside it (impact mapping, story map, pre-mortem, team canvas, hypotheses), and others follow it (Product Goal and initial backlog, PBB, opportunity solution tree). The Design Sprint combines before or after, with a Decider and a prototype, where the inception seeks alignment and a plan.

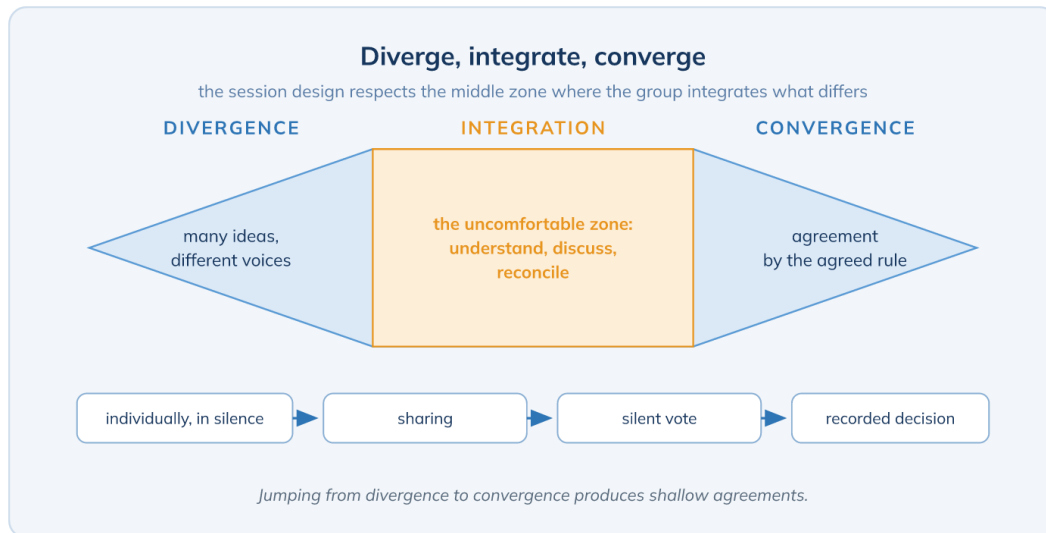


Why it is here now. Caroli describes the activities as a menu to choose from according to context, and the comparisons with the Design Sprint and with Cagan's discovery sprint are now standard references. The map is an editorial synthesis over established techniques.

Where to look. [Caroli — How to plan an inception](#) · [Caroli — Design Sprint and Lean Inception](#) · [Cagan — Discovery Sprints](#) · [Scrum Manager BoK — Design sprint](#)

Block E — Facilitating the inception

Neutrality on content, process design, and group decisions that withstand hierarchy, in the room or at a distance.



Facilitating versus directing: neutrality, dynamics, and pace · ESTABLISHED

The facilitator is neutral on content and responsible for the process. They design the session as an alternation of divergence and convergence with an intermediate zone of integration that must not be skipped, have each person work in silence before sharing, keep the timeboxes, choose reusable structures (1-2-4-All, Min Specs, Note-and-Vote), and look after the pace with breaks and changes of dynamic.

Why it is here now. The body of knowledge has been converging for decades (IAF, Kaner, Liberating Structures), and experimental evidence backs silent individual work over oral brainstorming (production blocking, anchoring, groupthink). The inception's result is produced in the room, so the quality of the facilitation is the quality of the result.

Where to look. [IAF — Core Competencies](#) · [Corrigan — the diamond of participation \(Kaner\)](#) · [Liberating Structures — 1-2-4-All](#) · [Knapp — Note-and-vote](#)

Participation, power, and group decisions · ESTABLISHED

The sponsor in the room weighs more than they speak, because anchoring, the highest-paid person's opinion, and pressure on dissenters operate even when nobody intends them; they are mitigated with silent voting, speaking order, and psychological safety. Decisions are made by the agreed rule (dot voting with its biases in mind, measuring the degree of agreement with fist of five or gradients, consent by objections, a Decider with a supervote) and are recorded with their context and consequences, with the parking lot closed with an owner and a date.

Why it is here now. The techniques are documented with their biases by NN/g, Cohn, and Kaner, and lightweight decision records (ADR, DACI) have spread from architecture to product. Sociocratic consent is gaining ground in agile teams as a fast alternative to consensus.

