Briefing

What questions should you be asking?

How executives lead new product development by asking, and teach their project leaders to ask the same questions of their own teams

FTTM best practices series.

A field guide for the general manager or executive who has just inherited a portfolio of NPD projects with schedules that look accurate, current, and on track. Drawn from lateralworks engagements across 200+ programs since 1988. Two companion briefings accompany this article: a seven-observation executive checklist and a ten-question schedule walk-through.

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Date
July 2026
Ideas library article

Online
lateralworks.com
FTTM best practices series

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Core thesis. Executives do not accelerate NPD portfolios by issuing instructions. They accelerate them by asking questions that make reality visible, and by asking them so consistently that project leaders start asking the same questions of their own teams before the executive walks in. The questions demonstrate involvement, and they teach.

Overview

Abstract

You inherit a portfolio of new product development projects. The teams use FTTM methods. The schedules are accurate, refreshed weekly, and show the products landing on their target dates. What should you be asking? The instinct is to ask nothing. The schedules look healthy, the teams are practicing a disciplined method, and an executive who probes a green portfolio can feel like a micromanager. That instinct is wrong, and this article explains why.

A schedule that shows no gap to its target is the single most common signature of a schedule that has stopped telling the truth. Across lateralworks engagements since 1988, the programs that failed late almost always looked on track early [1]. The mechanism is well documented: confirmation bias in the teams [2], the planning fallacy in the estimates [3, 4], and an organizational history that punished the last person who surfaced bad news. None of this is visible in a status report. All of it is visible in the answers to about ten questions, asked in front of a live schedule.

This article gives executives those questions. It explains why asking is the correct executive instrument for NPD, what each question is designed to expose, and what to listen for in the answers. It then shows the second-order effect, which is the real payoff: the questions you ask consistently become the questions your project leaders ask their own teams. Within two or three monthly cycles, the answers move from the meeting room into the schedule itself, which is where they belong.

The article draws on the published research on questioning as a leadership skill [5, 6], on psychological safety and organizational learning [7, 8], and on the product development literature [9, 10], cross-referenced against lateralworks field observations from 200+ FTTM programs [1]. Two companion briefings, published alongside this article, turn it into working documents: a seven-observation executive checklist and a one-page schedule walk-through script.

01

The situation

So you just took over the portfolio

Start with the scenario as it actually presents itself. You take over a portfolio of NPD projects. The teams follow FTTM practices: core teams are staffed, schedules are refreshed weekly, critical paths are calculated rather than asserted. Every project shows a plan that reaches its customer commitment. Nothing is escalating to you. On paper, this is what good looks like.

Here is the uncomfortable field observation: this is also exactly what the six months before a late-discovered crisis look like. The difference between the two is invisible in the artifacts and obvious in the conversation. A portfolio that is genuinely healthy can answer pointed questions about its gaps, its iterations, and its hard problems without flinching. A portfolio that has quietly stopped telling itself the truth cannot. The only way to tell them apart is to ask [1].

Why accurate-looking schedules lie

Three well-studied mechanisms produce a green portfolio that is quietly off track. The first is confirmation bias. Nickerson's survey of the phenomenon describes people seeking and weighting evidence that supports what they already believe [2], and a product team that wants to be on schedule is superbly equipped to find evidence that it is. Schedules built from derivative-product templates go unchallenged because challenging them is uncomfortable and confirming them is not. The team convinces itself it is on schedule even while individual engineers know their piece is not.

The second is the planning fallacy. Kahneman and Lovallo showed that executives systematically take the inside view, building forecasts from the specifics of the case in front of them while ignoring the distribution of outcomes on similar past projects [3]. Buehler, Griffin, and Ross demonstrated the same bias at the level of individual task estimates [11], and Flyvbjerg documented it at program scale, along with the reference-class discipline that corrects it [4]. In NPD the fallacy takes a specific, recognizable form: the schedule carries one pass through design, build, and test. One iteration everywhere is a prediction that nothing fails the first time. It has never come true.

