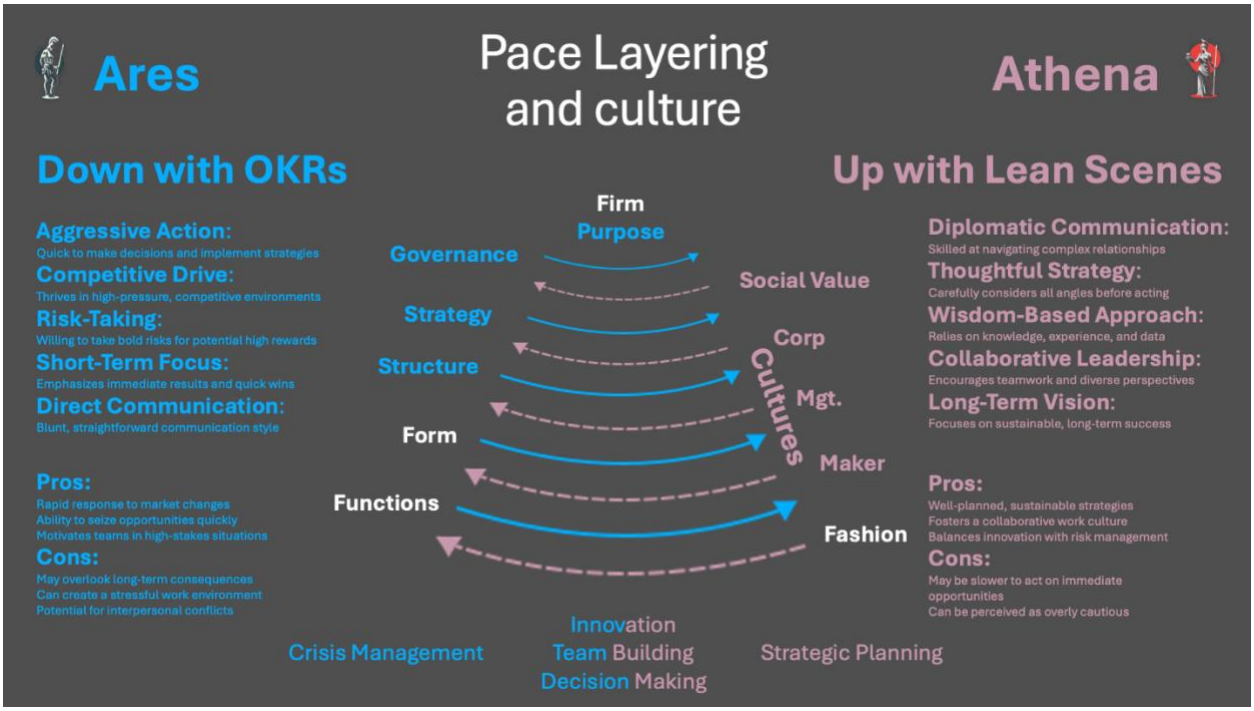
Lean Scenes

Accelerating Tech Team Performance with AI and Balanced Approaches



A White Paper

By Zak Moore & Keith Burnett

Time and Emotion

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Executive Summary

Lean Scenes are short business stories that capture bottom-up initiatives with benefits articulated for three organisational layers: makers (those doing the work), managers (those coordinating), and C-Suite executives (those setting strategic direction). Unlike traditional Objectives and Key Results (OKRs), which often start top-down, Lean Scenes emerge from the people closest to the work and address the real-world challenges facing modern tech teams.

For 14 years we have measured teams' creative culture. Managers asked for culture measurement to better understand their teams. Lean Scenes evolved as an efficient way to improve culture and processes. We found that other metrics improve too.

Strategic and operational guidance can be specified using two new frameworks and then stay alive by showing emergence and enabling conversations to take the best actions.

As AI enables rapid productivity and staff expectations evolve toward greater autonomy and voice, the traditional OKR framework faces limitations. The Lean Scenes concept provides a more inclusive, flexible alternative that:

- Captures actionable insights from maker teams
- Balances aggressive action (Ares) with thoughtful strategy (Athena)
- Improves team culture measurably
- Enables faster iteration with AI-assisted workflows
- Requires no revolutionary changes to existing systems

This white paper demonstrates how Lean Scenes complement or replace OKRs, with real-world examples and practical guidance for implementation in tech teams operating in fast-changing environments.

1. Introduction: The Need for Lean Scenes

The Evolution of Managing by Objectives

Since Peter Drucker introduced Management by Objectives (MBOs) in 1967, frameworks for goal-setting have evolved significantly. SMART goals in the 1981, OKRs at Google in 1999, and countless variations have emerged, each claiming to solve alignment and performance challenges. Yet the fundamental tension remains; how do you balance top-down strategic direction with the creativity and knowledge residing in teams doing the actual work?

Today, as generative AI claims to democratise productivity and younger teams expect to be heard, this tension has become acute. OKRs, while useful in many contexts, often fail to capture the nuance, emergence, and collaborative intelligence that drive innovation and sustained competitive advantage.

Key Limitations of OKRs

While OKRs have merits, they carry significant drawbacks in modern tech environments:

Issue	Problem	Lean Scenes Solution
Lack of Detail	High-level goals lack specific, actionable detail	Teams authoring scenes provide concrete, tested solutions
Top-Down Authorship	Senior leaders set goals without deep operational knowledge	Makers and junior managers author scenes based on real experience
Admin Overhead	Extensive tracking and review processes consume time	Minimal documentation; emphasis on working code and demos
Short-Term Focus	Quarterly cadence drives myopic thinking	2–13 week timescales allow both quick wins and strategic progress

The evidence for a better approach is mounting. Surveys show creativity is the #1 in-demand skill. Boston Consulting Group research indicates that while GenAI provides an initial productivity boost, most teams plateau—sustainable advantage comes from thoughtful, collaborative culture. Lean Scenes address these realities head-on.

