

Now/Next/Later Roadmap Workshop Guide

Formats: Markdown (canonical) | Word (DOCX) | PDF **Updated:** 2026-03-22 **License:** CC BY 4.0 --
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A facilitation guide for building a Now/Next/Later roadmap with your team -- from blank board to stakeholder-ready artifact in 60-90 minutes.

When to use this

Your team needs a roadmap that communicates priorities without false precision. Gantt charts and timeline roadmaps promise dates you can't keep. Now/Next/Later communicates intent, confidence, and sequence without locking in deadlines. Use this when kicking off a new quarter, aligning with leadership on priorities, or explaining to stakeholders what's coming and what's not.

Companion templates: See the [NNL Roadmap Template](#) for the fill-in-the-blank structural template, and the [Roadmap Slides Template](#) for a presentation-ready deck format.

Process

Step 1: Define the roadmap frame

Before placing a single item, establish what the roadmap is for.

Capture these four things on the board:

Product/Initiative: (What are we roadmapping?)
Audience: (Who will read this? Team, leadership, client, board?)
Time horizon: (How far out are we looking? One quarter? Two? Six months?)
Outcomes: (What 2-3 outcomes are we optimizing for?)

Why outcomes first? Every item on the roadmap should connect to an outcome. If it doesn't, it's noise. Starting with outcomes gives the team a filter for what belongs and what doesn't.

Example:

Product: PatientConnect mobile app
 Audience: VP of Product + Engineering leadership
 Time horizon: Q2-Q3 2026
 Outcomes:
 1. Increase medication adherence rate from 62% to 80%
 2. Reduce support call volume by 30% through self-service
 3. Launch clinician dashboard to 3 pilot clinics

Step 2: Generate candidate items (top-down and bottoms-up)

Populate the board with everything that could go on the roadmap. Don't filter yet.

Top-down items come from strategy:

- Leadership commitments and board-level goals
- Strategic bets the org has already decided on
- Customer commitments or contractual obligations

Bottoms-up items come from the team:

- Features the team has been advocating for
- Tech debt that's slowing delivery
- Discovery learnings that suggest new directions
- User feedback patterns

How to run it:

- Silent brainstorm: 8 minutes, one item per sticky note
- Each item needs a short title (3-6 words, action-oriented: "Reduce onboarding friction" not "Onboarding improvements")
- Aim for 15-25 candidate items
- Don't debate or filter during brainstorm -- capture everything

Step 3: Place items in lanes

Now sort everything into Now, Next, or Later. Work through the items one at a time.

Lane definitions:

Lane	What it means	Confidence level
Now	Actively building or starting this sprint/iteration. Committed.	High -- we know what to build and we're doing it

Lane	What it means	Confidence level
Next	Intended for the near future. Not started yet. Clear preconditions.	Medium -- we have intent but dependencies or unknowns remain
Later	On the radar but not planned. Will revisit when conditions change.	Low -- direction, not commitment

For each item, ask three questions:

1. **Does this connect to one of our outcomes?** If not, park it or kill it.
2. **Do we know enough to start?** If yes and it's high priority, it's Now. If we need more discovery, it's Next or Later.
3. **What must be true before we can start?** This defines the precondition that moves an item from Later to Next, or Next to Now.

Facilitation approach:

- Start with the obvious Now items. These are usually already in flight or clearly committed.
- Then place the clearest Later items -- things the team agrees are important but not yet.
- Everything in between is the conversation. Spend your time here.
- Timebox to 20-25 minutes. If an item is contested, note the disagreement and place it tentatively. You can revisit after all items are placed.

Step 4: Add context to each lane

Once items are placed, enrich each lane with the details stakeholders need.

For Now items, add:

- Outcome link (which outcome does this serve?)
- Why now (rationale for prioritizing this)
- Confidence level (High/Medium/Low)
- Key dependency (what could block this?)

For Next items, add:

- Outcome link
- What must be true first (precondition for starting)
- Confidence level

For Later items, add:

- Outcome link
- Why later (reason for deferring)
- Trigger to revisit (what event or metric would move this to Next?)

Also capture:

- **Not prioritized:** Items the team explicitly chose not to include. List them with a reason. This is just as important as what's on the roadmap.
 - **Risks and watchpoints:** Anything that could change the roadmap
 - **Decisions needed:** Open decisions with owners and deadlines
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Step 5: Review and pressure-test

Before calling the roadmap done, run these checks with the team.

