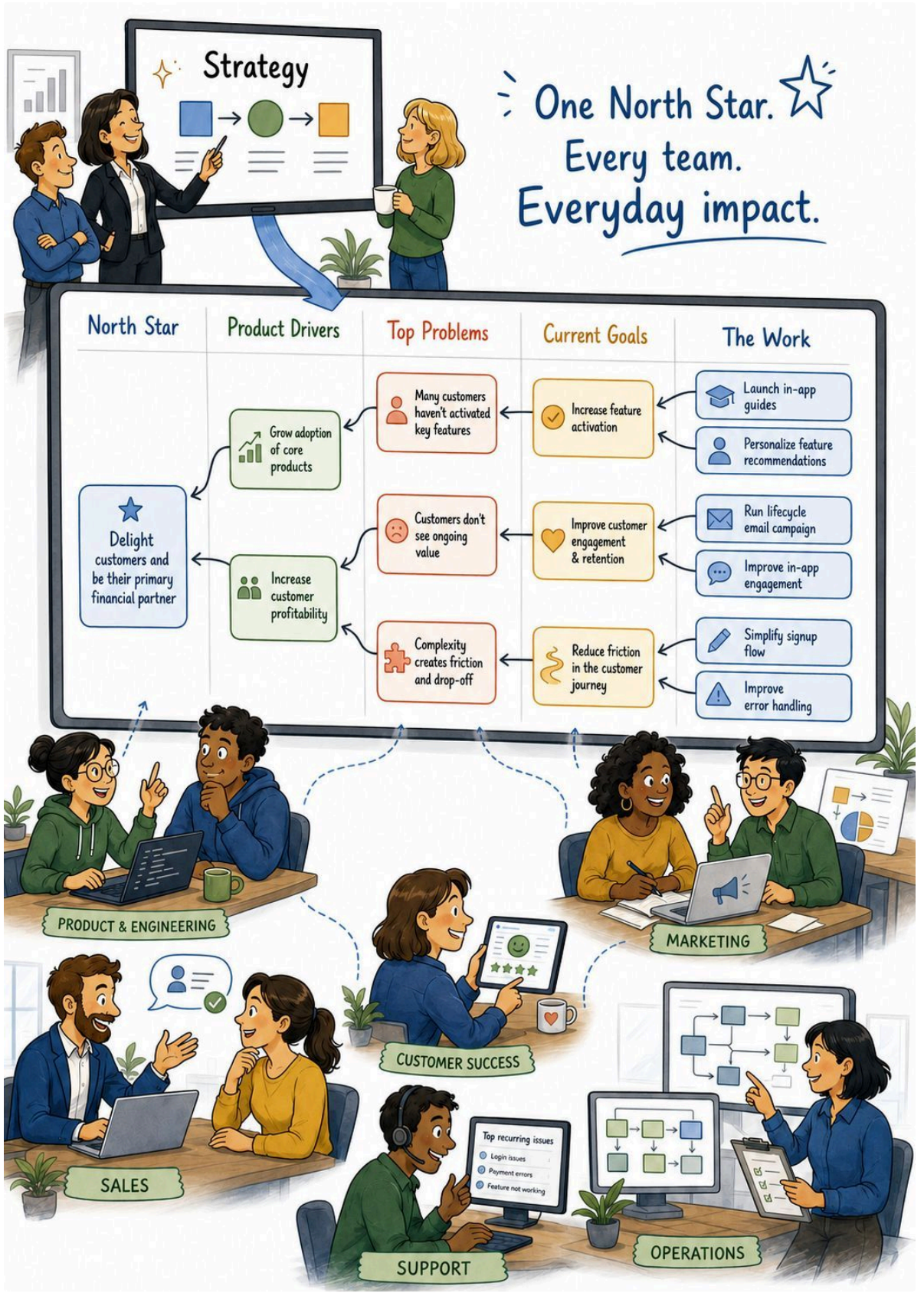
Make Strategy Work in Real Life

A practical guide to using the **North Star Framework** to connect direction, priorities and everyday work

For product teams, leadership teams, marketing, sales, customer success, operations and everyone trying to move in the same direction.



Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

CONTEXT

Why this guide exists

Most organizations do not suffer from a lack of effort. They have a strategy. They have goals. They have teams working hard every day. But the connection between these things is often weak.

THE REAL PROBLEM

The problem is not that people do not care. The problem is that the path from long-term direction to daily work is rarely visible enough.

A marketing team may plan a campaign without seeing which strategic problem it supports. A sales team may hear recurring customer objections without knowing where they fit. A product team may ship features without a clear view of which customer behavior they are trying to change. A support team may see patterns every week that never reach the strategic conversation.

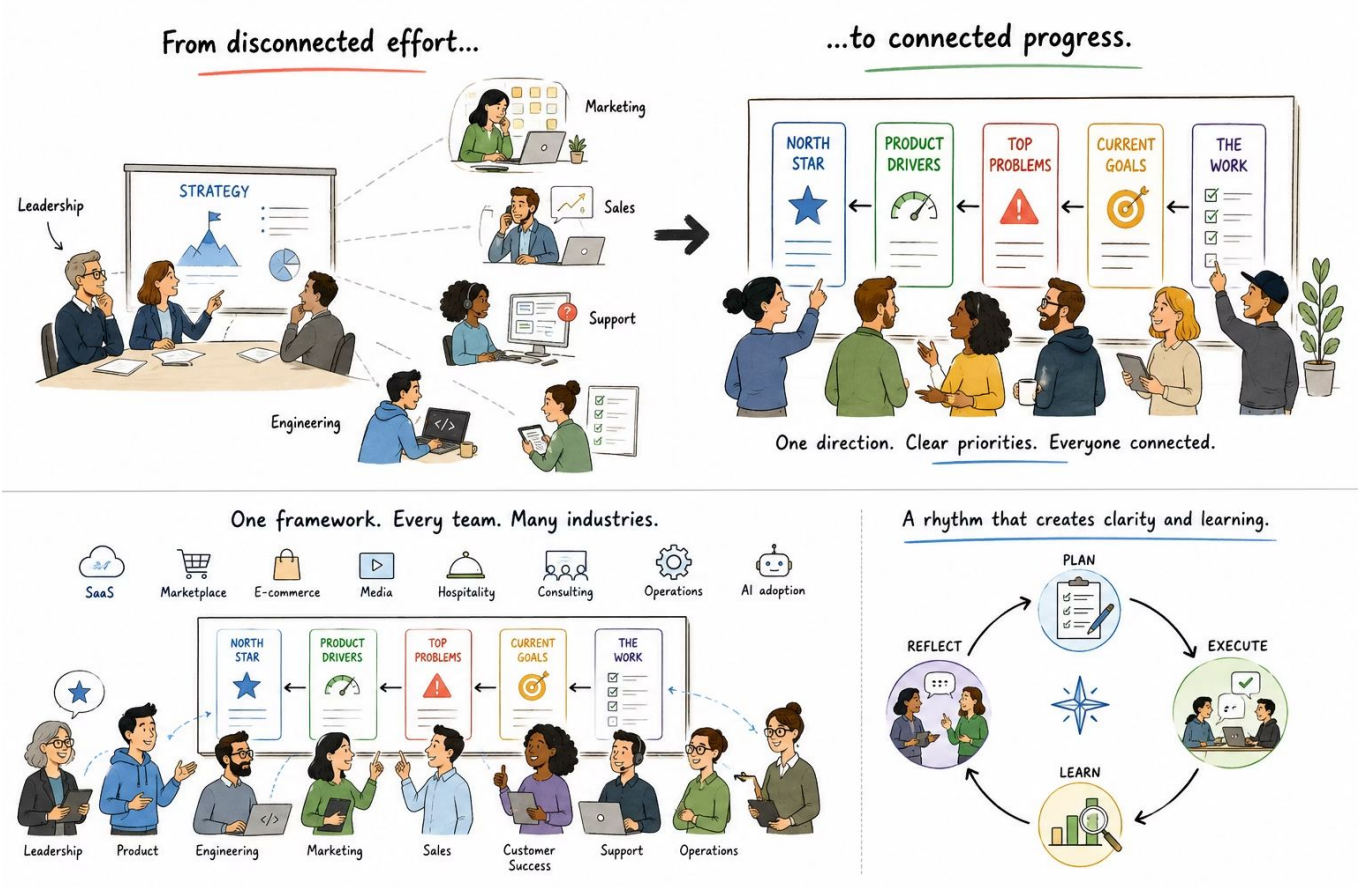
Everyone is moving. But not always in the same direction.

WHAT THIS GUIDE HELPS YOU DO

This guide introduces a practical way to make that connection visible. The North Star Framework helps organizations connect:

Long-term direction → Strategic drivers → Important problems → Current goals → Everyday work

It is not a replacement for Scrum, Kanban, OKRs, Jira, roadmaps or the processes your teams already use. It adds the missing context between them.



> A good strategy should not only be understood in a leadership meeting. It should be visible in the work people choose, discuss and improve every day.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

THE CHALLENGE

The strategy gap

Most organizations do not fail because people are lazy, careless or unambitious. They fail because the connection between strategy and daily work is too weak. The strategy may be clear in a leadership presentation. But a few weeks later, everyday work takes over.

THE FEATURE FACTORY TRAP

When the connection to strategy is unclear, organizations often start measuring progress by output.

- FEATURES SHIPPED?
- CAMPAIGNS LAUNCHED?
- TICKETS CLOSED?
- MEETINGS HELD?

Activity starts to look like progress. But a busy organization is not always a focused organization. A feature factory is not only a product problem — it can appear in any department where the work keeps moving, but the reasoning behind it becomes unclear.