2. Balancing Approaches: Ares and Athena in Pace Layering

Effective tech organisations need two speeds. Ares represents aggressive, action-oriented management—the rapid prototyping, crisis response, and bold bets that drive innovation. Athena embodies diplomatic, thoughtful strategy—the collaboration, alignment, and long-term vision that sustain it.

Rather than choosing one, mature organisations employ pace layering: rapid iteration in innovation layers (Ares) coupled with stable governance in strategic layers (Athena). Lean Scenes provide the mechanism for blending them effectively.

Ares: The Speed of Action

Ares is rigid OKRs, tight deadlines, and decisive top-down mandates. It works for:

- Crisis response and emergency pivots
- Rapid AI prototype cycles
- Time-bound competitive pushes

Athena: The Wisdom of Strategy

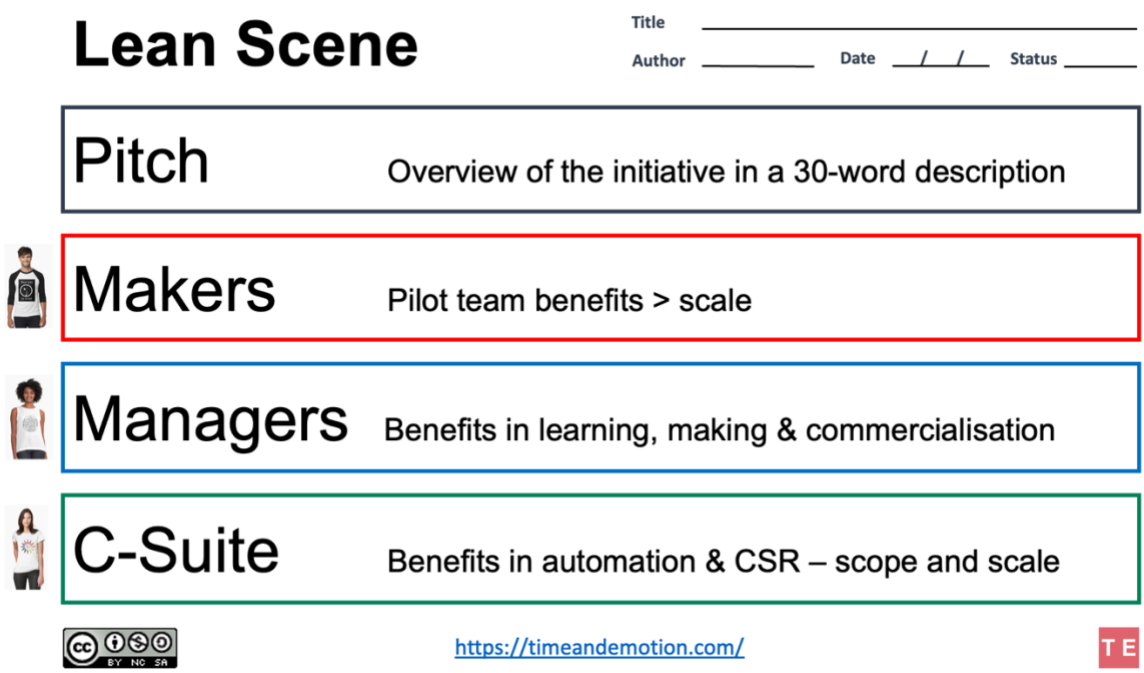
Athena is open dialogue, emergence, and long-term alignment. It works for:

- Building team trust and psychological safety
- Surfacing latent aspirations and creative ideas
- Sustained competitive advantage through culture

Lean Scenes thrive in Athena environments but can coexist with Ares. Use them to ensure the rapid decisions of Ares don't fracture team cohesion, and to ensure Athena doesn't slide into endless deliberation.

3. What Are Lean Scenes?

A Lean Scene is a concise, narrative statement of an initiative. It presents one perception (the problem or opportunity) and three perspectives (how the solution benefits makers, managers, and the C-Suite). Think of it as an elevator pitch for an idea—short enough to hold in working memory, rich enough to convey why it matters at every level of the organisation.



The Three Layers

Layer	Focus
Makers	Hands-on action and immediate results. Benefits: skill growth, problem-solving opportunities, movement to better roles.
Managers	Process flow and team coordination. Benefits: understanding team capabilities, studio management skills, ownership of improvement.
C-Suite	Strategic vision and long-term growth. Benefits: automation and CSR alignment, emergence of market-relevant ideas, scalable innovation.

