

Rethinking Kanban

The nuances most of us get wrong

Some of the (many) things I got wrong...

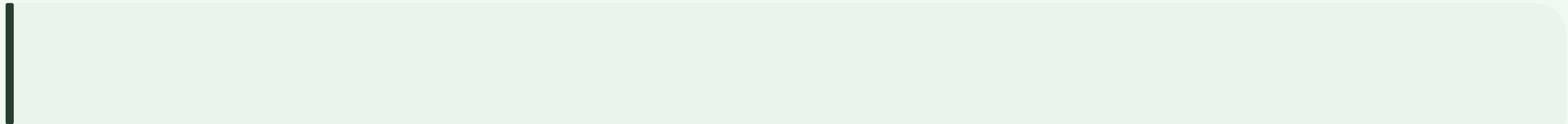
What does good Kanban practice look like to you? (*Use 1-2 words per submission*)

Let's explore...

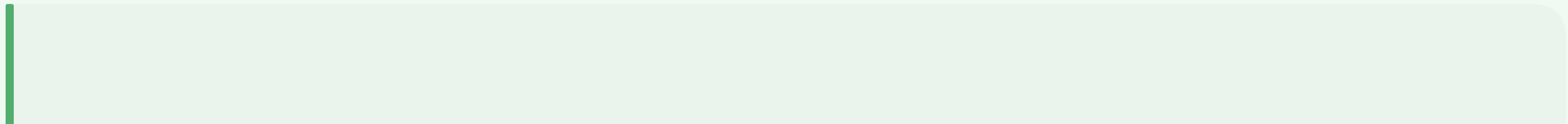
01. The Language Trap



02. The Workflow Illusion



03. The Missing Level



01. The Language Trap

Work in Progress / Process

Limiting WIP

Stop Starting and Start Finishing

WIP means...



- ☒ Work in Progress
- ☐ Work in Process
- ☒ Both are OK

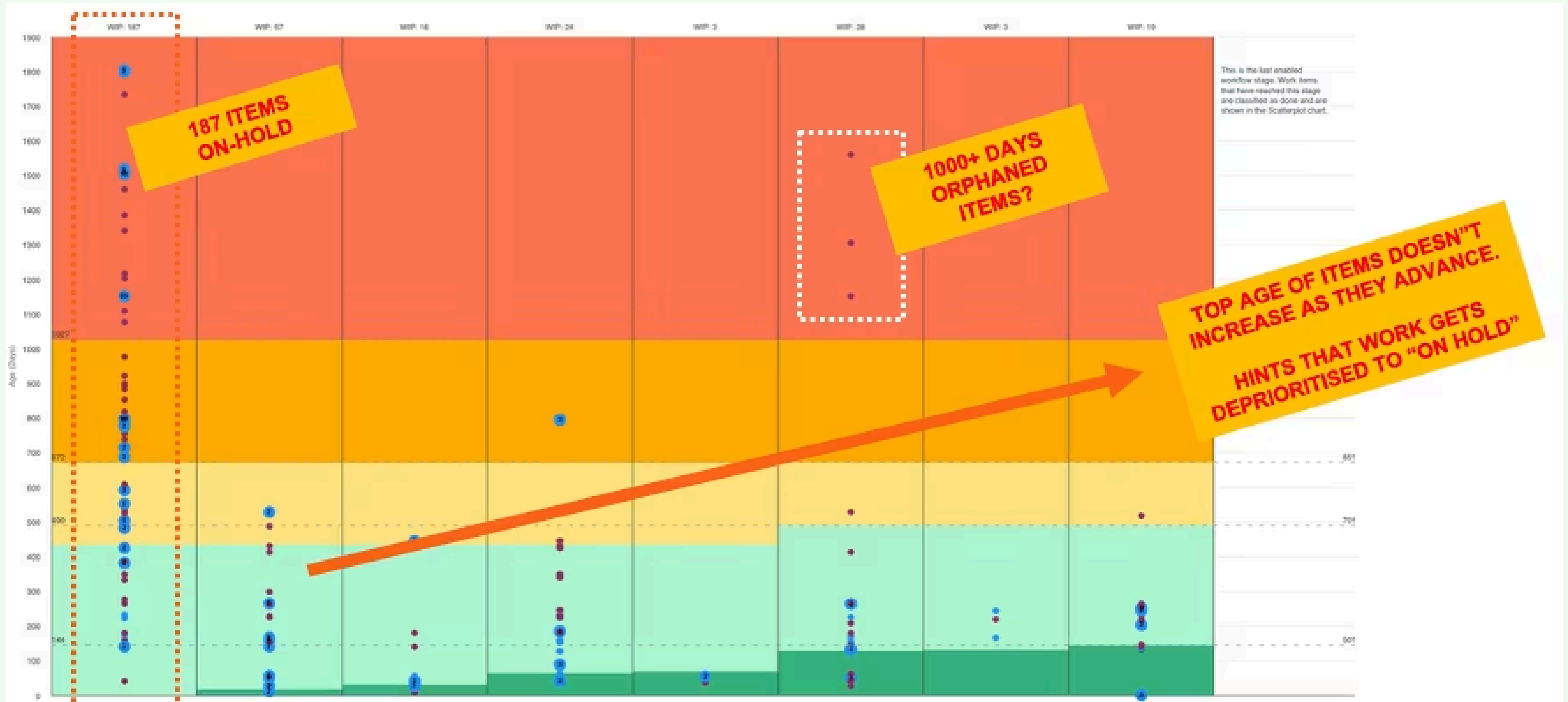
Think about your current board right now. What percentage of items do you think are genuinely moving forward vs silently stuck?