FRAGMENTED GOALS

Another common pattern is that every department has its own goals.

Product

Optimize for delivery

Sales

Optimize for new deals

Marketing

Optimize for leads

Support

Optimize for response times

Leadership

Optimize for growth

Each goal may make sense in isolation. Together, they can pull the organization in different directions. That is when prioritization becomes political, reactive or based on who speaks the loudest.

Great strategy. Fragile delivery. Clarity gets lost between slides and backlogs.

The strategy gap appears when people are working hard, but no longer share the same understanding of why this work matters now.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

THE FRAMEWORK

What NSF is

The North Star Framework is a visual system for connecting long-term direction to everyday work. It helps an organization make strategy visible, understandable and actionable.

North Star

Where are we going?

Product Drivers

What needs to improve?

Top Problems

What is in the way?

Current Goals

What do we focus on?

The Work

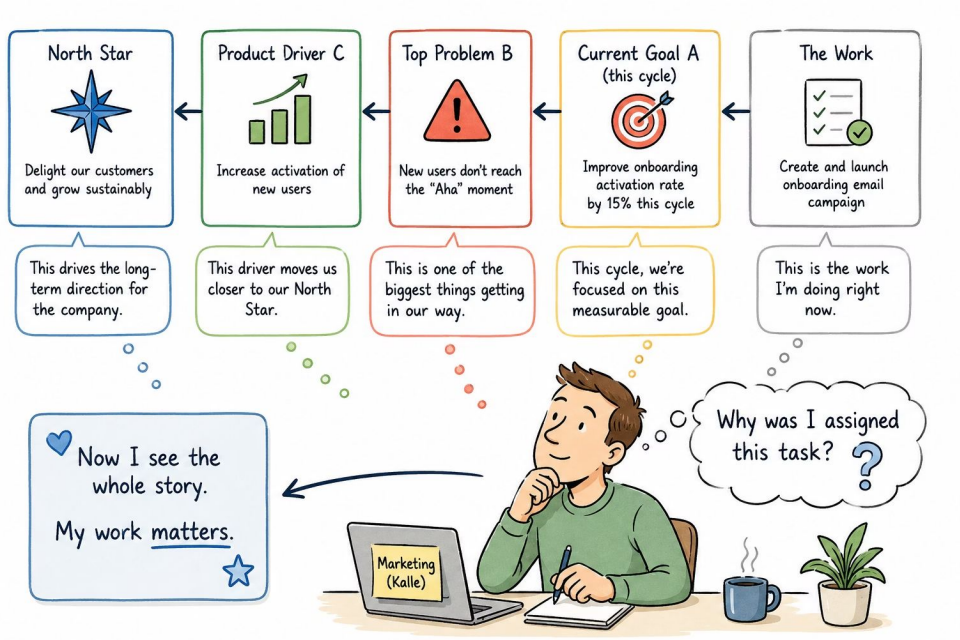
What will we do?

A SYSTEM FOR DAILY DECISIONS

NSF is not mainly about creating a better strategy document. It is about helping people make better decisions in the flow of work.

- *Should we prioritize this feature?*
- *Should marketing focus on this campaign?*
- *Should sales push this message?*
- *Should support fix this recurring issue?*

NSF gives those conversations a common structure.



Every piece of work connects back to the North Star.

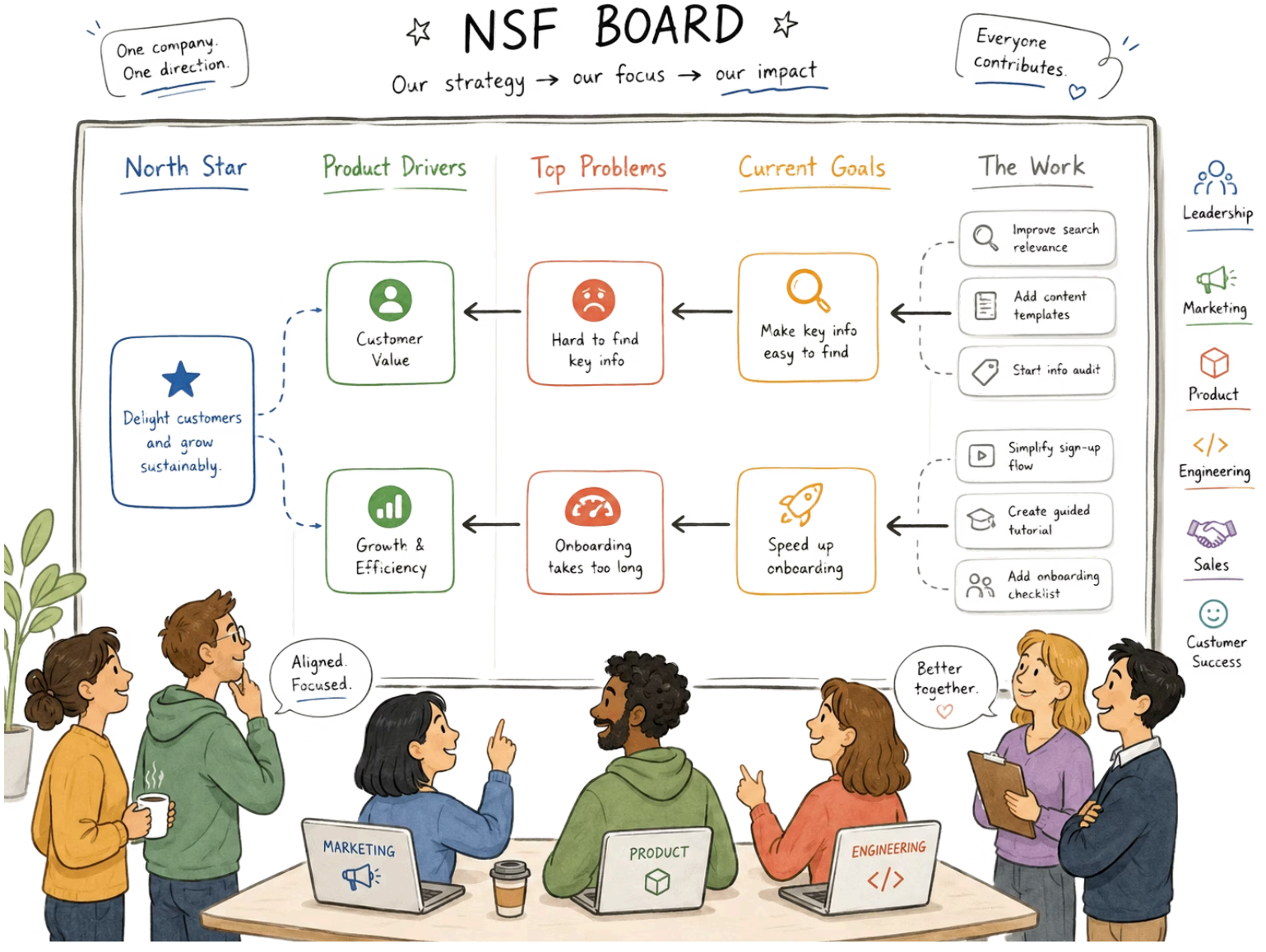
NSF turns strategy from something people hear about into something they can see, discuss and use in daily work.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

THE BOARD

The NSF Board at a glance

The NSF Board is the visual home of the North Star Framework — showing the full tree from long-term direction to daily work in one place.



One board. One direction. Every team connected.

HOW TO READ THE BOARD

The board expands from left to right — strategy becomes action. Read it right to left and it explains why any task matters. A campaign, feature or support fix should trace back to a Goal, a Problem, a Driver and finally the North Star.

- **North Star** — The long-term direction
- **Product Drivers** — What needs to improve
- **Top Problems** — What is in the way
- **Current Goals** — What we focus on this cycle
- **The Work** — What teams are actually doing

> The NSF Board is not a project plan. It is a shared map of how strategy becomes work.

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THE FRAMEWORK

How this version differs from classic North Star thinking

Classic North Star thinking usually starts with one central idea: Define a **North Star Metric** that captures the value customers get from your product. Then identify the most important **inputs** that can move that metric.

That foundation is still valuable. It helps organizations move away from output thinking and toward customer value, long-term growth and better prioritization.

But in practice, many organizations need more steps. They do not only need a better metric. They need a clearer way to connect that metric to priorities, problems, goals and daily work.