Each layer sees distinct value. A scene proposing a new testing approach might benefit makers by reducing tedium, managers by improving code quality visibility, and the C-Suite by reducing defect-related revenue loss. All three are true; all three are relevant

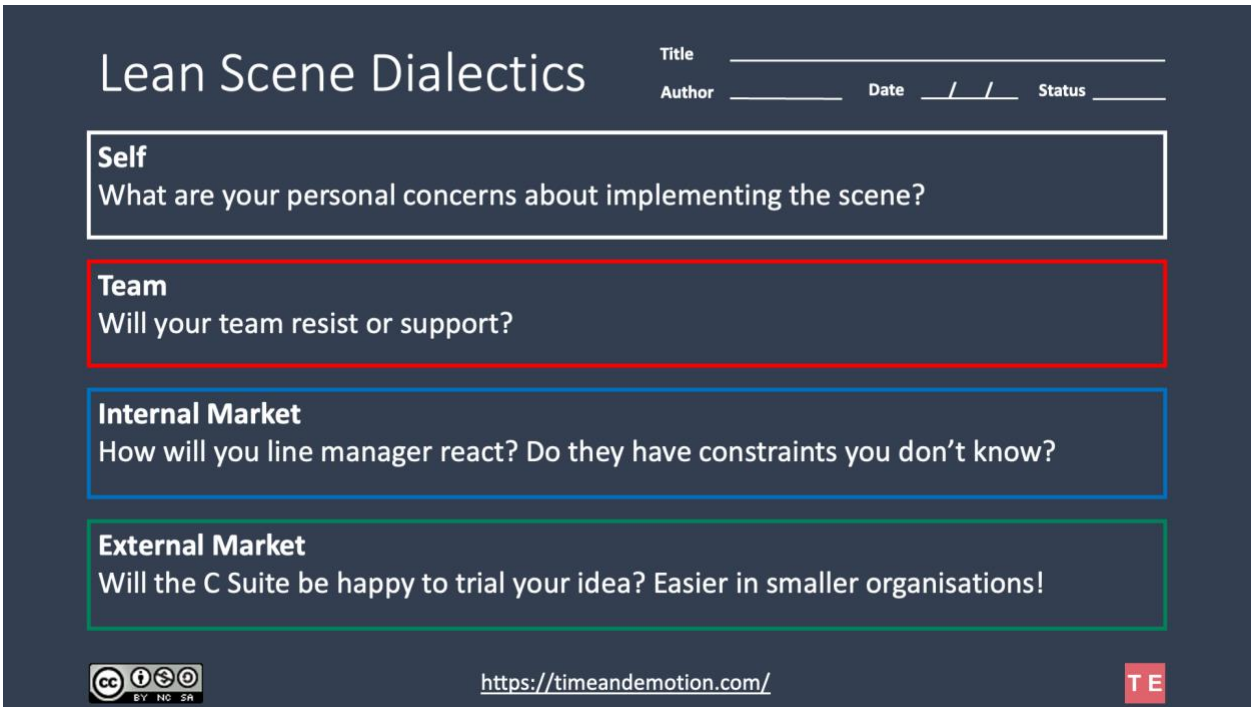
Dialectics: The Essential *Human In the Loop* Sanity Check for AI

AI moves fast. It generates polished, confident-sounding outputs in seconds. But speed without judgment is reckless. Dialectics are how you catch what AI misses: the blind spots, the risks, the threats hiding in plain sight.

Why Dialectics Matter

A language model can draft a business case, write customer copy, or suggest a strategy. It sounds coherent. But it has no skin in the game. It doesn't face the consequences if it's wrong. You do.

Dialectics are a sanity check—a structured way to ask uncomfortable questions *before* you commit. They force you to examine the output from four angles: Without these checks, you ship work that fails when it meets human reality.



The Risk You're Running

Without dialectics, you are betting that an AI, trained on historical patterns and public data, understands your specific context better than you do. It doesn't.

The Bottom Line

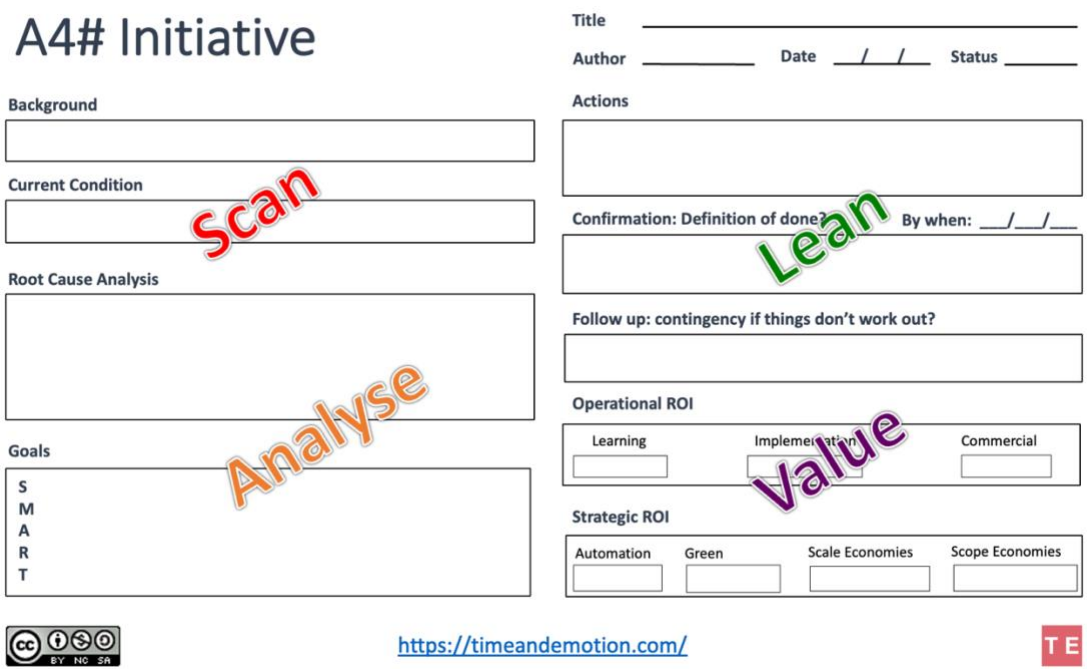
Dialectics are not a bureaucratic slowdown. They are a *feedback loop compression*. They catch problems when they're cheap to fix—in minutes, not weeks. They distribute accountability across the four layers that matter: you, your team, your organisation, and your market.
Skip them, and you'll ship broken work. Use them, and you'll ship faster work that works.