The third mechanism is organizational, and it is the one executives control most directly. Real gaps stay hidden when surfacing them is dangerous. If the people who stepped out into the wind on past programs got blown away, the current teams saw it happen. Edmondson's research established that teams learn, admit error, and raise problems in proportion to how safe it is to do so [7, 8], and Argyris showed how smart professionals construct defensive routines that keep threatening information out of the room [12]. The result is a portfolio where the gap is known three levels down and invisible at the top.

FTTM's answer to all three is the same: pull the pain forward [13]. A problem exposed early is cheap; the same problem exposed in the eleventh hour is existential. Gaps exposed early can almost always be closed, because there is still time to add people, change the development approach, or re-negotiate scope. The only variable leadership actually controls is the date of exposure. The questions in this article are the executive's tool for moving that date earlier [1, 14].

The gap is the tool

FTTM never builds a happy schedule. The distance between the customer target and the realistic finish is the engine of before-the-fact urgency: it justifies the resources, the decisions, and the parallel paths that close it [14]. Smith and Reinertsen made the economic version of this argument decades ago, quantifying what each week of delay costs so that trade-offs can be made rationally while there is still time to make them [15]. A schedule that matches the target on day one has usually been reverse-engineered from the answer. That is why the first thing an executive should do with a green portfolio is treat the absence of a gap as a finding, and start asking where it went.

02

The instrument

Questions are how executives lead NPD

If the schedules cannot be trusted at face value, what should the executive do about it? The tempting answers are structural: add a review gate, commission an audit, demand a recovery plan. Each of these tells the organization what to produce. None of them changes what the organization knows, and all of them teach the teams to manage the reviewer rather than the product. The instrument that works is older and cheaper: ask questions, in person, in front of the live schedule, and keep asking them on a cadence.

This claim has solid research behind it. Brooks and John, reviewing the behavioral science of questioning, found that asking is a uniquely powerful organizational tool: it drives learning and idea exchange, surfaces unforeseen risk, and builds trust, yet almost no executive is ever trained to do it [5]. Schein made the cultural argument in Humble Inquiry: leaders who ask genuine questions, rather than telling, are the ones subordinates bring problems to [6]. Both findings converge with what lateralworks has observed on fast programs since 1988: the executives who got early warning were the ones who asked for it, specifically and repeatedly [1].

Asking demonstrates involvement

Teams read executive attention accurately. A general manager who accepts a slide summary has communicated the required standard: produce good slides. A general manager who sits for an hour while a project leader walks the first five critical paths, task by task, has communicated something different: know your schedule, because I will. Grove described this as the leverage of monitoring: a small amount of genuine executive engagement, applied at the right depth, changes the preparation behavior of the whole organization [16]. Bossidy and Charan made robust dialogue the core of execution for the same reason: the leader's questions are where the organization's honesty gets set [17].

The depth matters. Questions answerable from a status report get status reports. Questions answerable only from inside the schedule, such as which task is driving critical path one today and who owns it, force the project leadership into their own plans before the review. That preparation is most of the value. Leaders will get into their own schedules before they will stand in front of an executive with one [1].

Asking teaches

The second effect is slower and more valuable. Questions asked consistently get anticipated, and anticipated questions get institutionalized. A project leader who knows the monthly walk-through will ask where the learning cycles are starts asking their own engineers where the learning cycles are. Within a few cycles the question has propagated down the organization and its answer has moved into the schedule, which is the goal. Catmull built Pixar's braintrust on the same insight: institutionalize candid questioning at the top, and candor becomes how the whole studio works [18]. The executive's question list is a curriculum. Choose it deliberately.

This is also how the executive escapes the micromanagement trap. The walk-through never tells a team how to solve its technical problems, and it never re-plans the project from the head of the table. It inspects whether the team is asking itself the right questions, and it models what those questions are. Wheelwright and Clark drew the same boundary in their work on heavyweight teams: senior management sets direction and holds the team accountable for the whole product, while the team owns the how [9]. Questions respect that boundary. Instructions violate it.