CLASSIC NSF

North Star Metric

The long-term direction

Inputs

The strategic forces that can move the organization toward the North Star

The Work

The concrete activities, experiments and tasks happening in daily work

THIS PRACTICAL VERSION

North Star

The long-term direction

Product Drivers

The strategic forces that can move the organization toward the North Star

Top Problems

The most important obstacles standing in the way right now

Current Goals

The measurable outcomes teams focus on during the current cycle

The Work

The concrete activities, experiments and tasks happening in daily work

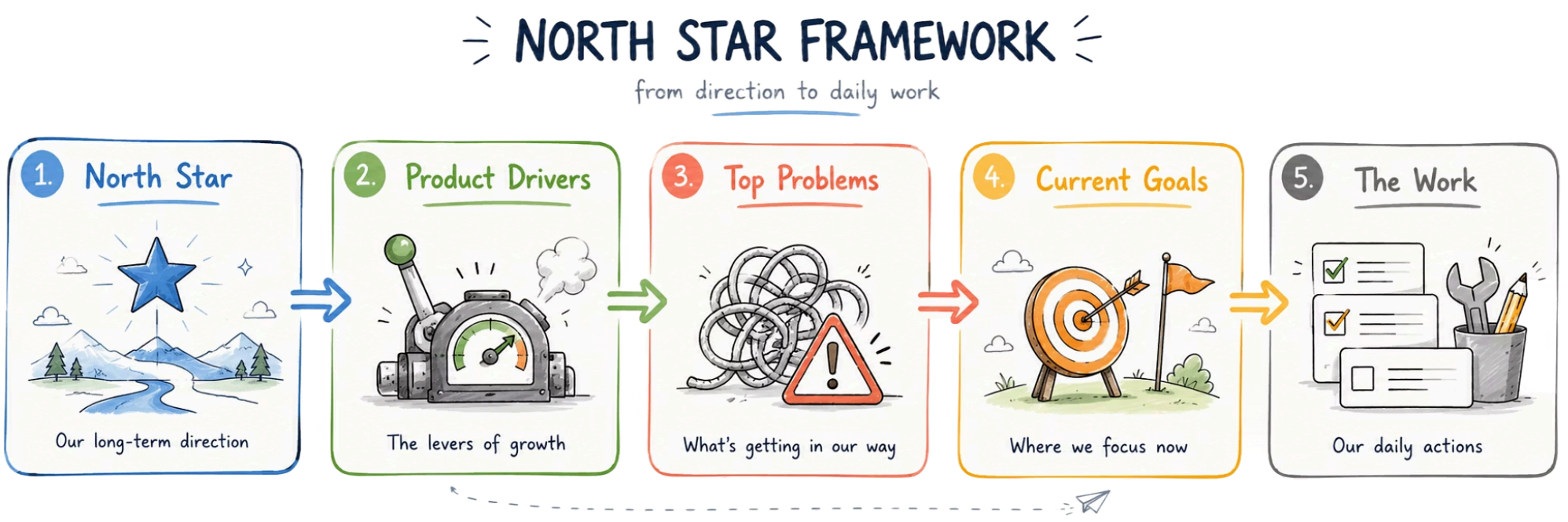
A complete chain — from direction to daily work, across the whole organization.

From product framework to company framework

Classic NSF is often discussed in the context of product development. This version is broader. Product and engineering may still be central users, but the model is designed to include marketing, sales, finance, customer support, Customer Success, operations, leadership and any other department.

A campaign, a sales initiative, a support improvement or an internal operations project can all be connected to the same strategic direction.

That is where the NSF Board becomes important. It makes strategy, priorities and work transparent and visible to the whole organization — not hidden in slides, tools or department-specific plans.



This version of NSF does not replace classic North Star thinking. It turns it into a practical operating model for the whole organization.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

THE FRAMEWORK

The five building blocks

The North Star Framework is built from five connected building blocks.

Each block has its own role, but the real value comes from the chain between them:

North Star → Product Drivers → Top Problems → Current Goals → The Work

Together, they help an organization move from direction to focus, from focus to problems, from problems to goals, and from goals to action.

North Star

The long-term direction. Describes the value the organization wants to create over time. Stable, measurable and easy to understand across the company.

It gives everyone the same direction.

Product Drivers

The most important forces that can move the organization toward the North Star. Strategic focus areas, not tasks. Broad enough to involve several functions, concrete enough to guide decisions.

It translates direction into the areas that need to improve.

Top Problems

The most important problems standing in the way right now. Written as problems, not solutions — to avoid jumping into features or campaigns before understanding what really needs to change.

It focuses the organization on the obstacles that matter most.

Current Goals

Measurable outcomes for the current cycle. Smaller than the North Star, more immediate than Product Drivers, more concrete than Top Problems.

It turns problems into focused short-term outcomes.

The Work

The concrete work teams do to reach the Current Goals — experiments, tasks, campaigns, support improvements, technical work or operational changes.

It turns goals into action and learning.

The five building blocks are simple on their own. The power comes from connecting them.

BUILDING BLOCK 1

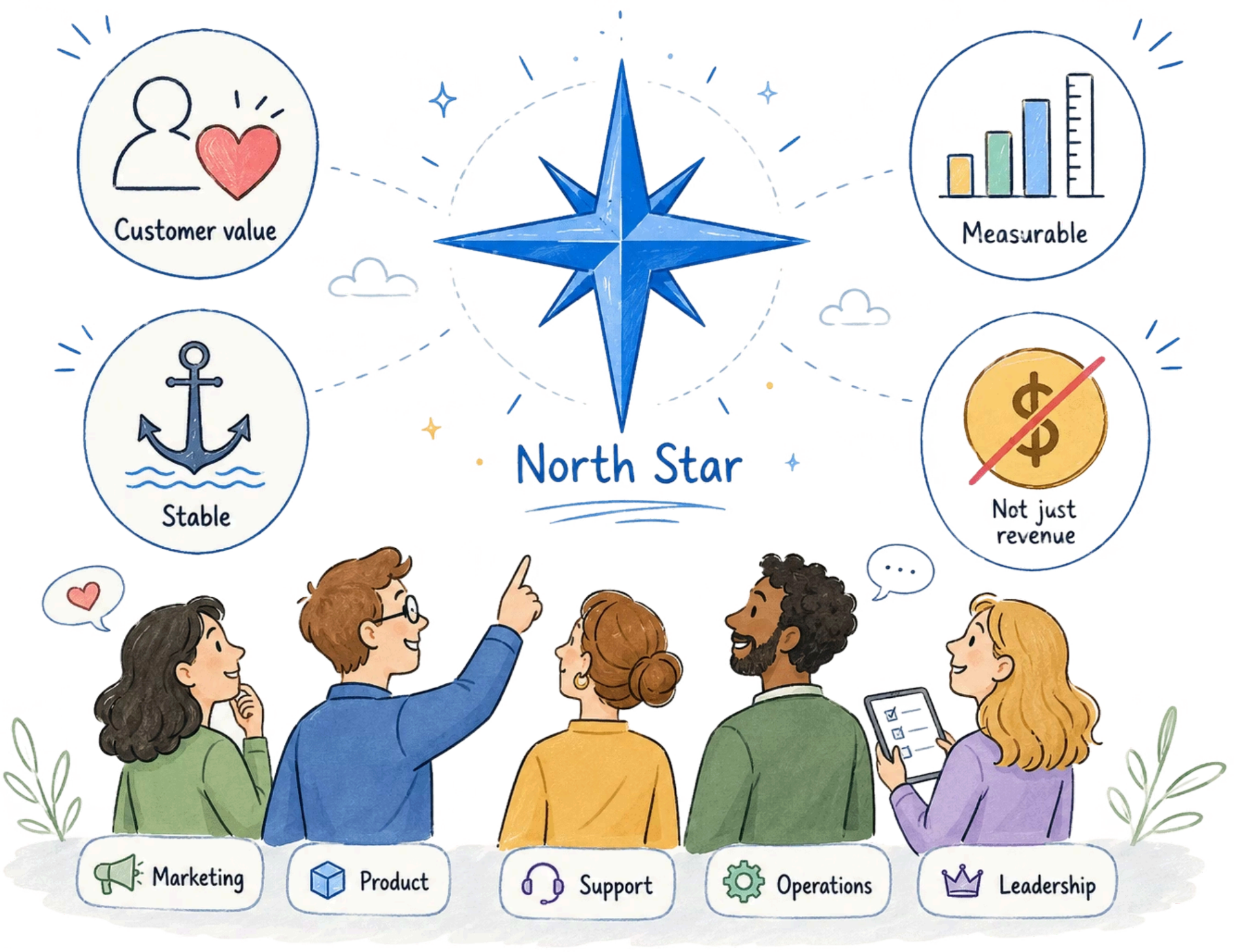
North Star: the long-term direction

The North Star is the long-term direction of the organization.

It describes the value the organization wants to create for customers over time, and gives everyone a shared point of reference.

A good North Star should not change every quarter. It should be stable enough to guide strategy and preferably survive for years, but concrete enough to influence daily decisions.

It should also be measurable — not because numbers are more important than judgment, but because the organization needs a way to see whether it is moving in the right direction.



What makes a strong North Star

Customer-centered

Reflects value created for customers, users, guests, partners or internal customers.

Stable

Can survive changes in roadmap, campaigns, organization and short-term priorities.

Measurable

Can be tracked over time, even if the first version of the measurement is imperfect.

Not just financial

Revenue and profit matter, but they are usually results of customer value, not the best expression of it.

Examples

FINTECH · B2C

North Star: Help people build healthier financial lives.

Metric: Number of customers actively using both borrowing and saving products every month.

Why it works: It focuses on meaningful customer behavior, not only revenue or number of accounts.

INDUSTRIAL · B2B

North Star: Help customers reduce downtime in critical production.

Metric: Number of production hours saved for customers each month.

Why it works: It connects the product or service to a business-critical customer outcome.

HOSPITALITY

North Star: Create guest experiences people want to return to.

Metric: Share of guests who return within 12 months or recommend the stay.

Why it works: It connects service quality, operations, marketing and customer experience to the same long-term direction.

A good North Star is not the company's financial ambition. It is the customer value that makes the financial ambition possible.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

BUILDING BLOCK 2

Product Drivers: the strategic levers

If the North Star describes where the organization is going, Product Drivers describe what needs to improve to get there.