The choice is yours. But the dialectics—Self, Team, Internal Market, External Market—are essential. They're the difference between AI that scales judgment and AI that scales mistakes.

3.1 The SALVE Process – A4# LEAN Business Case

Writing a Lean Scene follows the SALVE cycle: Scan (identify the problem and explore dialectically), Analyse (apply creative problem-solving and rational business thinking), Lean (plan for innovation with contingencies), and Value (quantify or qualify the benefit). The process engages three modes of thinking—intuitive, rational, and social—flexibly, emphasizing balance over rigid analysis.

The A4# initiative is an extension of Toyota Production System A3 Thinking – a Lean tool.



AI tools accelerate this: GenAI can draft initial dialectics, analyse risk scenarios, or even generate illustrative sonnets. The human role shifts to refinement, validation, and ensuring the thinking is contextually sound.

AI tools such as Claude Code encourage you to spend more time planning and specifying – then they do the work.

4. How to Implement Lean Scenes

Step 1: Write the Scene

A Lean Scene is authored by makers or junior managers—the people closest to the work. The writing process is brief: 5–15 minutes to capture the problem, solution, and benefits for each layer. The goal is not perfection but speed and clarity.

Duration	Who	Output
5–15 min	You	Draft scene with pitch, maker, manager, C-Suite benefits
5–15 min	You	Apply dialectics; anticipate objections
5–15 min	You + team	Discuss and refine; adapt as needed
15–30 min	You + 1-up	Pitch and gather feedback
15–60 min	You + 1-up, 2-up	A4# business case with objectives, risks, ROI

Most Lean Scenes don't require the A4# level—a short pitch suffices. Reserve the full business case for initiatives requiring sign-off from senior leadership.

Step 2: Pitch and Refine

Present the scene to your 1-up manager in the style of a conversation, not a presentation. This is a negotiation, not a monologue. Listen for pushback—it's often fertile: resistance signals where alignment is unclear or where the organisation's constraints haven't been fully integrated.

Step 3: Implement in Studio Mode

Once approved, execute like a creative project. Use studio styles borrowed from film, music, games, or dance:

- Game: Iterative builds with visible progress and vertical slice demos
- Movie: Script, budget, schedule, daily rushes (demos)
- Dance: Choreograph, rehearse, perform, refine
- Music: Start with data, layer in creative refinement

Six to eight weeks is typical for a full cycle. If this is your first time, allow thirteen weeks. Break work into 15-minute chunks and use studio time as sanctioned creative space.

Step 4: Report and Iterate

Share progress via demos, daily rushes, or on-demand videos. Measure team climate, velocity, and learning. After completion, document outcomes in a Use Case Report and update the operating model with any emergent insights.

5. Real-World Examples

Example 1: Behaviour-Driven Development (BDD) in Enterprise

A European data aggregation firm, recently acquired by a US efficiency fund, needed to improve code quality and test reliability without slowing delivery. A maker team proposed introducing Behaviour-Driven Development, framing the Lean Scene as:

"Anyone contributing to feature creation will be English-like in nature and use business domain language. Increased coverage of developing, testing, and quality."

Maker benefit: Learn a valuable technique; faster feedback loops; feel heard in technical decisions.

Manager benefit: Better visibility into test quality; uniform approach across teams.

C-Suite benefit: Continuous improvement in quality; reduced defect liability.

The scene was approved and run as a three-month product increment trial. Resistance from managers was reframed as an opportunity to co-create operational guidance. The initiative succeeded, and practices were scaled across the organisation.

Example 2: Cross-Cultural Team Onboarding

A Netherlands-based SaaS firm hired a 20-person Polish developer squad to rebuild legacy Java systems. To accelerate integration and team gelling, the Product Owner ran a two-day onboarding workshop using climate measurement and Lean Scenes. Eight scenes emerged: seven from maker teams, one from the PO. Topics ranged from version control workflows to sprint thinking to defining collaboration norms. The team worked through COVID challenges smoothly, and the PO was subsequently promoted to Chief Product Officer—a testament to the power of bottom-up listening.

Example 3: AI-Powered Bid Writing

A UK government supplier faced a tedious bid-writing process: read tenders, search legacy responses in Excel, manually compile answers. A maker proposed using semantic search to automate the hunt. The A4# business case projected €600k–€1.1M ROI over 4 years. The initiative was approved, executed in 15-minute studio chunks over 6 weeks, and eventually became an independent startup valued at €1.1M. The lesson: simple ideas from people doing the work often unlock enormous value.

You can see other case studies here https://timeandemotion.com/ - works. Click on the company for the one-page use case report.

6. Getting Started

For Strategists

1. Create a G+ strategic guidance framework (based on Ghoshal's matrix, adapted for AI and CSR considerations).
2. Validate with your C-Suite to signal strategic priorities, green initiatives, automation goals, and scope economies.

For Managers

3. Create Value Stream Blueprints for each portfolio item, defining learning, implementation, and commercialization priorities.
4. Train teams to author scenes and provide psychological safety for ideas that cross traditional silos.

