

A KEVIN DUNCAN PLAYBOOK

Escape the Factory

A short, honest diagnostic for finding out whether your organisation ships features or creates outcomes, and what to do about the answer.

THE CORE PROBLEM

Most feature factories don't know they're feature factories

A team can be busy, agile, and shipping constantly, and still be stuck in exactly the trap it thinks it has already escaped.

Product strategist Melissa Perri named this pattern the "build trap" in her 2018 book of the same title, also widely known by its nickname, the feature factory: an organisation that has come to measure its own success by how much it ships, rather than by the value any of it creates.¹ Perri's point wasn't that these teams are lazy or incompetent. Most are neither. They are usually fast, disciplined and genuinely agile in their ceremonies. What they are missing is any mechanism that would tell them if the wrong feature shipped efficiently.

The uncomfortable part is that this pattern rarely announces itself. Nobody schedules a meeting to decide to become a feature factory. It accumulates, one reasonable-sounding stakeholder request at a time, until roadmap items are ideas nobody validated, success is a burn-down chart, and the team has forgotten it ever had the authority to say no.

This playbook is a diagnostic, not a lecture. Nine honest questions, organised into three areas. No organisation scores a perfect zero, and that isn't the point. The point is finding out which of the three areas is actually costing you, so you know where to spend the effort.

THREE AREAS, NINE QUESTIONS

The diagnostic

Score one point for every honest "yes." These are not aspirational questions, answer for how the team actually operates this month, not how the strategy deck says it operates.

01

Where Ideas Come From

- Do most roadmap items start life as a stakeholder's already-decided solution, rather than a validated customer problem?
- Would saying no to a senior stakeholder's request require the team to escalate over their head?
- Has nobody on the team run a discovery interview in the last month?

02

How Success Gets Measured

- Is the team's primary success measure velocity or the number of features shipped, rather than a customer or business outcome?
- Once a feature ships, does the team move on without checking, weeks later, whether it actually moved anything?
- Would a cancelled or abandoned initiative be treated as a failure on someone's performance review, rather than a normal result of learning?

03

How Much Autonomy The Team Has

- Does the team typically receive a fully-specified requirement rather than a problem to go and solve?
- Is the roadmap essentially fixed for the quarter, regardless of what gets learned along the way?
- Do engineers and designers usually join a project only after the solution has already been decided?

WHAT THE NUMBER MEANS

Reading your score

Add up every "yes" across all nine questions, out of a possible nine.

SCORE	0-3	4-6	7-9
Reading	Outcome-Led Roadmap items are largely validated, success is measured beyond shipping, and the team has real autonomy.	Transitioning Genuine outcome practices exist alongside factory habits, often in different parts of the organisation.	Feature Factory Busy, disciplined, and optimising for the wrong thing. Perri's build trap, in its classic form. ¹

A high score is not a verdict on the people in the team. Marty Cagan and Chris Jones make the same point in *Empowered*: the difference between a "feature team" executing a roadmap and an "empowered team" solving a problem is almost entirely a structural and management choice, not a talent gap.² Escaping the factory is an organisational design problem, not a hiring problem.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

A worked scorecard

A team believing itself to be agile and outcome-focused, scored honestly.

AREA	SCORE	WHAT WAS ACTUALLY TRUE	ACTION
Where Ideas Come From	3/3	Every item this quarter came from a director, pre-solved	Introduce a discovery gate before roadmap entry
How Success Is Measured	1/3	One shipped feature was never re-checked	Add a 6-week post-launch review to the process
Team Autonomy	2/3	Engineers joined after specs were finished	Bring engineering into discovery, not just delivery

Total: 6/9, Transitioning. The honest finding wasn't "we're a feature factory," it was "one specific area is dragging the other two down." That's a far more useful, and far less demoralising, place to start.

WHERE THIS BREAKS DOWN

Common pitfalls

- ✗ **Scoring the team you wish you were.** The diagnostic only works if you answer for what actually happened this month, not what the team charter says should happen.
- ✗ **Treating a high score as a character flaw.** This is a structural diagnosis. Blaming individuals for an organisational design problem fixes nothing and burns trust you'll need for the fix.
- ✗ **Fixing all three areas at once.** Pick the lowest-scoring area first. Trying to overhaul idea generation, measurement and autonomy simultaneously usually just produces three half-finished changes.
- ✗ **Assuming agile ceremonies mean you're not a factory.** Standups, sprints and retros are delivery practices. None of them tell you whether the thing being delivered was worth building.
- ✗ **Running the diagnostic once and filing it away.** Organisations drift back toward the factory under deadline pressure. Re-score quarterly, not once as a one-off exercise.
- ✗ **Waiting for permission to change your own answers.** Some of the nine questions, particularly around autonomy, are within a team's own control to shift, regardless of what leadership does elsewhere.

THE CANVAS

Score your own team

Answer honestly, out of nine, then use the right-hand column to note one thing you'd actually change.

AREA	SCORE (OUT OF 3)	WHAT'S ACTUALLY TRUE	ONE THING TO CHANGE
Where Ideas Come From			
How Success Is Measured			
Team Autonomy			

Total score: ____ / 9. 0–3 Outcome-Led · 4–6 Transitioning · 7–9 Feature Factory

THE AUTHOR

About Kevin Duncan



Kevin Duncan is a product and digital transformation leader with over a decade of experience delivering product strategy and large-scale change across financial services, government and consumer sectors in the UK.

He currently leads product strategy and transformation for the UK mortgage and property ecosystem as Product Director at Novus Strategy & Consulting.

This playbook is drawn from workshops Kevin has run helping product organisations diagnose, and move beyond, feature factory habits.

Want an outside view on where your organisation actually scores?

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References

1. Perri, M. (2018) *Escaping the Build Trap: How Effective Product Management Creates Real Value*. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media.
2. Cagan, M. and Jones, C. (2020) *Empowered: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Products*. Hoboken: Wiley.