(1 = it's all stuck. 5 = everything is moving forward)



it's all stuck

everything is moving forward



Half-Done Work

Our laser focus should be on "finishing work as fast as possible".

Use language that reinforces that thinking.

Not language that creates a delusion of progress.

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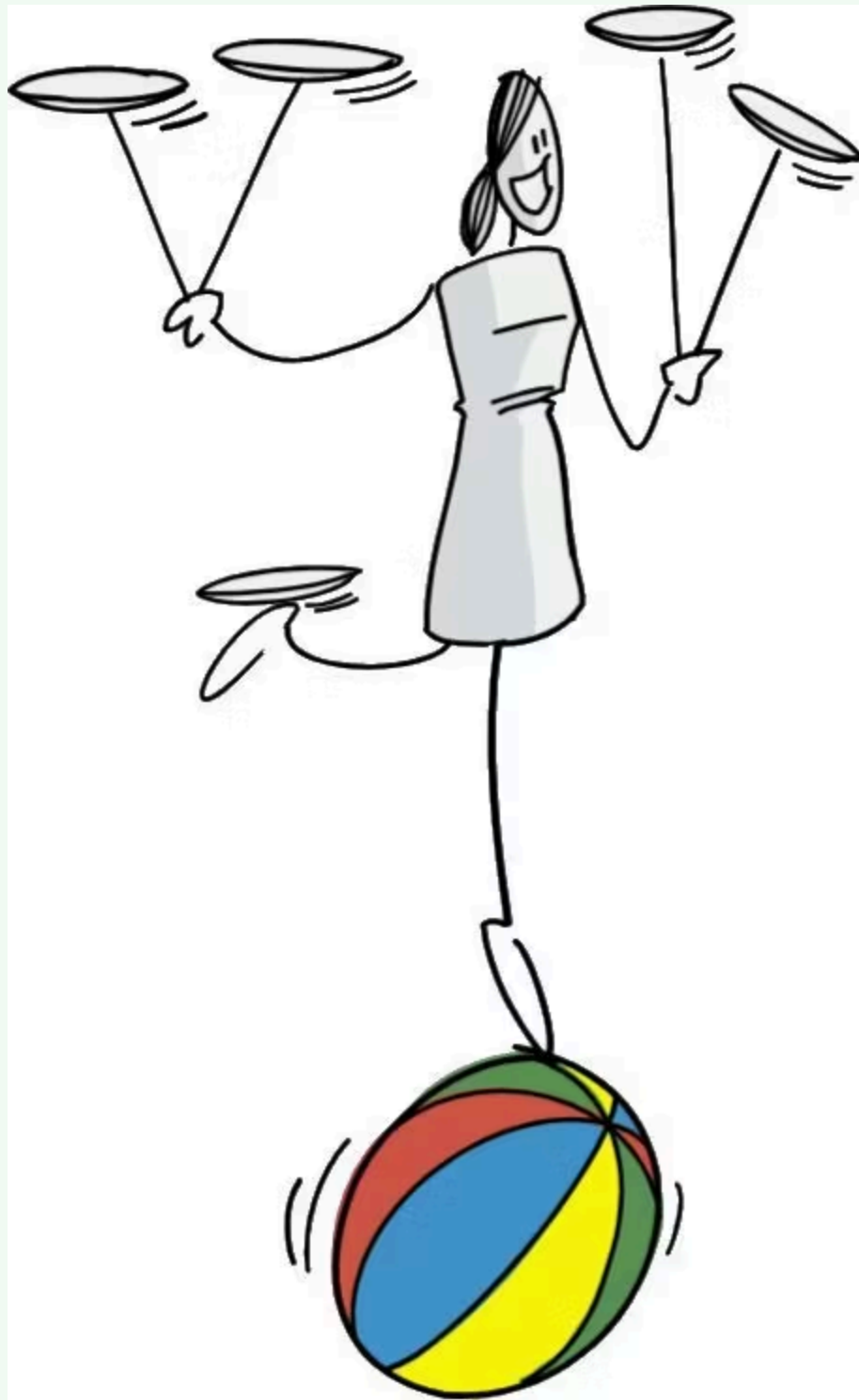
When you introduce WIP management to a team or organisation, what's the most common reaction?