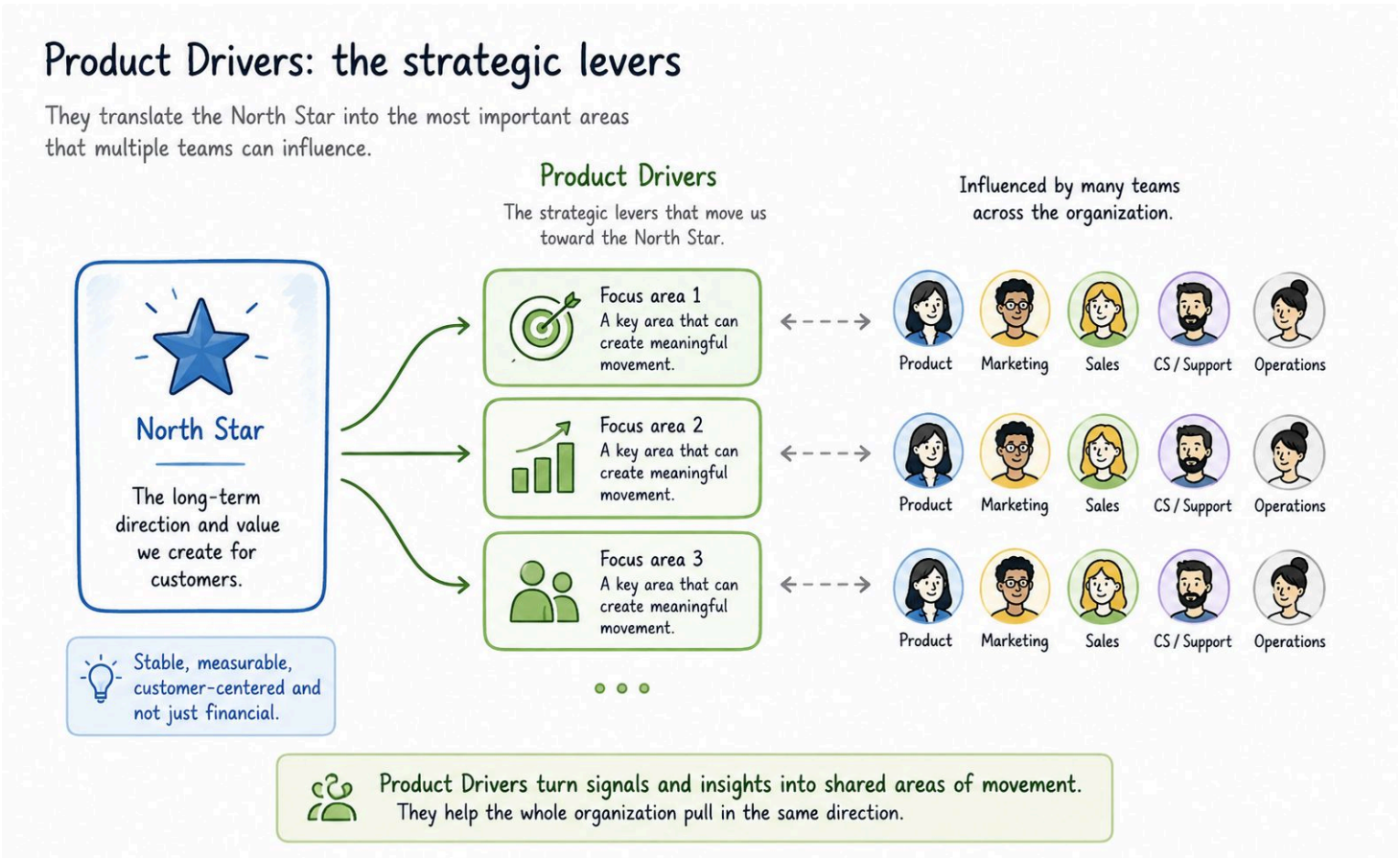
They are the strategic levers that can move the organization closer to its long-term direction.

A Product Driver is not a task, not a project and not a feature. It is an important area of movement.

Good Product Drivers often come from the strategic conversations already happening in the company:

- The CEO's annual message about market trends and future bets.
- Product leadership's analysis of where the product must become stronger.
- Marketing's view of positioning, demand and market fit.
- Sales and Customer Success signals from real customer conversations.
- Operational insight into what limits quality, speed or scalability.

The value of Product Drivers is that they turn those signals into something concrete enough for teams to work with.



Shared levers, not department goals

A strong Product Driver is usually bigger than one team. It may require product to improve the experience, marketing to clarify the message, sales to adjust the pitch, support to remove friction, and operations to improve reliability.

That is why Product Drivers are powerful. They help the organization move from separate department goals to shared strategic movement.

Examples

FINTECH · B2C

Product Driver: Increase trust when customers make important financial decisions.

Metric: Share of customers who complete a loan, savings or investment journey after starting it.

Why it works: Trust is not owned by one team. Product, compliance, marketing, support and customer communication all affect it.

INDUSTRIAL · B2B

Product Driver: Reduce the time customers need to move from order to production value.

Metric: Average time from signed order to first measurable production improvement.

Why it works: This connects sales promises, onboarding, technical delivery, training and customer success.

HOSPITALITY

Product Driver: Create more consistent guest experiences across the full stay.

Metric: Share of guests rating all key touchpoints positively, from booking to checkout.

Why it works: The guest experience depends on marketing, booking, reception, housekeeping, service and operations working together.

A Product Driver is not a plan. It is a strategic lever that helps many teams understand where their work can create movement.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

BUILDING BLOCK 3

Top Problems: the obstacles worth solving

Top Problems are the most important obstacles standing in the way of a Product Driver.

They answer a simple question:

What is stopping us from moving this driver right now?

This is where many organizations need to slow down before they speed up.

The natural instinct is often to jump straight to solutions: "Build a new onboarding flow." "Launch a campaign." "Add a dashboard." "Hire more people." "Create an AI assistant."

Some of those ideas may be good. But until the problem is clear, the solution is mostly a bet.

From solutions to problems

A Top Problem should be written as a problem, not as a solution.

❌ **Not:** Build a better onboarding flow.

✅ **But:** New customers do not understand how to reach their first successful outcome.

❌ **Not:** Launch a premium campaign.

✅ **But:** Customers do not understand why the premium offer is worth paying for.

❌ **Not:** Add more support agents.

✅ **But:** Slow first response times are causing customers to lose trust.

This shift creates room for product, marketing, sales, support, operations and leadership to explore different ways forward before locking into one answer.

Examples

FINTECH · B2C

Top Problem: Customers start a loan or investment journey, but abandon it before completion.

Why it matters: The problem may involve trust, unclear language, too many steps, risk perception or missing support.

INDUSTRIAL · B2B

Top Problem: New customers do not reach measurable production value quickly enough after implementation.

Why it matters: The obstacle may sit across sales promises, onboarding, training, integrations and customer success.

HOSPITALITY

Top Problem: Guests experience inconsistent service between booking, arrival, stay and checkout.

Why it matters: The guest does not see departments. They experience one journey.

ⓘ Top Problems help the organization stop asking 'what should we build?' and start asking 'what problem are we really trying to solve?'

BUILDING BLOCK 4

Current Goals: measurable progress this cycle

Current Goals turn Top Problems into focused progress.

They answer the question:

What meaningful progress can we make on this problem during the current cycle?

A Current Goal should be concrete, measurable and time-bound. It often works best as a stretch goal: ambitious enough to create focus, but realistic enough to give the team a fair chance.

Current Goals make large problems manageable. A Top Problem may take several cycles to solve. That is fine. The Current Goal does not have to remove the entire obstacle in one cycle.

It should create one of two things:

Progress — something is measurably better.
Learning — the team understands the problem better and can choose a smarter next step.

Sometimes the result is: "This did not solve the problem. We need to try something else next cycle." That is not failure. That is useful learning.

From problem to progress

A good Current Goal is not a task list. It describes what should be different by the end of the cycle.

❌ **Not:** Build a new application flow.

✅ **But:** Increase completed loan applications from 42% to 55% among returning customers.

❌ **Not:** Train the customer team.

✅ **But:** Reduce first-week onboarding escalations by 30%.

❌ **Not:** Improve guest experience.

✅ **But:** Reduce check-in related complaints by 40% during the next cycle.

Examples

FINTECH · B2C

Top Problem: Customers abandon investment onboarding before making their first deposit.

Current Goal: Increase first-deposit completion from 28% to 40% during the cycle.

Learning value: If completion does not move, the problem may be trust, timing or unclear value — not only onboarding friction.

INDUSTRIAL · B2B

Top Problem: New customers take too long to reach first production value.

Current Goal: Get three new customers to complete their first production workflow within 14 days.

Learning value: The team learns where implementation slows down: integrations, training, data quality or handovers.

HOSPITALITY

Top Problem: Guests experience inconsistent service between booking and arrival.

Current Goal: Reduce arrival-related support cases by 25% during the next cycle.

Learning value: If cases do not drop, the team can test whether the issue sits in communication, staffing, systems or expectations.

ⓘ A Current Goal does not have to solve the whole problem. It has to create measurable progress or useful learning.

BUILDING BLOCK 5

The Work: where strategy becomes real

The Work is where strategy becomes real.

It is the concrete work teams choose to do in order to reach their Current Goals.

This can be a task, an experiment, a customer conversation, a campaign, a technical change, a support improvement or an operational adjustment.

But not everything belongs on the NSF Board.

Small enough to finish

If it cannot be completed during the cycle, it is probably too large and needs to be sliced.

Large enough to matter

The Work should matter for the Current Goal. It should not be every tiny internal task.

Atomic enough to close

Avoid ongoing work. A good work item can move from not started to done.

The Work is not "improve onboarding" or "work on reliability". It is the next concrete piece of progress.

Write it so the company understands

The Work should be written in plain language.

Not because specialists do not need detail. They do. But the NSF Board is not only for specialists.