Where to look. [NN/g — Dot voting](#) · [Cohn — Four quick ways to gain or assess team consensus](#) · [Sociocracy 3.0 — Consent decision-making](#) · [Nygard — Documenting architecture decisions](#)

Remote and hybrid facilitation · CONSOLIDATING

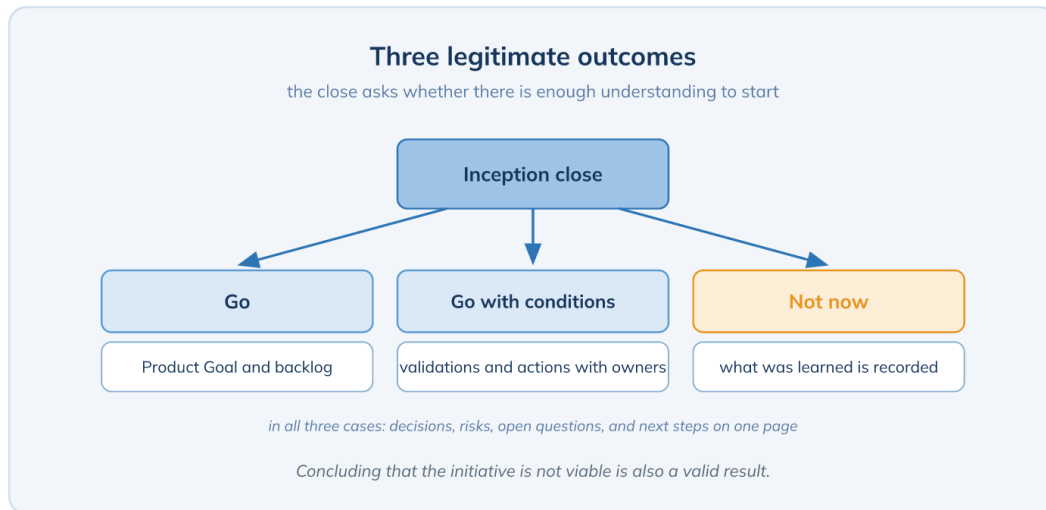
Remotely, the inception is split into sessions of up to three hours with a single board moderator, breakout pairs, asynchronous work before and after, and frequent breaks. Hybrid is the hardest format, because remote participants speak up and influence less, and it demands a single digital whiteboard, remote participants speaking first, and a co-facilitator dedicated to them.

Why it is here now. Zoom, Teams, Miro, and Mural are now the dominant tools and hybrid is the format facilitators like least (only 7.5% practice it regularly), but codification lags behind practice: the 2025 agile facilitation learning outcomes still do not mention it.

Where to look. [SessionLab — State of Facilitation 2025](#) · [Mural — How to run a remote workshop](#) · [Miro and AJ&Smart — Remote facilitation](#) · [W3C — Hybrid meetings](#)

Block F — Closing, handing over, and realigning

What must remain at the end, how it passes into the work without becoming a contract, and when to return to the room.



Closing the inception: what must remain, the three outcomes, and the lightweight record

· ESTABLISHED

At the end there must remain the shared vision, the scope with exclusions, the risks and constraints, the decisions, the open questions, and the next steps, in a record that fits on one page and is communicated to those who were not there. The closing criterion is whether there is enough understanding to start, and it admits three legitimate outcomes: go, go with conditions, or not now.

Why it is here now. Not documenting is the critical mistake the BoK points out, and more than a third of facilitators admit they fail to keep the momentum after the session. Concluding that the initiative is not viable has been a valid result since the earliest texts on inception in Spanish.

Where to look. [Scrum Manager BoK — Inception](#) · [Beas — Agile Inception \(2013\)](#) · [SessionLab — State of Facilitation 2026](#) · [NN/g — Parking lots](#)

From result to work: Product Goal, initial backlog, and specifications · ESTABLISHED

The result of the inception is carried into the first Product Goal and an initial, emergent Product Backlog, with the pending validations turned into testable hypotheses; in teams that work with spec-driven development, the inception's conversations are the raw material of the first specifications. The agreements are open to revision, because the inception is a living document that is corrected with what is learned.

Why it is here now. The 2020 Scrum Guide gave the team an explicit Product Goal that has to be built somewhere, product backlog building (PBB) formalizes the step from features to stories, and Scrum Manager recommends the combined Agile Inception and SDD course because both skills define the "what" before building.

Where to look. [Scrum Guide 2020 — Product Goal](#) · [Caroli — From features to user stories \(PBB\)](#) · [O'Reilly — Hypothesis-driven development](#) · [Skill Arena — SDD in agile teams](#)