0 Instant understanding and buy-in 

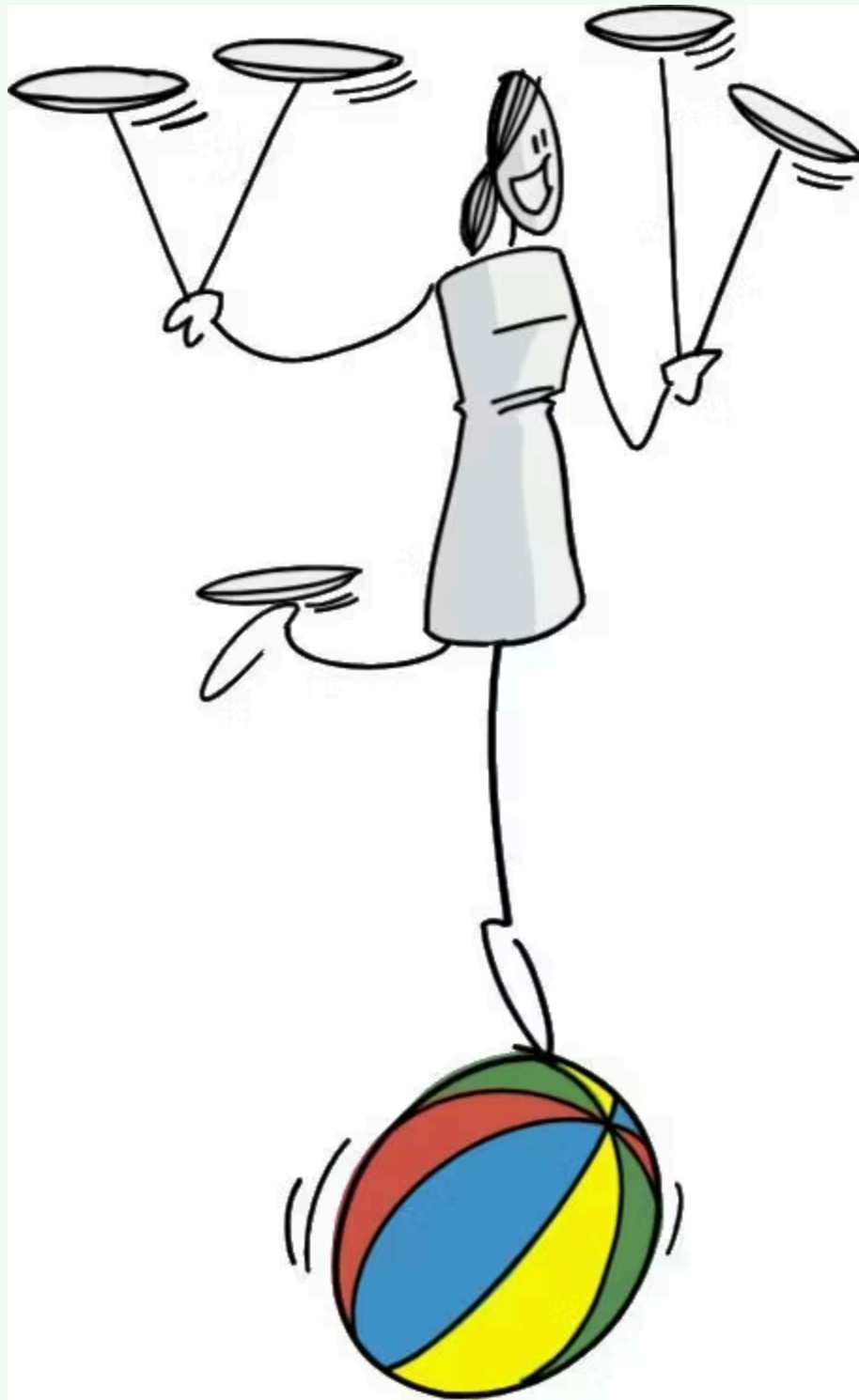
0 Curiosity but some hesitation 

0 Significant resistance 

0 It depends :-) 

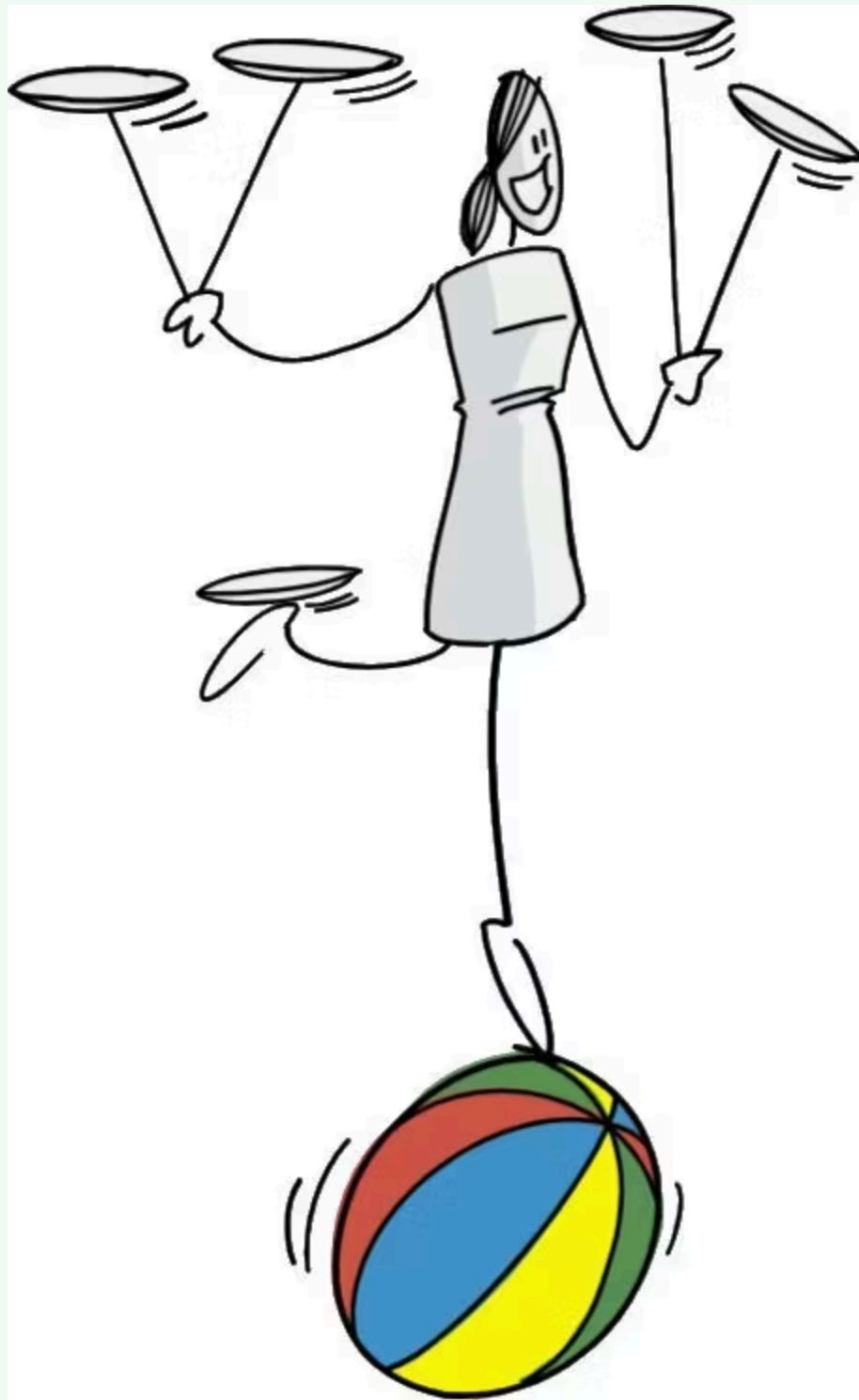


The word "limit" is anti-cultural.



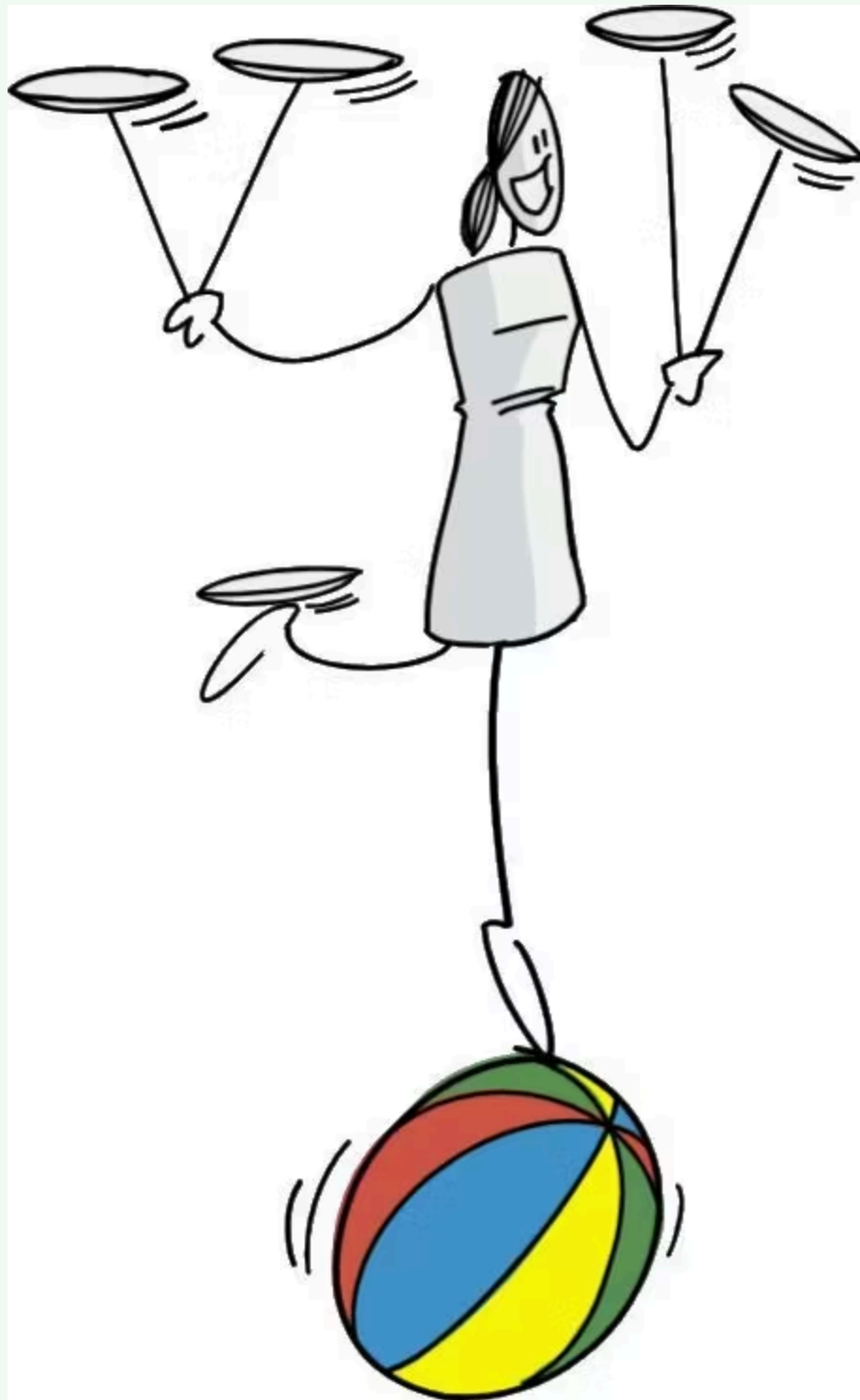
Three core beliefs "Limiting WIP" clashes against

1. The more we do, the more we achieve
2. Being busy is a good thing
3. We can multi-task



Two alternatives approaches to manage the workload

1. Focusing on ageing work
2. Promoting a balanced (or sustainable) workload (or WIP)



One surprising outcome

Ageing and balance are the Trojan horses that achieve WIP management.