For Makers

5. Write Lean Scenes for ideas that improve your work. Be specific about benefits for each layer.
6. Use studio time to iterate. Share demos and daily rushes. Celebrate learning, not just delivery.

Success Criteria

Lean Scenes succeed when measured by SLIP: Simple, Low or no cost, Immediate benefits, long-term Payoffs, Plays nicely in the existing ecosystem.

7. Conclusions

Lean Scenes extend OKRs by capturing insights from the people closest to the work. They are more inclusive, flexible, and culturally aligned than traditional frameworks. They improve team culture measurably. And they do all this without revolutionary change—they slip into existing systems, complement top-down strategy with bottom-up emergence, and leverage AI to accelerate the cycle of ideation, validation, and learning.

In fast-moving tech environments, where staff expect to be heard and AI commoditizes certain types of work, Lean Scenes are not a luxury—they are essential. They are how you turn latent talent, emerging ideas, and the wisdom of your teams into sustained competitive advantage.

Start small. Write your first scene this week. Share it with your team. Pitch it to your manager. Implement it. Measure what changes. The hardest part is beginning. After that, it becomes practice.

Contact and Resources

Zak Moore

Email: zak@timeandemotion.com

Website: www.timeandemotion.com (Takeaway section for templates and tools)

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About the front piece

The structure framework is based on longnow.org and Pace Layering

The culture measurement is based on Goran Ekvall

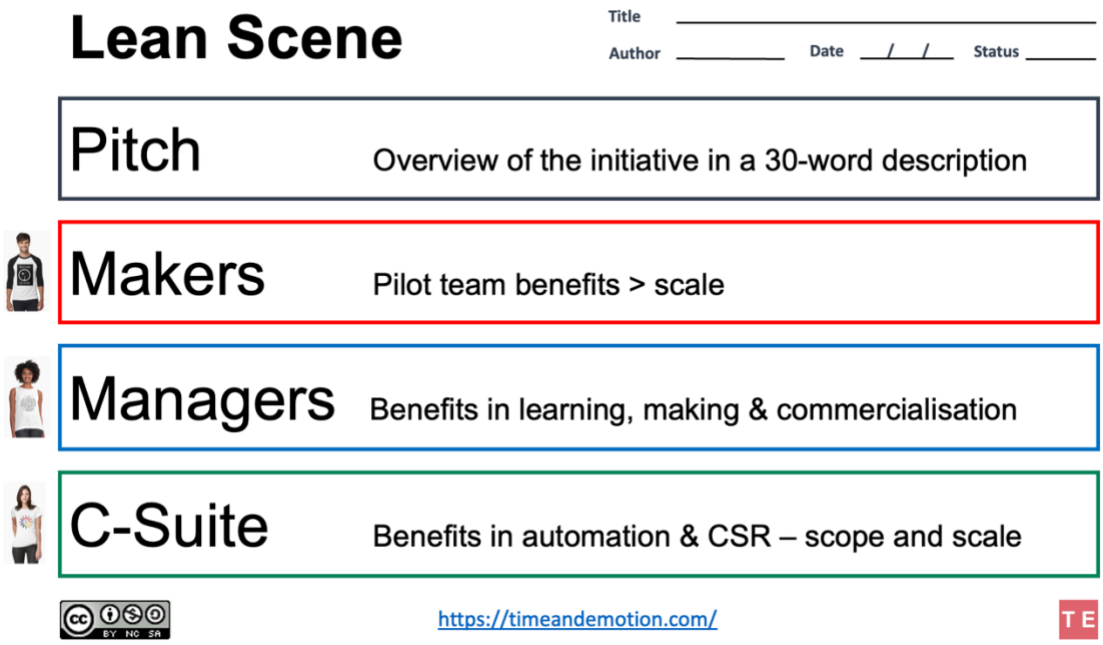
Ares and Athena are from Greek mythology – Iliad and Odyssey by Homer

Firm follows Form follows Function follows fashion is an extension of the Bauhaus maxim Firm follows Function