The balance check:

- Are there too many Now items? (More than 3-5 means you're overcommitted)
- Are there zero Later items? (That usually means you're not thinking far enough ahead)
- Does every item connect to an outcome? (Orphan items need a home or the exit)

The dependency check:

- Do any Now items depend on other Now items? (Sequence them or flag the risk)
- Are any Next items blocked by decisions that haven't been made? (Add them to "Decisions needed")

The stakeholder check:

- Would a VP reading this understand what the team is doing and why?
 - Could someone who missed this meeting read the roadmap and know where things stand?
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Worked example

Team: PatientConnect mobile product team **Time horizon:** Q2-Q3 2026

Outcomes we are optimizing for

1. Increase medication adherence rate from 62% to 80%
2. Reduce support call volume by 30% through self-service

3. Launch clinician dashboard to 3 pilot clinics

Now

Item	Outcome Link	Why Now	Confidence	Key Dependency
Medication reminder notifications	Adherence rate	User testing validated -- patients want customizable reminder times	High	Push notification infra (shipped Sprint 6)
Care plan PDF export	Support call reduction	Top 3 support request; 3 clinic partners waiting	High	None
Clinician dashboard v1 (read-only vitals)	Pilot launch	Pilot clinics onboarding in May	Medium	Device integration API (in progress)

Next

Item	Outcome Link	What Must Be True First	Confidence
Smart refill reminders (pharmacy API integration)	Adherence rate	Pharmacy API access confirmed (pending vendor review)	Medium
In-app FAQ and troubleshooting	Support call reduction	Top 10 support topics identified and validated	Medium
Clinician dashboard v2 (care plan editing)	Pilot launch	v1 launched and feedback collected from pilot clinics	Low

Later

Item	Outcome Link	Why Later	Trigger to Revisit
AI-powered adherence predictions	Adherence rate	Needs ML model and 6 months of adherence data	When we have 10K+ users with 90-day history
Family caregiver portal	Support call reduction	User research not yet done on caregiver workflows	After caregiver interview round (planned Q3)

Not prioritized

- Dark mode -- cosmetic, no outcome link
- Custom avatars -- low impact, high effort (killed in 2x2 exercise)

Risks and watchpoints

- Pharmacy API vendor review could delay smart refill reminders by 4-6 weeks
- Pilot clinic onboarding depends on IT setup at each site -- variable timelines

Decisions needed

- VP of Product: Approve pharmacy vendor contract by Apr 15
- Engineering lead: Confirm device integration API scope by Apr 1

Facilitator tips

- **Outcomes before items.** If the team starts placing items without defining outcomes, stop and go back. Without outcomes, every item seems equally important.
- **"Not prioritized" is the hardest section and the most valuable.** Teams resist explicitly saying no. Make space for it. What's not on the roadmap is a decision, not an omission.
- **Now should be small.** 3-5 items in Now is plenty. If you have 10 items in Now, you're not roadmapping -- you're listing everything you hope to do. That's a wish list, not a roadmap.
- **Preconditions make Next actionable.** "We'll get to it later" is vague. "We start this when the API access is confirmed" is a trigger. Every Next item needs a precondition.
- **Revisit quarterly, not weekly.** A roadmap is a strategic artifact. If you're re-sorting items every sprint, the roadmap isn't stable enough to communicate intent.
- **Top-down and bottoms-up must both be in the room.** A roadmap built only from leadership priorities misses technical reality. A roadmap built only from engineering backlog misses strategic direction. You need both perspectives to land on something honest.

Miro/FigJam board setup

To run this workshop digitally, set up your board with these zones:

1. **Frame zone:** Product name, audience, time horizon, outcomes (top of board)
2. **Brainstorm zone:** Unstructured sticky note area for candidate items

3. **Roadmap zone:** Three columns labeled Now / Next / Later with table headers for context fields
4. **Parking lot:** Not prioritized items with reasons
5. **Risks & decisions zone:** Two-column area at the bottom

Pre-populate the frame zone and column headers before the session starts.

How did it go?

After the workshop, check:

- ☐ Outcomes are defined and every item connects to at least one
 - ☐ Now has 3-5 items, not 10+
 - ☐ Every Next item has a specific precondition (not "when we're ready")
 - ☐ Every Later item has a trigger to revisit
 - ☐ "Not prioritized" items are listed with reasons
 - ☐ Risks and open decisions have owners and deadlines
 - ☐ The roadmap is readable by someone who wasn't in the room
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