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Stop Starting and Start Finishing

How often have you used "Stop Starting, Start Finishing" at work in the last year?



- Regularly — it's in my standard language
- Occasionally
- Rarely — I've started questioning it
- Never used it

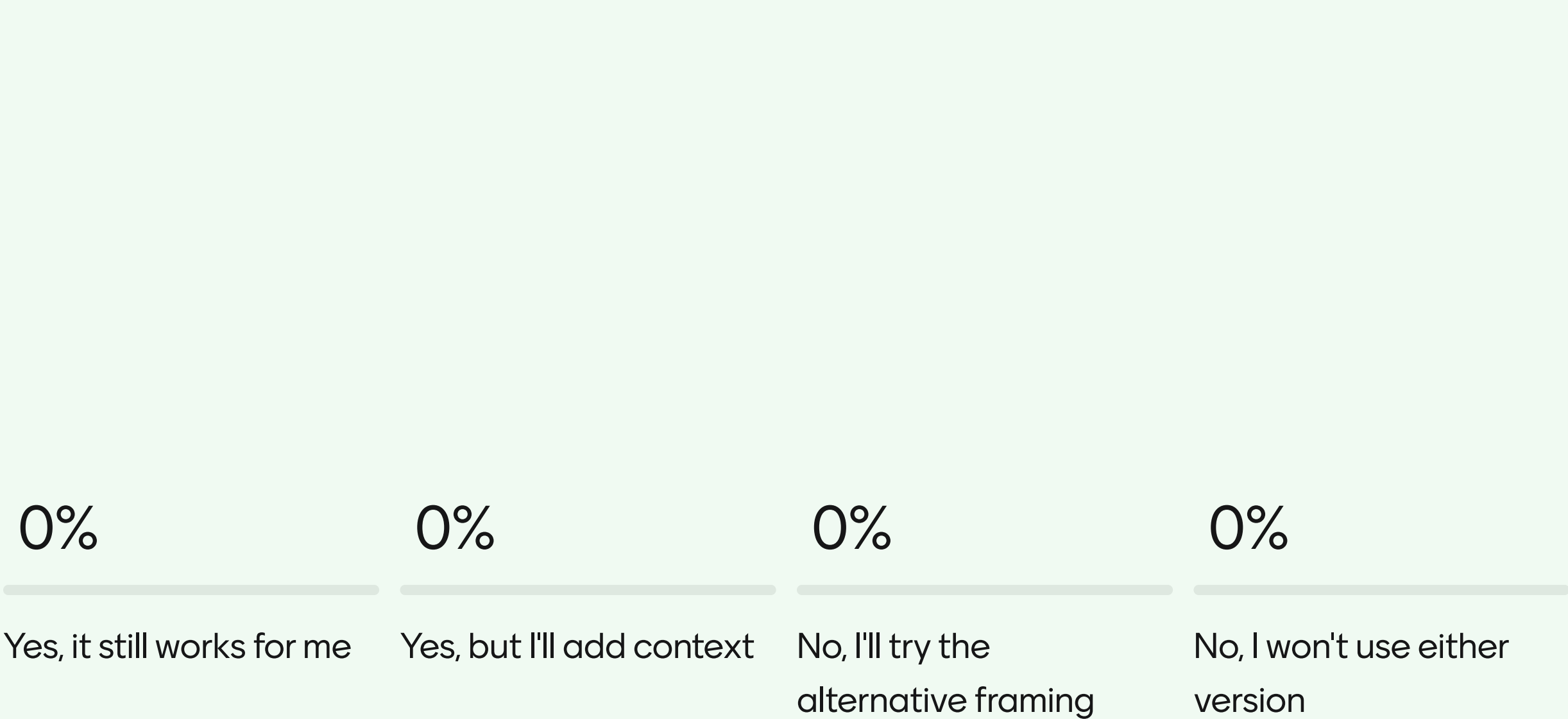
*stop
starting
and **start**
finishing*


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Don't start simply because you can.
Start because you think you can finish.

Will you use "Stop Starting, Start Finishing" again?



02. The Workflow Illusion

Workflow, Roleflow or Waitflow?

The Linearity Assumption

Column WIP Limits

Turbulent Flow

Think about the last Kanban board you designed or reviewed. What did the columns primarily represent?

0 The stages work moves through

0 The roles or teams who handle the work

0 A mix of both

0 I'm not sure

Most Kanban boards
visualise the handovers
between roles in the system

This is a "Roleflow", not a "Workflow"

In environments with
low flow efficiency
it is more important to
visualise the waiting steps
than the working steps.

This is your business "Waitflow"

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Do you allow *backward flow* in your systems?

0

Yes, and I design for it

0

Not really, but people do it

0

I don't allow it. It's heresy.