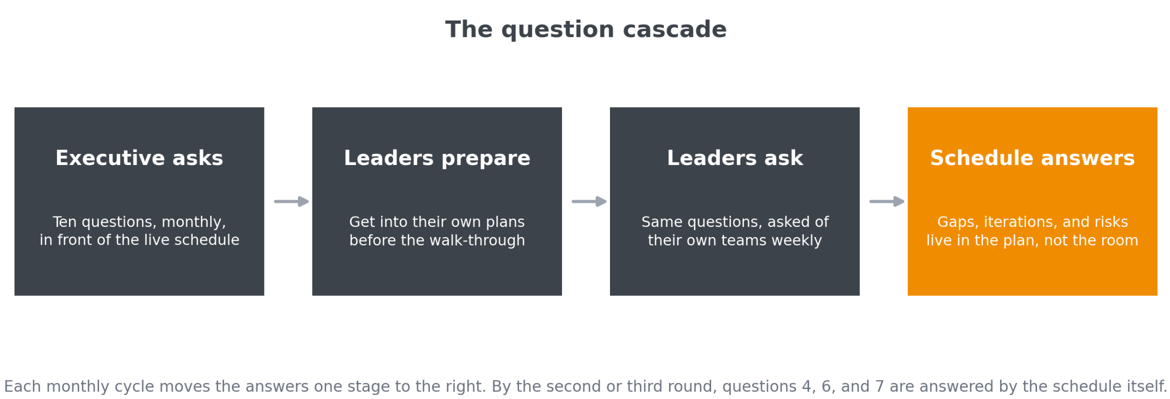

Figure 1. The question cascade: consistent executive questions propagate down the organization and into the schedule.

03

The walk-through

Ten questions, one hour per project

The format matters as much as the questions. Have each project leader and their program manager present their schedule to you, live in the scheduling tool, walking the first five critical paths. The PM drives the tool; the leader answers the questions. One hour per project, no slides, schedule current as of that morning. Slides are where reality goes to be formatted; the live schedule is where it can be inspected [1, 19].

The answers matter less than the preparation the format forces. A leader who knows the walk-through is coming spends the preceding week inside their own plan, and that week of preparation surfaces more problems than the hour in the room. What follows are the ten questions, what each is designed to expose, and what to listen for.

1 · Where are we against the target date, plus or minus?

The opening question, and the one most portfolios cannot answer. Ask for the gap in weeks and ask whether it lives on the schedule or only in the leader's head. FTTM treats the published gap as the engine of the whole method: it is what justifies resources, decisions, and parallel paths while there is still time for them to work [14].

Listen for: a number. "On track" without a number means the gap is hidden.

2 · Walk me through critical path #1, task by task.

What is the driving task today, and who owns it? What finishes this week, and what starts because of it? The content of the answer is secondary. You are testing whether the leader can narrate their own plan, because a leader who cannot has delegated their understanding of the project to a tool and an administrator.

Listen for: whether the leader can narrate the path without the PM rescuing them.

3 · Now show me critical paths 2 through 5.

How many days behind the longest path is each one, and which becomes #1 the moment the first is pulled in? Single-path thinking is one of the oldest failure modes in project management; Goldratt built Critical Chain around the near-critical paths that overtake the nominal winner [20]. It is the second or third critical path that sneaks up and bites you [21].

Listen for: near-critical paths within days of the longest. Pull-in has to target the top three to five, not just the winner.

4 · Which tasks on these five paths assume everything works the first time?

Where are the learning cycles, and how many does each hard problem carry? NPD work iterates; that is what makes it NPD. Thomke's research on experimentation reaches the same conclusion from the laboratory side: development is a sequence of design-build-test cycles, and the plan should say how many [22, 23].

Listen for: one iteration everywhere. That is a prediction that nothing fails, and it has never come true.

5 · What are the top three technical problems between here and delivery?

Have the leader rate each one easy, medium, or hard, then ask who is solving them and whether that is all those people do. Every first-of-a-kind product carries a small set of problems nobody has solved before, and they are routinely worked part-time by the few experts who could solve them full-time.

Listen for: hard problems worked part-time by people carrying other jobs.

6 · Which problems will need more learning cycles than the schedule shows?

This is question 4 turned forward. Ask what the worst case looks like and whether a worst-case placeholder is in the plan. The FTTM budgeting rule of thumb: roughly two cycles for easy problems, three or four for medium, five or more for hard [23]. An educated guess with a method beats a schedule that pretends.