Appendices

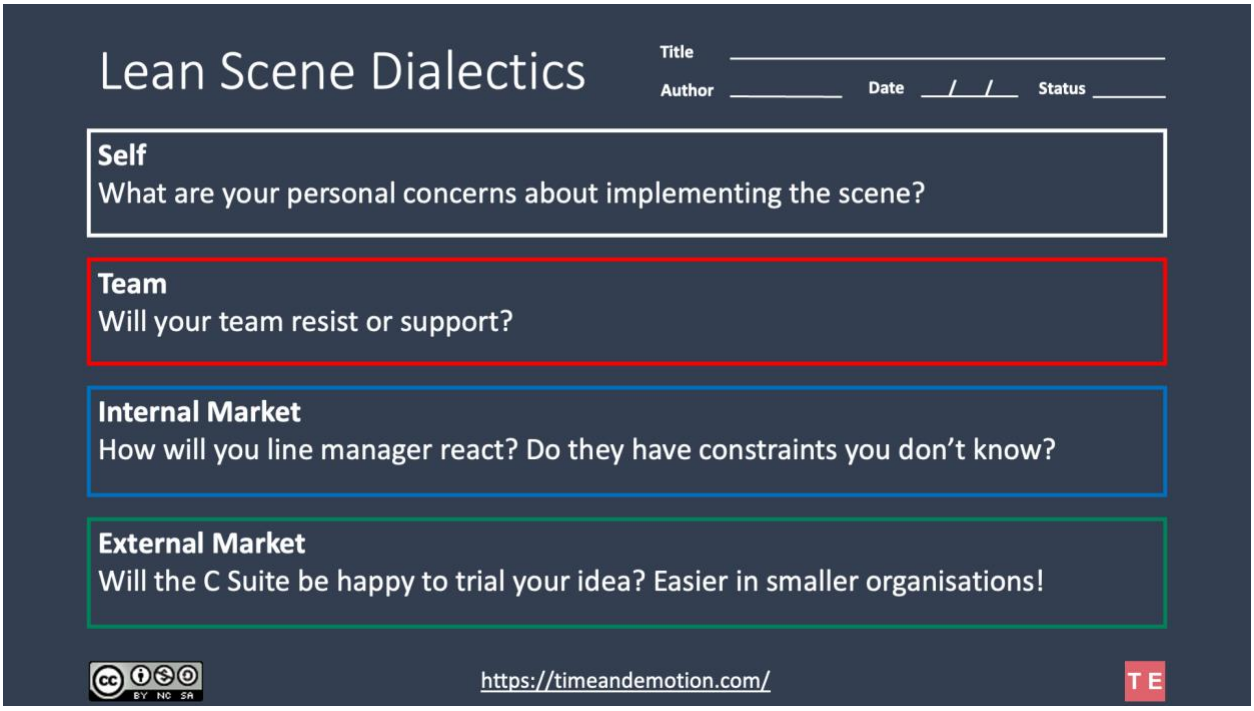
- Lean Scenes
- Dialectics
- A4 Business Case
- Value Stream Blueprint
- G+ Organising Framework
- Journey and Buffer chart
- Use Case Report
- SALVE Framework
- Culture and Lean Scene Workshops

Lean Scene



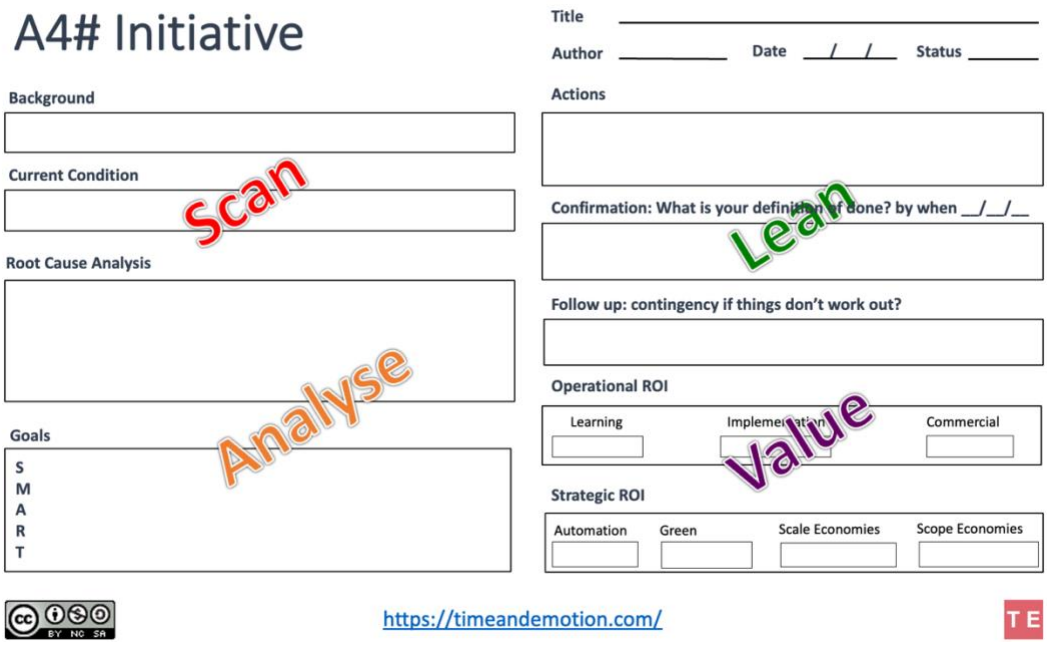
What	A simple business story you can hold in your head and pitch at 3 levels
Why	Be heard and look cool
When	Anytime
Where	At work
Who	You start with intuition and rational then socialise the idea
How	Write it down

Dialectics



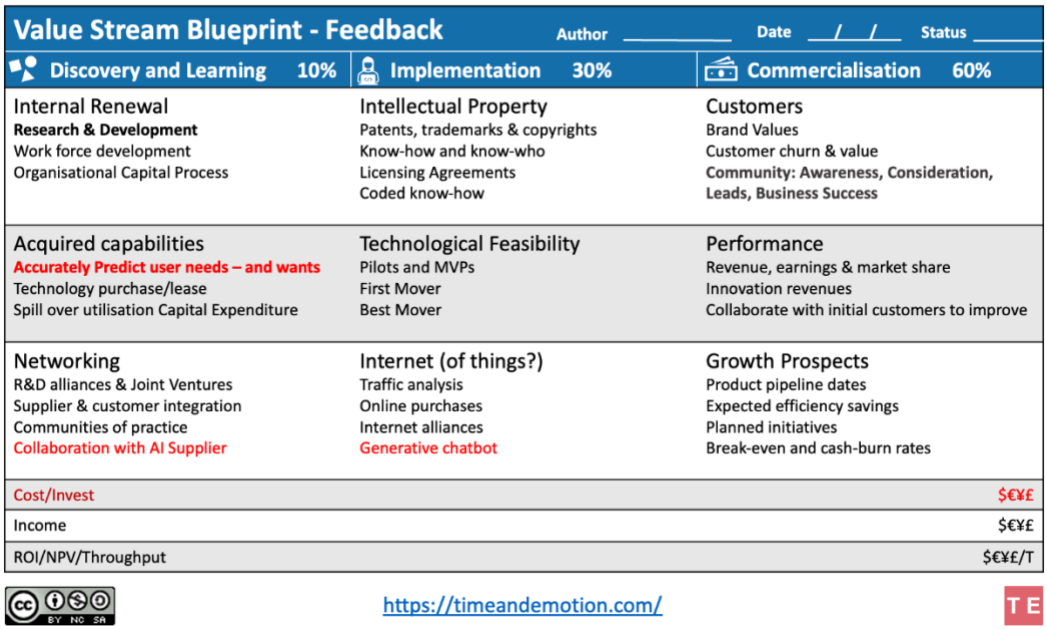
What	A set of Devils Advocacy considerations to second guess resistance
Why	Check and Test before submissions
When	After writing the lean scene
Where	At work
Who	You
How	Run them over your lean scene in an LLM or by yourself