Sometimes the most honest workflow design
includes backward flow

...even if most tools can't handle it,

02. The Workflow Illusion

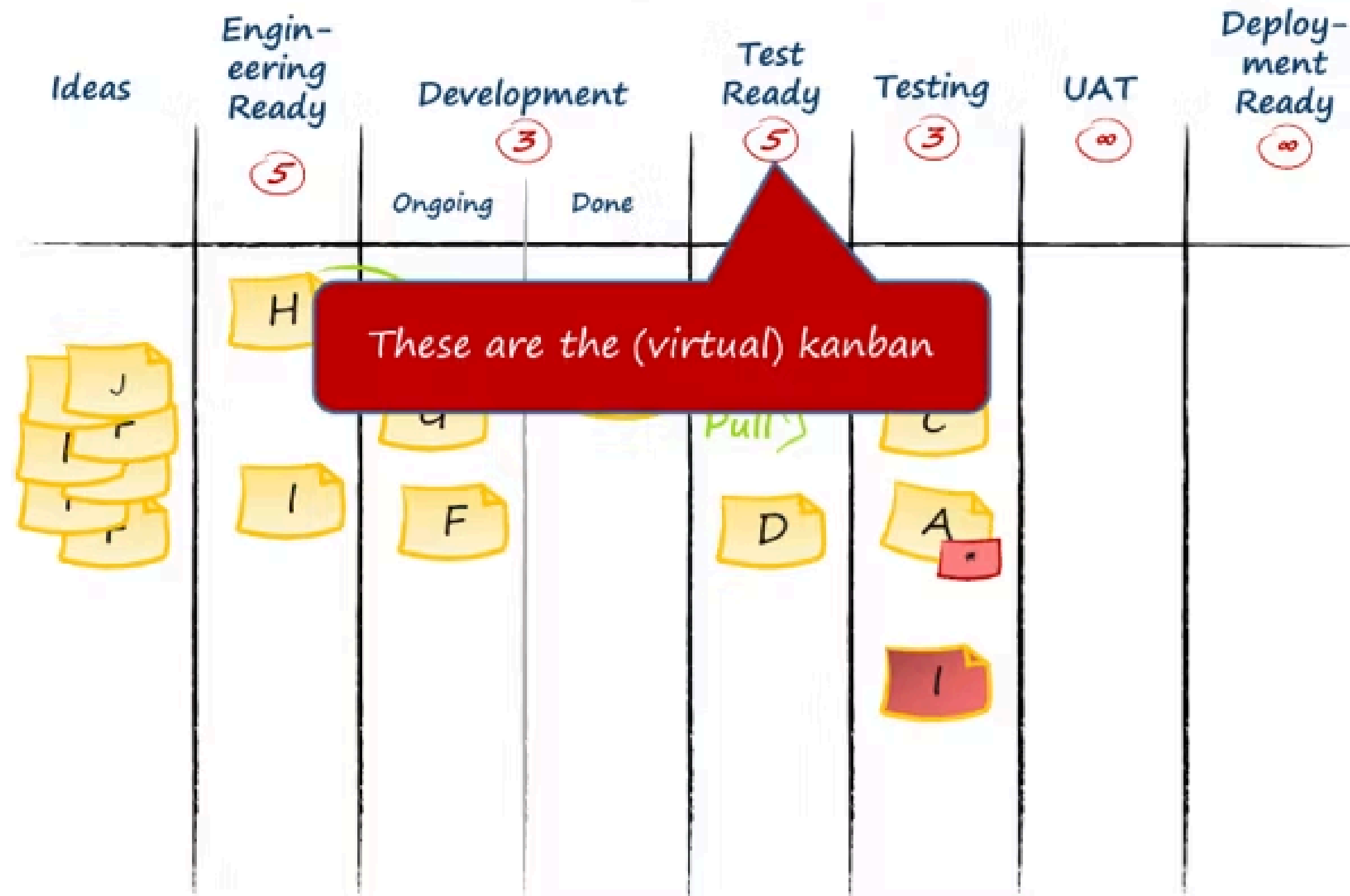
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Declaring a kanban quantity is even simpler



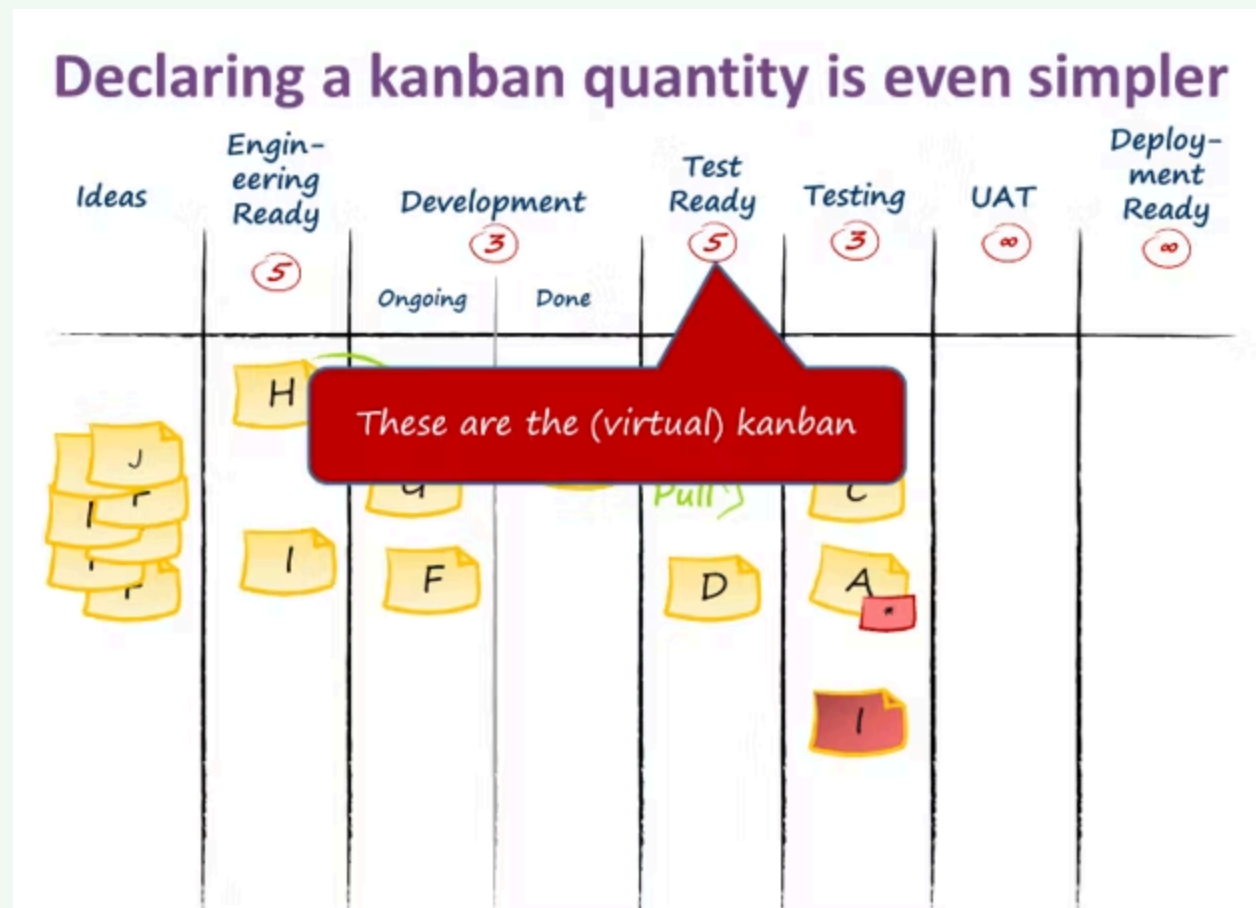
How well do column WIP Limits serve knowledge work teams in practice?