Listen for: open-loop unknowns: "no answer yet" appearing as no task in the plan.

7 · What are the top risks on these paths, and the mitigation for each?

Distinguish what is in the risk register from what lives only in people's heads, and ask what trigger starts each mitigation. A mitigation with no owner, no date, and no trigger is a hope with paperwork.

> **Listen for:** mitigations with owners and dates. Intentions are not mitigations.

8 · What is the schedule trend: slipping or accelerating?

The trend carries more information than the position [24]. If the project is slipping, is there time left to recover, and what is the recovery plan? If it is on schedule, what is being pulled in, and what are the top three future slips the leader expects? FTTM teams pull in before they slip, because the slack they create is what absorbs the surprise that has not arrived yet [25].

> **Listen for:** active pull-in. A flat trend with no pull-ins means drift is being absorbed silently.

9 · What do you need that you are not getting?

How many people, which skills, which decisions? Then the question that changes the relationship: what can I remove for you today? Unmade decisions are a resource constraint like any other, and often the cheapest one to fix; Rogers and Blenko found that ambiguity about who holds a decision is one of the most common drags on organizational performance [26].

> **Listen for:** names and numbers. A vague call for "resources" is the excuse, not the constraint.

10 · Do you have confidence in the target date, and what would raise it?

If confidence is low, what specifically has to change to raise it? What would the schedule look like with everything they asked for? This question closes the loop on question 1: a leader whose stated confidence does not match the gap they showed you an hour ago has just told you which of the two answers was rehearsed.

> **Listen for:** whether their confidence matches the gap they showed you in question 1.

FTTM first principle

The red flag

A schedule with no gap to the target is a red flag, not good news.

lateralworks engagement observations

NPD portfolios, 1988–2026

04

The patterns

What the questions surface

Run the walk-through across a portfolio and the same findings appear, in nearly the same order, in company after company. lateralworks has watched seven of them recur across engagements since 1988 [1]. Knowing them in advance changes how you hear the answers: you stop treating each finding as a surprise about this team and start treating it as a pattern with a known root cause and a known executive action. The companion checklist to this article lays out all seven in table form; the four below are the ones the questions expose first.

Leaders who ask what their role is

Questions 2, 3, and 9 expose it: project leaders who cannot narrate their own plan and who report missing skills without a plan to acquire them. Wheelwright and Clark defined the heavyweight leader as the general manager of the product, looking ahead, clearing obstacles, and provisioning the team, while the program manager runs the near-term detail [9]. When a leader asks what their role is, the answer is the problem in front of them. The executive action: tell each leader directly that they own the outcome, and judge them on whether they find and fix what is missing rather than on how well they report it.

The unmanaged critical 10%

Question 5 exposes it: each project has a few research-grade problems holding up the 90% the teams have done a hundred times, and those problems are being worked part-time by experts split across teams and meetings. Goldratt identified the underlying mechanism as bad multitasking, the silent killer of project throughput [20]. The executive action: isolate the 10% into its own project-managed schedule with a dedicated core team of specialists, give them everything they ask for, and run their plan on twice-weekly refreshes with executive visibility. Solutions come from focused people, not from large meetings.

Schedules with one learning cycle

Questions 4 and 6 expose it: optimistic new-product-introduction templates applied to new-product-development work, with first-of-a-kind iteration never planned in. The fix is a planning discipline, not a personality change. Rate each technical problem easy, medium, or hard; budget cycles accordingly (Figure 2); put a worst-case placeholder on every open unknown so the schedule stays closed-loop; then pull the placeholder in as reality improves [22, 23]. The schedule stops being a prediction that nothing fails and becomes a model of how the team actually learns.