A4 Business Case



What	Business case to back up lean scene and get approval
Why	Be heard and look even cooler
When	After Lean Scene positive feedback
Where	At work
Who	You start and ask others for help as needed to ascertain the ROI and build relationships that may not have existed beforehand
How	Apply some deeper thinking and analysis

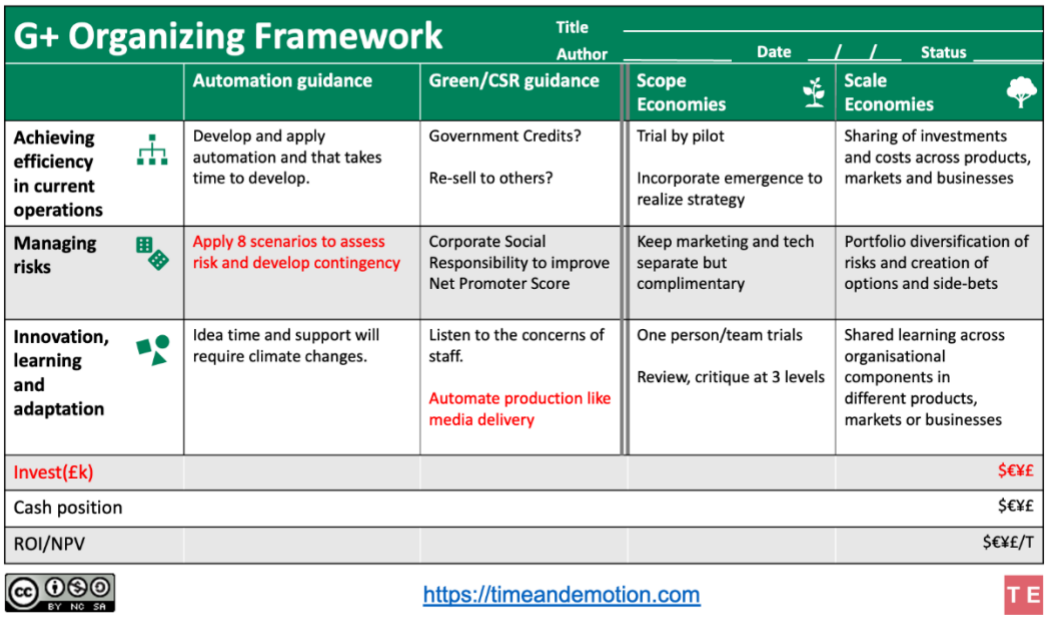
Value Stream Blueprint



Value Stream Blueprint - Feedback	Author _____	Date __/__/__	Status _____
Discovery and Learning 10%	**Implementation 30%**	**Commercialisation 60%**	
Internal Renewal **Research & Development** Work force development Organisational Capital Process	Intellectual Property Patents, trademarks & copyrights Know-how and know-who Licensing Agreements Coded know-how	Customers Brand Values Customer churn & value **Community: Awareness, Consideration, Leads, Business Success**	
Acquired capabilities **Accurately Predict user needs – and wants** Technology purchase/lease Spill over utilisation Capital Expenditure	Technological Feasibility Pilots and MVPs First Mover Best Mover	Performance Revenue, earnings & market share Innovation revenues Collaborate with initial customers to improve	
Networking R&D alliances & Joint Ventures Supplier & customer integration Communities of practice Collaboration with AI Supplier	Internet (of things?) Traffic analysis Online purchases Internet alliances Generative chatbot	Growth Prospects Product pipeline dates Expected efficiency savings Planned initiatives Break-even and cash-burn rates	
Cost/Invest			$€¥£
Income			$€¥£
ROI/NPV/Throughput			$€¥£/T

What	A set of guidelines prepared by the workstream/project/product manager
Why	Be heard and look cool
When	After Lean Scene Approval
Where	At work
Who	Determine if you are aligning or emerging with new things. Novelty scares most managers. Denote your emergent actions in red
How	Write it down