Re-inception: realigning an initiative already under way · CONSOLIDATING

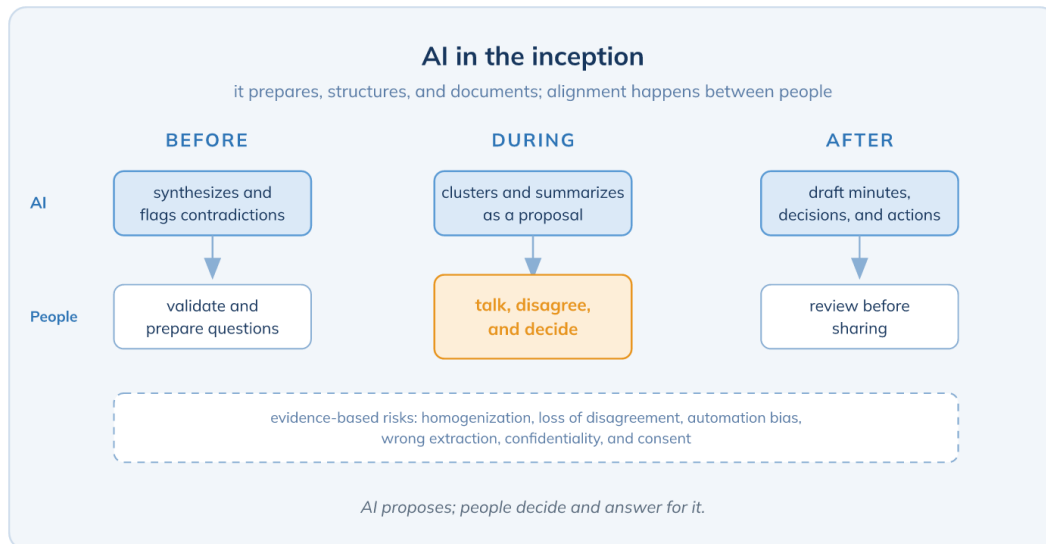
It is time to return to the room when the effort has gone astray, the team's composition changes, the MVP hypotheses are invalidated, the Product Goal is abandoned, or a major release arrives. The re-inception is a trimmed inception that takes the earlier results as a baseline and reopens only what has changed.

Why it is here now. Re-chartering has been in Liftoff since 2016 and the Scrum Guide provides for abandoning a Product Goal, but the practice of reorienting initiatives under way is less codified than that of starting them; this entry synthesizes scattered sources.

Where to look. [Larsen and Nies — Liftoff \(2nd ed.\)](#) · [Team Canvas — using it to adjust course](#) · [Scrum Guide 2020](#)

Block G — The inception in the age of AI

AI makes everything in an inception that is production cheaper and shifts the workshop's value toward what remains human: aligning people and deciding what not to do.



AI before, during, and after: preparing, synthesizing, and documenting with human review

· CONSOLIDATING

Before, AI synthesizes the prior documentation, spots contradictions, and prepares questions and the agenda; during, it clusters and summarizes contributions as a proposal the group validates; afterwards, it produces the draft minutes with decisions and actions that a person reviews before sharing, and it reviews the resulting backlog better than it writes it. Synthetic personas serve to generate hypotheses and prepare questions, never to replace the user's voice.

Why it is here now. Clustering notes and transcribing meetings are now standard features of Miro, Mural, FigJam, Meet, or Zoom, and three out of four facilitators use generative AI to prepare sessions; but extracted actions are what it gets wrong most (between 62% and 87%), and participants' consent has become a practical legal requirement.

Where to look. [NN/g — Facilitating AI-enhanced workshops](#) · [Kitces — accuracy of AI meeting assistants](#) · [Caroli — ChatMVP](#) · [NN/g — Synthetic users](#)

The prototype and the agents in the room · EMERGING

AI prototyping turns the clickable prototype into raw material available during the workshop, which strengthens the "show the solution" conversation but introduces three risks: anchoring on a solution before aligning problem and goals, confusing the prototype with the product (building to learn versus building to earn), and creating parallel systems without governance. In products with AI agents, the agents enter as actors in personas and journeys, and the agent experience is added to the technical, UX, and business review.

Why it is here now. Figma Make has been generally available since July 2025 and sits in Trial on the 2026 Thoughtworks Radar, Cagan warns of the confusion between prototype and product, and Caroli proposes the agent dimension in the Lean Inception; all of it is less than two years old.

Where to look. [Cagan — Prototypes vs Products](#) · [Thoughtworks — Technology Radar, techniques](#) · [Caroli — Lean Inception for AI agents](#) · [Figma — Figma Make general availability](#)

Evidence-based risks and the principle of use · EMERGING

Recent evidence shows that AI homogenizes contributions and smooths over disagreement when it summarizes, that automated facilitation raises participation but does not improve the decision, that automation bias leads to accepting outputs without examining them, and that the extraction of decisions and actions often fails; confidentiality and consent add to this. The principle of use is simple: AI prepares, structures, and documents, and alignment happens between people.

Why it is here now. The studies on homogenization (2024–2026) and on AI facilitation (2026) are new and convergent, and the agile institutions (Scrum.org, the Scrum Guide Expansion Pack, the Agile Business Consortium) agree that people decide and are accountable.

Where to look. [Anderson et al. — homogenization of ideas with AI](#) · [Alsobay et al. — AI facilitation of groups \(CSCW 2026\)](#) · [Scrum Guide Expansion Pack — AI and Scrum](#) · [Fisher Phillips — consent and meeting assistants](#)

A note on the references

The links included were available and verified as of the update date. Given the pace of change in this area, some may change; each revision of the map also updates its references.

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