Marketing, sales, product, engineering, support, operations, leadership and finance should all be able to look at the board and understand what is happening and why it matters.

Technical detail can live in Jira, Linear, GitHub, HubSpot, Notion or another team tool. The NSF Board should show the meaningful work in language the company can share.

Examples

❌ **Not:** Implement risk-score fallback in KYC flow

✅ **But:** Make it possible for more customers to complete identity verification without getting stuck

❌ **Not:** Optimize PLC integration retry handling

✅ **But:** Make machine data imports recover automatically when a factory connection drops

❌ **Not:** Revise PMS pre-arrival trigger logic

✅ **But:** Send guests the right arrival information before they reach the hotel

ⓘ The Work should be concrete enough to finish, meaningful enough to matter and clear enough for the whole company to understand.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

THE FRAMEWORK

Title + Metric: make it understandable and measurable

A common mistake in strategy work is mixing meaning and measurement.

Sometimes the organization has inspiring language, but no clear way to know if progress is happening. Sometimes it has precise metrics, but nobody outside a small group understands what they mean.

NSF needs both.

A strong card should usually have two parts:

Title — A clear, human-readable statement of what we are trying to achieve.
Metric — A concrete way to follow whether we are moving in the right direction.

The title creates understanding. The metric creates precision. Together, they make the board useful for both conversation and decision-making.

Where title and metric matter most

NORTH STAR

Title

Explains the long-term value the organization wants to create.

Metric

Shows whether that value is increasing over time.

PRODUCT DRIVER

Title

Explains the strategic lever.

Metric

Shows whether that lever is moving.

CURRENT GOAL

Title

Explains the focus for this cycle.

Metric

Shows whether the team created meaningful progress.

Without the title, the metric can feel cold, abstract or too technical. Without the metric, the title can become vague and difficult to act on.

The Top Problem exception

Top Problems work differently. A Top Problem should be formulated as a problem to solve, not as a target to optimize.

It can be user-focused:

New customers do not understand how to reach their first successful outcome.

Or internal:

Support teams cannot resolve billing issues without asking engineering for help.

A Top Problem does not always need its own metric on the card. Its core state is simpler:

Is this still unsolved, or have we solved it enough to move on?

The evidence may come from data, customer feedback, operational signals or team learning. But the card itself should keep the problem clear.

TOP PROBLEM

Problem statement

Written as a clear problem, not a target.

Status

Unsolved → In progress → Solved enough to move on.

ⓘ A title helps people understand what matters. A metric helps people know whether it is actually improving.

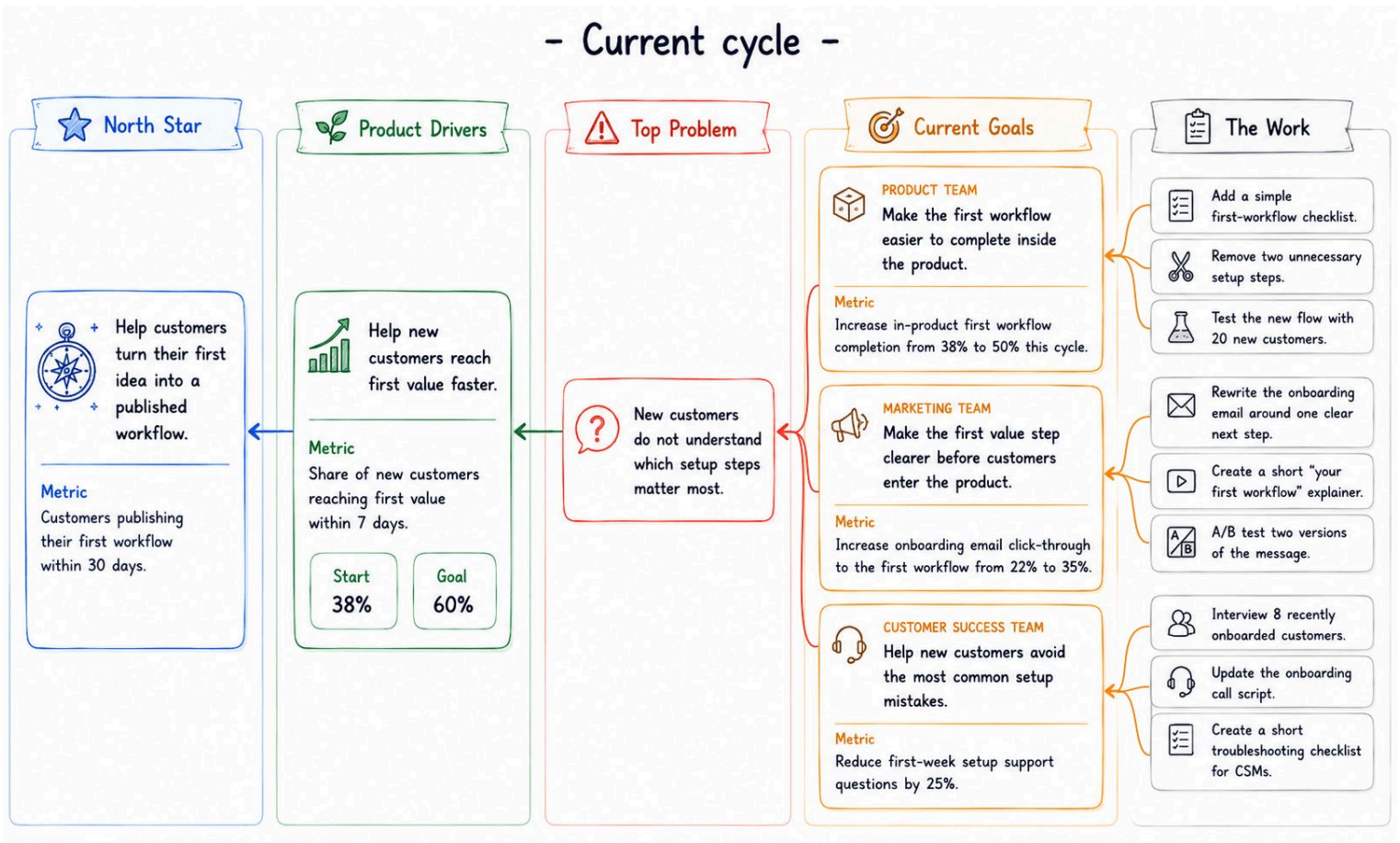
THE FRAMEWORK

From strategy to execution: the complete tree

This is where the North Star Framework becomes practical.

The point is not to fill a board with disconnected cards. The point is to create a visible tree where every piece of work can be traced back to a larger reason.

Below is one example from a B2B SaaS company that wants new customers to reach value faster.



You can find this NSF board as a clickable example here: www.northstarframework.com/board/example/guide-en

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How to read the tree

The teams are not sharing one Current Goal.

They are contributing to the same Top Problem through different goals, based on what each team can actually influence.

Product improves the experience.
Marketing improves the message.
Customer Success improves the guidance.

Together, they create movement on the same problem, strengthen the same Product Driver and move the company closer to its North Star.

> A good NSF Board makes every important piece of work answer the same question: 'How does this help us move toward the North Star?'

THE RHYTHM

Working in cycles

NSF is not meant to run as an endless stream of work.

It needs rhythm.

A cycle is the fixed timebox where teams choose their focus, do the work, learn from the result and adjust before the next round starts.

The cycle gives the organization a shared pulse:

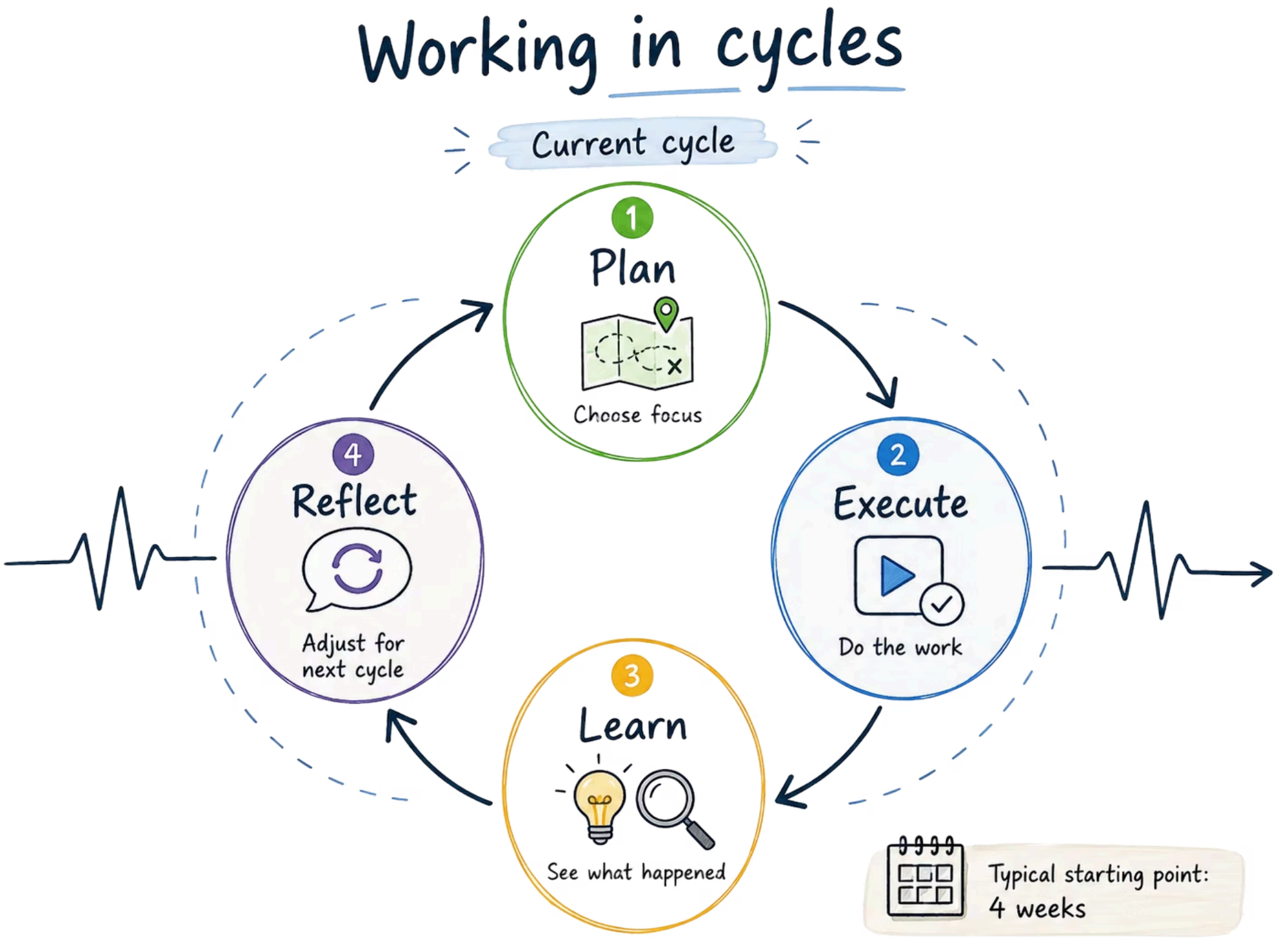
Plan → Execute → Learn → Reflect

This rhythm helps teams avoid two common traps.

The first trap is constantly changing priorities. When everything can change every week, focus disappears.

The second trap is planning too far ahead. When goals are too distant, learning comes too late.

A cycle creates a middle ground. It is short enough to create urgency, but long enough for teams to complete something valuable.



The four moments of a cycle

Plan

Choose the Top Problems to focus on. Set Current Goals. Decide what The Work should be.

Execute

Do the work. Keep the board updated. Make progress visible while the cycle is still running.

Learn

Look at what happened. Did the work create progress? Did it reveal something unexpected? Did the team understand the problem better?

Reflect

Decide what changes for the next cycle. Keep going, change approach, or move focus to another problem.

A practical starting point

For many organizations, **four weeks** is a good first cycle length.

It is long enough to complete meaningful work across product, marketing, sales, support, operations or leadership. But it is short enough that teams feel the need to start now, not "later in the quarter".

The exact length can change over time. The important thing is not the number of weeks. The important thing is that the organization creates a predictable rhythm for focus, progress and learning.

> A cycle is not mainly a delivery container. It is a learning rhythm.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

THE RHYTHM

Planning the cycle

Cycle planning is where NSF turns from structure into action.

The goal is not to create a perfect plan. The goal is to create enough shared clarity for teams to start moving in the right direction, with clear focus and a visible connection to the bigger picture.

A good planning conversation moves through three questions:

Which Top Problem matters most right now?

What progress should we create this cycle?

What work will help us get there?

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1. Choose the Top Problem

Start with the board. Look at the Product Drivers and ask what is currently blocking progress. The question is not "What do we want to build?" — it is "Which problem, if we understood or solved it better, would create real movement?"

2. Set Current Goals

Once the Top Problem is clear, each team defines its Current Goal — what should be different by the end of the cycle. It should be concrete, measurable and realistic within the timebox. Not a task list. A description of the progress or learning the team wants to create.

3. Break it into The Work

Break the Current Goal into concrete activities, experiments and tasks that can be completed during the cycle. Small enough to finish, clear enough for others to understand, meaningful enough to belong on the board.

What good Current Goals might look like

1	2	3
Increase onboarding email click-through from 22% to 35%.	Reduce first-week setup questions by 25%.	Get 20 new customers to complete their first workflow within 7 days.

The goal should not be a task list. It should describe the progress or learning the team wants to create.

> Cycle planning is not about filling the board. It is about choosing the few things that deserve focus now.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

THE RHYTHM

Status updates: visibility without control

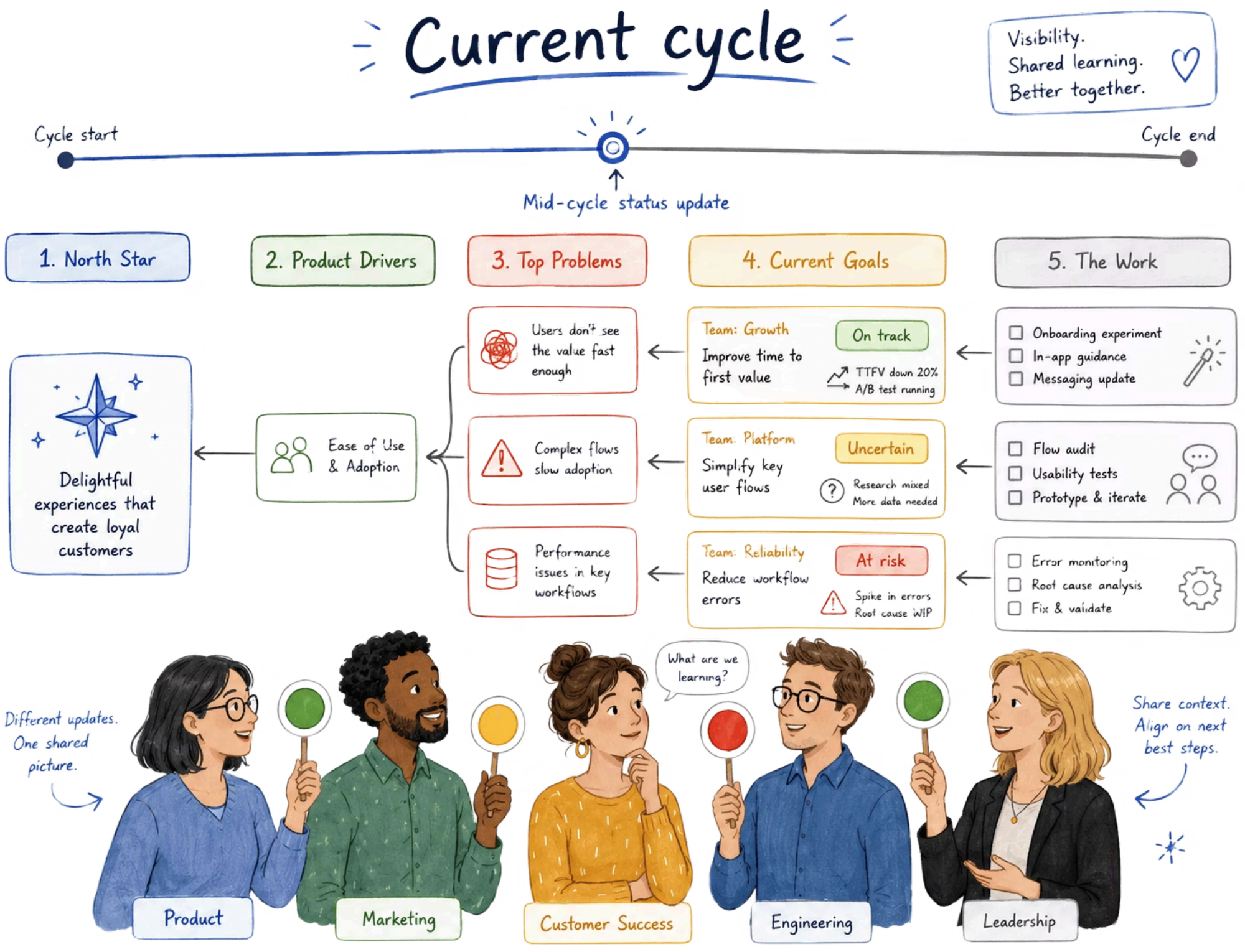
Halfway through the cycle, teams should pause briefly and update the board.

Not to report upwards. Not to defend progress. Not to create another meeting layer.

The purpose is simpler:

Make reality visible while there is still time to act.

A good mid-cycle status update helps the team, nearby teams and leadership understand what is happening right now. It shows whether the work is moving, whether the goal still looks realistic and whether anything important has been learned.



What to update

A useful status update should be short and concrete.

How are we progressing?

Are we on track, uncertain or at risk?

What have we learned so far?

Has the work confirmed or challenged our assumptions?

What is blocking us?

Do we need help, a decision or input from another team?

Does the goal still make sense?

Has the problem changed, or do we need to adjust our approach?

The update should live on the board, close to the work. That way, the board becomes the status report.

Visibility is not control

CONTROL

When status updates become a control mechanism, teams polish the truth. They hide uncertainty, delay difficult conversations and make progress look cleaner than it is.

SHARED LEARNING

When status updates are treated as shared learning, they create trust. A team can say: "We are behind, but we now understand the obstacle." Or: "This experiment did not move the metric, so we are changing approach." That is not failure. That is the cycle doing its job.

Status is not about proving that everything is fine. It is about making reality visible early enough to learn and adjust.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

Demo and reflection

At the end of each cycle, the organization should stop and look at what actually happened.