G+ Framework



G+ Organizing Framework	Title		Date / /	Status
	Author			
	Automation guidance	Green/CSR guidance	Scope Economies	Scale Economies
Achieving efficiency in current operations	Develop and apply automation and that takes time to develop.	Government Credits? Re-sell to others?	Trial by pilot Incorporate emergence to realize strategy	Sharing of investments and costs across products, markets and businesses
Managing risks	Apply 8 scenarios to assess risk and develop contingency	Corporate Social Responsibility to improve Net Promoter Score	Keep marketing and tech separate but complimentary	Portfolio diversification of risks and creation of options and side-bets
Innovation, learning and adaptation	Idea time and support will require climate changes.	Listen to the concerns of staff. Automate production like media delivery	One person/team trials Review, critique at 3 levels	Shared learning across organisational components in different products, markets or businesses
Invest(£k)				$€¥£
Cash position				$€¥£
ROI/NPV				$€¥£/T

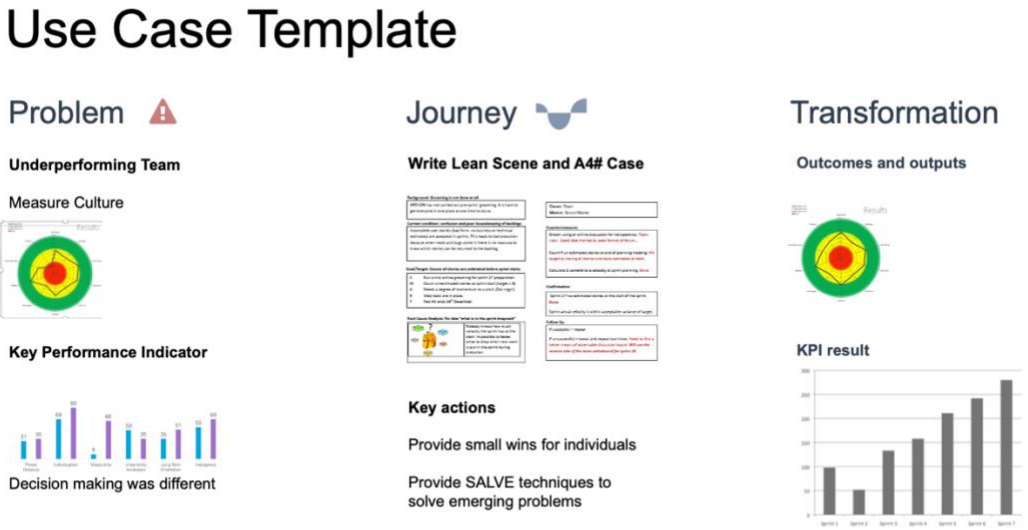
https://timeandemotion.com

What	A set of guidelines prepared by the C-Suite
Why	Be heard and look cool
When	After Lean Scene approval.
Where	At work
Who	Determine if you are aligning or emerging with new things. Novelty scares most managers. Denote your emergent actions in red
How	Write it down

Journey & Buffer chart selection

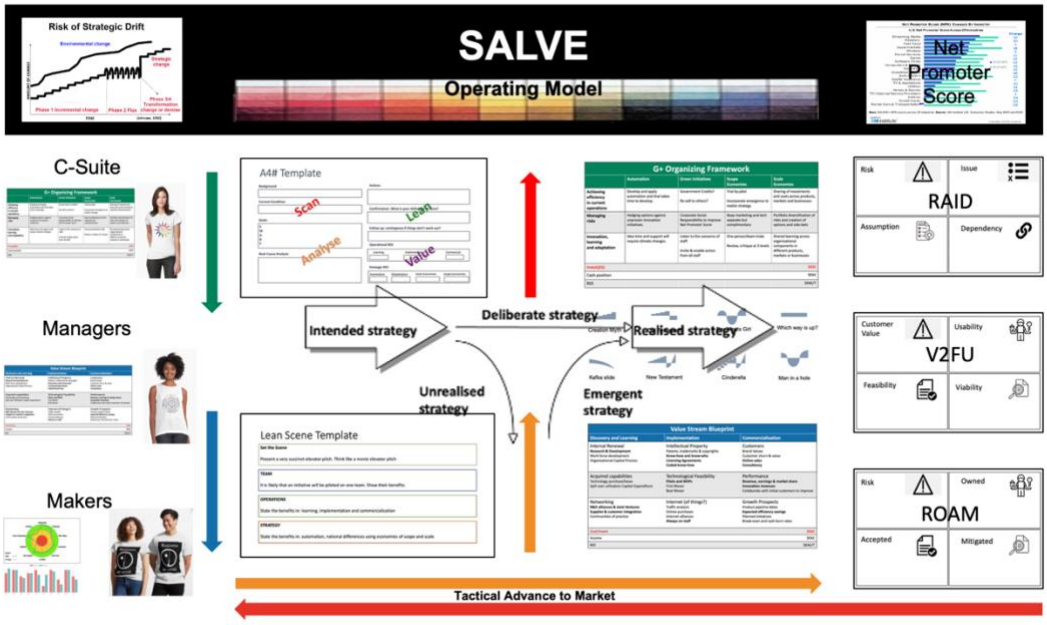
What	A forecast implementation plan
Why	Set expectations of peers and higher ups
When	After Lean Scene approval and finalised during A4 preparation
Where	At work
Who	You and your peers. Anticipate resistance – Is it fertile or futile
How	Write it down

Use Case Report



What	A set of guidelines prepared by the C-Suite
Why	Present your end position - and look cool
When	After implementation
Where	At work
Who	You and the team. Share the kudos.
How	Write it down

SALVE Framework



What	Overview of how the pieces fit together
Why	Aide memoir
When	Prior to and during process.
Where	At work
Who	Everyone
How	Conceptualise

Culture & Lean Scene Workshop – tailorable to your needs