(1 = not at all, 5 = very well)



not at all

very well



Column WIP Limits only work when stages are real, sequential, and stable. Those are characteristics of semi-deterministic industrial environments.

Knowledge work contains too much intrinsic variability.

System-level WIP
is a practical alternative for
VUCA and BANI environments

One more thing...

If a WIP Limit represents your system's capacity,
then we should **aim to work at that level of workload.**

Not below.

Not above.

Exactly at that level.

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Where is the bottleneck?

03. The Missing Level

Most Kanban Systems are Siloes

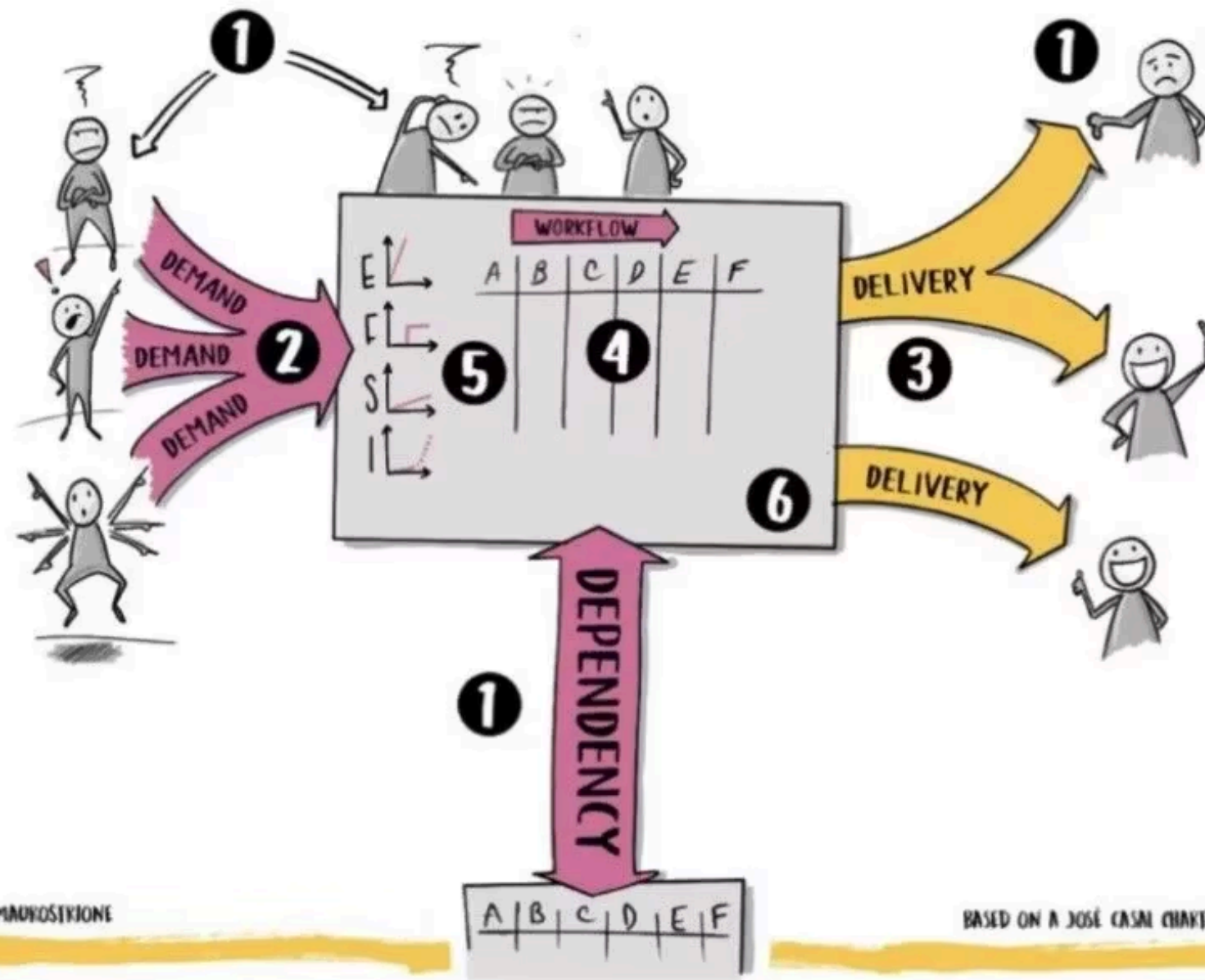
No Systemic View of the Organisational Flows