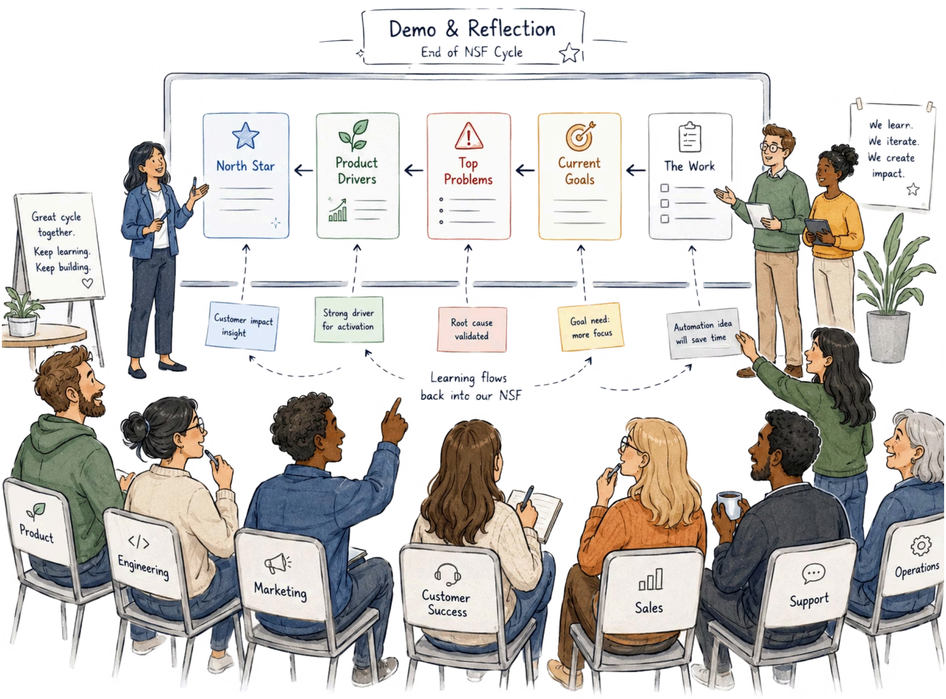
Not only what was shipped. Not only what was completed.

But what was achieved, what changed, and what the teams learned.

This is the moment where NSF becomes a learning system.

Each team should connect its story back to the chain:

Top Problem → Current Goal → The Work → Result → Learning



What teams should show

A good demo does not need to be polished. It should be concrete.

- A feature, prototype or workflow.
- A campaign, message or sales material.
- A customer insight, support pattern or operational improvement.
- A before-and-after metric.
- A failed experiment and what it revealed.

The important part is not the format. The important part is that everyone can see how the work connects to the goal, the problem and the larger direction.

What teams should explain

For each Current Goal, the team should answer four simple questions:

What did we set out to achieve? — The goal for the cycle.

What did we do? — The most important parts of The Work.

What happened? — The result, including data, signals or observations.

What did we learn? — What should influence the next cycle.

Sometimes the answer is: 'We reached the goal.' Sometimes it is: 'We did not reach the goal, but we now understand the problem much better.' Both can be valuable.

From ending to next beginning

Demo and reflection should not feel like a final report. They should create better input for the next planning conversation.

Do we continue on the same Top Problem or choose a new one? Do we change approach? Did we learn that another problem is more important?

This is how the board stays alive.

1	2	3
Reflect	**Decide**	**Plan**
What did we achieve and learn this cycle?	Continue, change approach, or shift focus?	Start the next cycle with better input.

The end of a cycle is not only where teams show what they delivered. It is where the organization learns what to do next.

THE FRAMEWORK

NSF as a learning system

Many organizations confuse movement with progress.

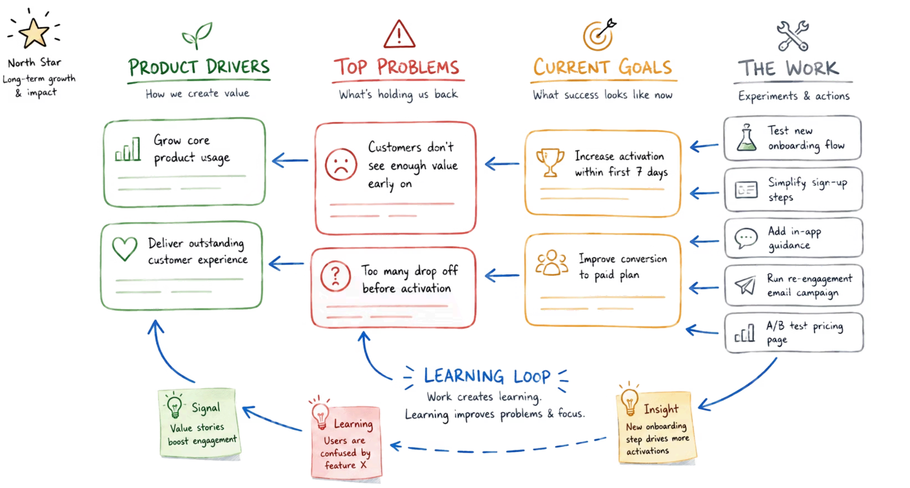
They ship features. They launch campaigns. They run projects. They close tasks.

But after all that activity, the most important question can still remain unanswered:

Did we move the needle and did we actually understand the problem better?

NSF is designed to make those questions visible.

The goal is not simply to increase speed. The goal is to help the organization learn faster what actually creates movement toward the North Star.



Learning flows both ways

During the cycle, the chain moves from strategy to execution:

North Star → Product Drivers → Top Problems → Current Goals → The Work

But at the end of the cycle, learning moves back in the other direction.

Strategy to execution

1	2	3
North Star	**Product Drivers**	**Top Problems**
The long-term direction	The strategic levers	The obstacles to solve

4	5
Current Goals	**The Work**
The measurable focus	The concrete actions

Learning back up the chain

1	2	3
The Work	**Current Goals**	**Top Problems**
tells us what happened in reality.	tells us whether the progress was measurable.	tells us whether we were solving the right obstacle.

4	5
Product Drivers	**North Star**
tells us whether the chosen lever still seems important.	becomes something the organization can test its decisions against.

Faster understanding beats faster output

A team may complete all The Work and still learn that the approach was wrong.
→ That is useful.

Another team may miss its Current Goal but discover the real blocker.
→ That is also useful.

A third team may see no immediate metric movement, but create the foundation for next cycle's result.
→ That can be useful too.

NSF makes these learnings visible, so the organization does not repeat the same assumptions cycle after cycle. It helps product, engineering, marketing, sales, support, operations and leadership build shared understanding from real work.

> NSF is not mainly about doing more work faster. It is about learning faster which work actually matters.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

PRACTICAL GUIDE

Common traps and how to avoid them

NSF is simple in theory.

But like most simple systems, it can become messy in practice.

The problem is rarely that the model is too hard. The problem is usually that the organization slowly bends it back into old habits: too many goals, solution-driven planning, status reporting, unclear ownership or a board that tries to show everything.

Here are the traps to watch for.

⚠️ Trap: Too many goals

When every team has too many Current Goals, focus disappears.

Avoid it by: Choosing fewer goals per cycle. A good Current Goal should create focus, not become another line in a long list.

⚠️ Trap: The board becomes reporting

If teams feel the board is mainly used to check up on them, they will polish the truth.

Avoid it by: Using the board for learning, visibility and better decisions. Status should make reality visible, not create performance theater.

⚠️ Trap: Solutions pretending to be problems

"Build a new onboarding flow" is not a Top Problem. It is already a solution.

Avoid it by: Asking "What is actually blocking progress?" before deciding what to build, change or test.

⚠️ Trap: Leadership does not use the model

If leadership still makes decisions outside the NSF structure, the board loses credibility.

Avoid it by: Using North Star, Product Drivers and Top Problems in leadership conversations, prioritization and trade-off decisions.

⚠️ Trap: The Work becomes too detailed

If every tiny task goes on the board, NSF turns into a task tracker.

Avoid it by: Keeping The Work small enough to finish, but large enough to matter. Detailed execution can live in Jira, Linear, Trello, Notion or other team tools.

Not everything belongs on the board

Every team does work that matters, but not all work belongs on the NSF Board.

Payroll processing, bug fixes, incident management, internal meetings, compliance routines, maintenance, operational support, and many recurring tasks are important. Some are business-critical.

But they do not always represent strategic progress toward the North Star.

The proportion of work that belongs on the board therefore varies between teams and cycles. A product development team might spend 80% of its time on improvements linked to Current Goals. In that case, the board can reflect a large part of the team's work, while the details remain in the team's own tools.

A payroll department might spend 5% of its time on similar improvement work, and not necessarily in every cycle. Day-to-day payroll processing continues as usual. During a particular cycle, however, an initiative to reduce recurring payroll errors might belong on the board if it helps address a Top Problem in the NSF chain.

These percentages are examples, not targets. Teams' contributions should not be judged by how much of their work appears on the board. A team can be essential to the business without having any work on the board during a particular cycle.

The board should show the work that moves the organization forward, generates learning, or creates measurable progress toward Current Goals. Everything else still needs to be planned. It simply does not need to become part of the NSF chain.