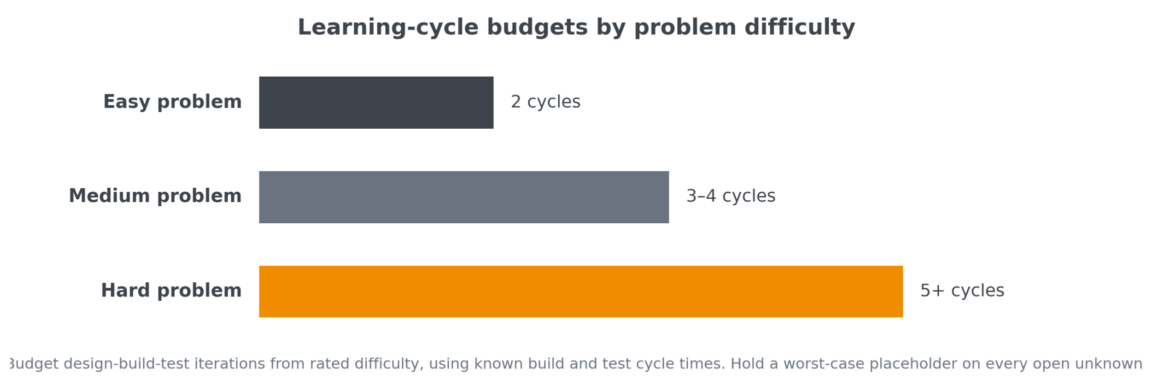

Figure 2. The FTTM learning-cycle budgeting rule of thumb: about two cycles for easy problems, three or four for medium, five or more for hard.

No safe way to surface bad news

Every question on the list depends on this one being fixed, and only the executive can fix it. Where the people who stepped out into the wind on past programs got blown away, protection has to be visible and repeated before behavior changes [7, 12]. The first reaction to bad news determines how much bad news reaches you afterward. The executive action: publicly back the first person who surfaces an ugly gap, reward gap-surfacing in reviews, and say it out loud, often: bad news early is good news [13, 27].

05

The cadence

Run it as a rhythm, not an event

A single walk-through produces a good meeting. A monthly walk-through produces a different organization. Repeat the ten questions with each project on a fixed cadence, and hold the schedule-currency expectation between reviews: schedules refreshed weekly, current as of a fixed day, as a standing and non-negotiable norm. By the second round, the answers to questions 4, 6, and 7 should be in the schedule rather than in the room. When a leader answers every question from their own plan without looking at the PM, the pain has been pulled forward and you are no longer flying without instruments [1].

Eisenhower’s line applies directly: plans are worthless, but planning is everything [28]. The walk-through is not an inspection of a document. It is an inspection of whether planning, as a live weekly activity, is happening, and it is the executive’s recurring opportunity to teach the questions that make it happen.

What to do with the first ugly answer

The first honest walk-through usually produces a gap measured in months, and what you do next sets the tone for every review that follows. Thank the leader, publicly and specifically. Then get to work on the gap: fund the named resource asks fast, make the unmade decisions, and authorize the parallel paths. Provisioning speed is itself a signal; it tells the organization that surfacing a gap buys help rather than punishment [1, 26]. Accountability without provisioning is unfair, and provisioning without accountability is charity. FTTM does both, in strict order: remove every named excuse in writing, then hold delivery accountability with no exceptions.

Watch the trend between reviews

Between walk-throughs, the instrument to watch is the schedule trend: the week-over-week movement of the projected finish against the target [24]. A flat trend with no pull-ins means drift is being absorbed silently, usually by consuming margin the schedule never showed. Healthy FTTM teams pull in before they slip, banking acceleration while the options to accelerate still exist [25]. Ask for the trend chart in every review, unfiltered. If instruments exist that you are not being shown, insist on seeing them and schedule the review; flying in the clouds on instruments someone else is reading is not a governance model [1].

Companion briefings

Two working documents accompany this article, linked below it on the lateralworks Ideas page. **Getting reality into the schedules** is the executive checklist: seven recurring observations, the root cause behind each, and the actions only the general manager can take, with an expanded best-practice appendix. **Ten questions for the schedule walk-through** is the one-page script for the review itself, with the listen-for cues for each question. Print the second one and bring it to the first walk-through; by the third, you will no longer need it, and neither will your project leaders.

Start this week. Ask questions 1 and 4 of every project leader in the portfolio: where are we against the target, and which tasks assume everything works the first time? Put the first full walk-through on the calendar. Everything else in this article follows from seeing the true gap.

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