At what level does your Kanban system primarily operate? (Distribute 100 points across these options)



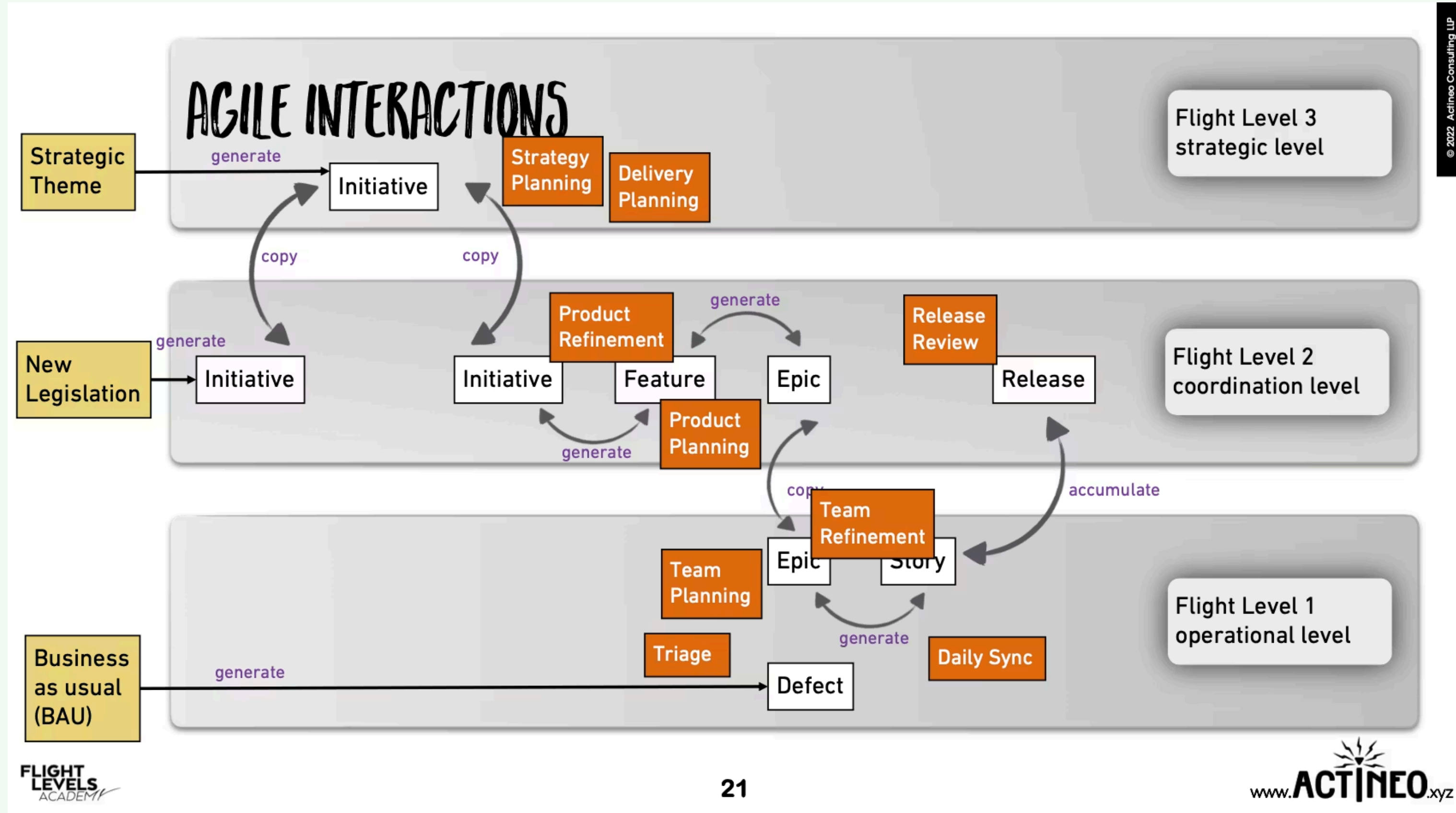
STATIK

SYSTEM THINKING APPROACH TO INTRODUCING KANBAN



- 0 UNDERSTAND WHAT MAKES THE SERVICE "FIT FOR PURPOSE"
- 1 UNDERSTAND SOURCES OF DISSATISFACTION REGARDING CURRENT DELIVERY
- 2 ANALYZE SOURCES OF AND NATURE OF DEMAND
- 3 ANALYZE CURRENT DELIVERY CAPABILITY
- 4 MODEL THE SERVICE DELIVERY WORKFLOW
- 5 IDENTIFY & DEFINE CLASSES OF SERVICE
- 6 DESIGN THE KANBAN SYSTEM
- 7 SOCIALIZE, DESIGN & NEGOTIATE IMPLEMENTATION





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What's the one thing from today that you'll find hardest to stop doing?

 **Thank you!**

 **¡Gracias!**

 **Kiitos!**

Let's continue the
conversation in
substack or linkedin.