The NSF Board should not show everything the organization does. It should show the work that helps the organization learn, focus and move toward the North Star.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

PRACTICAL GUIDE

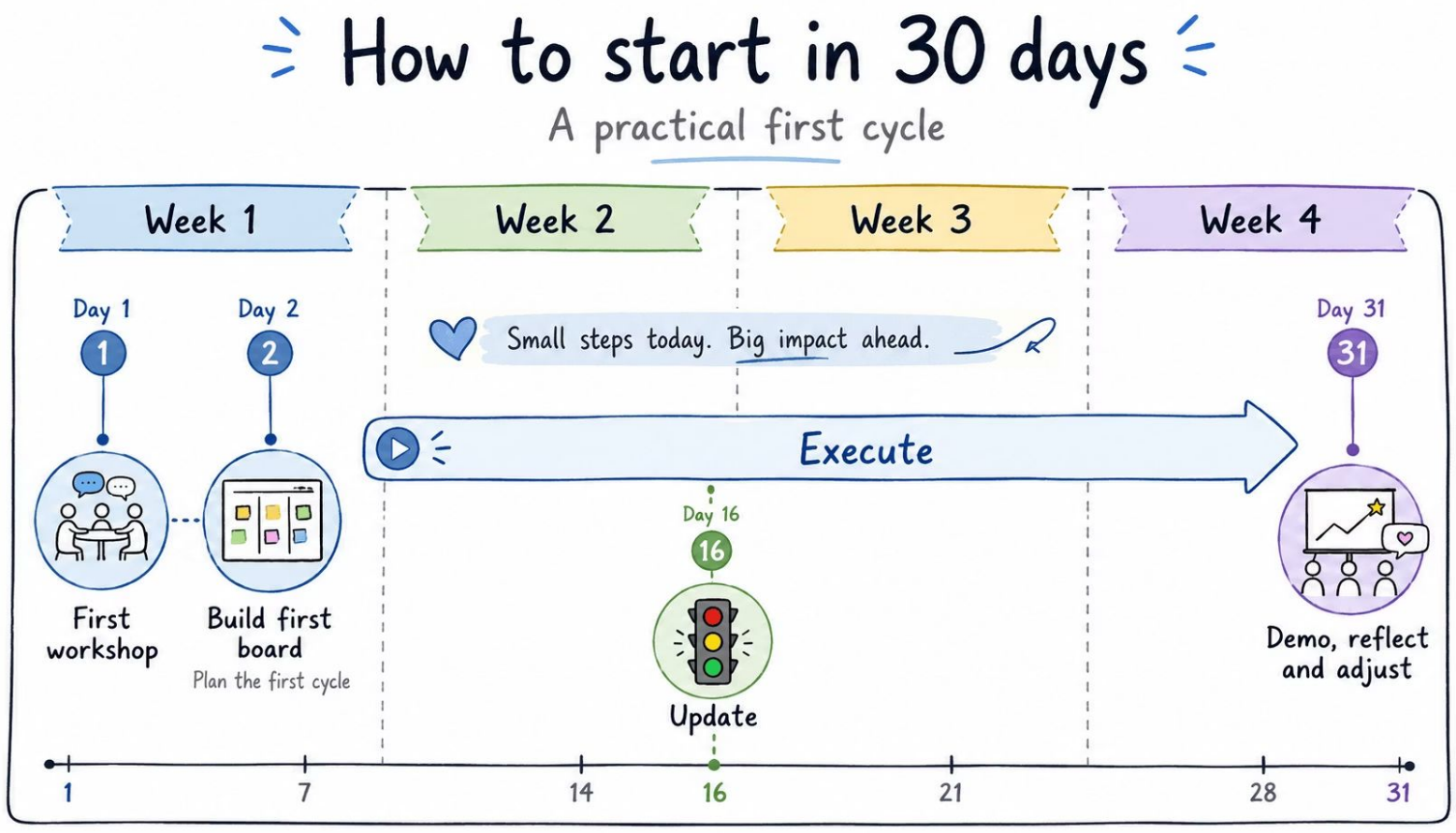
How to start in 30 days

You do not need to transform the whole organization on day one.

Start with one meaningful area. Choose a product area, business initiative, customer journey, department or cross-functional group where there is already energy and a real need for better alignment.

The goal of the first month is simple:

Create the first version of the board, run one cycle, learn from it and adjust.



- ## Day 1 — Run the first workshop

  Output: First version of North Star, 1–3 Product Drivers and a few important Top Problems.

  Note: Do not aim for perfection. Aim for enough clarity to begin.

- ## Day 2 — Build the first board and plan the first cycle

  Output: A visible NSF Board. Top Problems chosen. Each team has a Current Goal and The Work defined.

  Note: Keep it focused. Fewer goals will create better learning.

- ## Days 3–31 — Execute the first four-week cycle

  Output: Teams do the work, keep the board updated and use it to stay connected to the larger direction.

  Note: The board should not become a reporting layer. It should be a shared map of what is happening, why it matters and what the teams are learning.

- ## Day 16 — Update status halfway through

  Output: Board updated with what is on track, uncertain or at risk. Early learnings captured.

  Note: The midpoint update is not about control. It is about visibility while there is still time to adjust.

- ## Day 31 — Demo, reflect and adjust

  Output: Short demo and reflection. Board adjusted based on what was learned.

  Note: Maybe a Top Problem needs rewriting. Maybe a Current Goal was too broad. That is the point.

ⓘ The first month is not about proving that NSF is perfect. It is about creating the first shared learning loop.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

PRACTICAL GUIDE

Checklist: is your NSF Board useful?

An NSF Board does not become useful because it looks complete.

It becomes useful when people can use it to understand direction, make better decisions and connect daily work to something larger.

A good board should help people answer three simple questions:

What are we trying to achieve?
What is standing in the way?
What are we doing about it now?

Use this checklist to test your board.

✅ 1. Is it understandable?

Can someone outside the team read the board and understand the main story without a long explanation?

✅ 2. Is the language plain enough?

Are cards written in words that product, engineering, marketing, sales, support, operations and leadership can all understand?

✅ 3. Is it measurable where it should be?

Do North Star, Product Drivers and Current Goals have clear metrics or observable progress?

✅ 4. Are problems written as problems?

Are Top Problems real obstacles, not disguised solutions or project names?

✅ 5. Is the chain visible?

Can you trace The Work back to a Current Goal, a Top Problem, a Product Driver and the North Star?

✅ 6. Is The Work at the right level?

Is it small enough to finish during the cycle, but meaningful enough to belong on the board?

✅ 7. Is the board focused?

Does it show the work that creates movement and learning, not every task the organization performs?

✅ 8. Is it used in daily decisions?

Do teams and leaders refer to the board when they prioritize, discuss trade-offs or explain why something matters?

Quick test

Pick one card in The Work and ask:

Why are we doing this?

If the answer naturally moves back through the chain, the board is doing its job.

If the answer is unclear, the board is not broken. It is giving you useful feedback. Something needs to be clarified, measured, connected or removed.

A useful NSF Board is not the one with the most cards. It is the one that makes the right conversations easier.

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com

CLOSING

Closing: make strategy visible

Strategy only becomes useful when people can use it.

Not only in leadership meetings. Not only in planning documents. Not only in slides.

But in the everyday decisions where teams choose what to focus on, what to postpone, what to test and what to learn from.

That is the core idea behind this practical version of the North Star Framework.

> It makes the connection visible:

North Star → Product Drivers → Top Problems → Current Goals → The Work

A visible board will not solve every problem. But it changes the conversation.

Instead of asking only **"What are we doing?"** — teams can start asking:

Why are we doing this?
Which problem does it solve?
What goal does it support?
What did we learn?

Start small

You do not need a perfect rollout. Start with one area where better alignment would make a real difference. Run a first workshop. Build a first board. Plan a first cycle. Imperfect and visible is better than polished and hidden.

Make it visible

The board should become a shared reference point — for product, engineering, marketing, sales, Customer Success, support, operations and leadership. When the work is visible, people can challenge assumptions, see dependencies and understand how their contribution fits into the larger direction.

Learn in cycles

NSF is not mainly about creating a beautiful board. It is about creating a rhythm. Plan. Execute. Learn. Reflect. Then adjust. Every cycle should make the organization a little clearer, a little more focused and a little better at deciding what matters next.

Continue the journey

For more examples, deeper explanations and practical guidance, continue with the book:

North Star Framework from the trenches

ⓘ Start small. Make strategy visible. Learn in cycles.

NEXT STEPS

NSF Board: a digital home for the framework

You can work with the North Star Framework in many ways.

A wall, a whiteboard, Miro, FigJam or a simple spreadsheet can be enough to start.

The most important thing is not the tool. The most important thing is that strategy, problems, goals and work become visible enough for people to use them.

That said, once NSF becomes part of daily work, many teams need more structure than a normal whiteboard gives them.

That is why NSF Board exists.

Built for the NSF workflow

NSF Board is a digital product built specifically for working with this practical version of the North Star Framework. It brings the full operating rhythm into one place:

- **Planning** — Prepare future cycles, capture ideas and decide what should become active.
- **Execution** — Follow the current cycle and see how The Work connects to goals, problems and strategy.
- **Followup** — Review progress, status, learnings and confidence across the organization.
- **Learnings** — Capture insights so they are not lost between cycles.
- **Status updates** — Make progress, risks and blockers visible without turning the board into a reporting machine.

Make the chain from strategy to execution easier to see, easier to maintain and easier to discuss.

Designed for visibility

NSF Board is also designed to reduce noise.

Focus mode

Helps teams zoom in on one chain of the tree.

Hide columns

Makes it easier to present the right level of detail.

Kiosk mode

Lets companies display the board on office screens so direction, priorities and progress stay visible in everyday work.

The board becomes both a working surface and a shared reference point.

Start for free, collaborate as a team

NSF Board is available in a free Guest Mode, where data is saved locally in the user's browser. For teams that want shared boards, collaboration and longer-term use, there is also a team version available as a subscription. Here you can also find example boards from many different businesses.

www.northstarframework.com/board

ⓘ You do not need a special tool to start with NSF. But when the framework becomes part of daily work, a dedicated board can make the rhythm easier to keep alive.

Make Strategy Work in Real Life

Based on the book "North Star Framework from the trenches" by Martin Börlin - www.northstarframework.com