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The Program Builder for Businesses

Many businesses do not fail because the owner lacks a good idea. They struggle because the good idea stays in one person's head. Customers get a different experience depending on who helps them that day. New helpers guess at steps that were never written down. A service that worked well for ten people breaks down when thirty people need it at once. The Program Builder for Businesses is a practical system for turning an idea in your head into a program other people can actually run — the same way, in the right order, with clear owners, clear costs, and a way to tell whether it is working.

A program, in plain language, is a set of connected activities that leads a person from a starting point to a clear result. A new-customer welcome program leads a buyer from first purchase to feeling settled and knowing how to get help. An employee training program leads a new hire from day one to doing the job correctly without constant supervision. A community workshop program leads a neighbour from signing up to leaving with a finished skill. The Program Builder gives you a repeatable way to design any of these: name the purpose, name who it serves, break the work into parts, put the parts in order, assign each part to a person with the tools and time it needs, run it on a small scale first, measure what happened, and improve it in writing.

This system helps owners, managers, team leads, and anyone asked to "put something together" at work — a training series, a service package, a client onboarding path, a volunteer program, or a regular event. It helps most when you are tired of reinventing the same work every time, when quality depends too much on one busy person, or when you want to grow without chaos. You do not need a business degree to use it. You need honest answers, paper or a simple document, and the discipline to test small before you promise big.

It matters because a written program protects everyone. Customers know what to expect. Helpers know what "done well" looks like. The owner can see the true cost in time and money before committing. And when something goes wrong, a written program lets you find the exact step that failed instead of blaming people or starting over. By the end of this set you will know how to define a program in one clear sentence, break it into parts, sequence those parts into a timeline, staff and cost it honestly, and run a first version you can improve instead of a perfect plan you never launch.

What You Will Learn

- How to write a one-sentence purpose for a program that names who it serves and what result it produces.
- How to describe the person your program serves — their starting point, their needs, and what success looks like for them.
- How to break a program into clear parts, each with its own input, action, and finished output.
- How to put parts in the right order, build a realistic timeline, and spot steps that depend on each other.

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- How to assign an owner, helper, tools, and time to every part so nothing depends on guessing.
- How to work out the true cost of a program, including staff time, materials, and hidden costs.
- How to run a small first version — a pilot — and collect useful feedback without defensiveness.
- How to measure results with a few honest numbers and improve the program in writing, version by version.

Lesson 1 — Start With Purpose: One Sentence, One Person, One Result

Every strong program begins before any schedule, budget, or flyer. It begins with a purpose sentence. A purpose sentence answers three questions in one line: who is this for, what changes for them, and how will we know it worked? For example: "This program helps new bakery customers order with confidence, so that within their first two visits they can place a custom order without help and know how to reach us if something is wrong." That sentence does real work. It tells you who to design for. It tells you what to include and, just as important, what to leave out. It gives you a finish line you can check.

Without a purpose sentence, programs drift. A training program becomes a pile of interesting topics with no order. A customer program adds a gift, a tour, a discount, and a survey because each sounded nice, until staff are exhausted and customers are confused. Drift is expensive. Every extra part costs time and money and attention. The purpose sentence is your filter: if a part does not move the named person toward the named result, it does not belong in this program, however good it sounds. It may belong in a different program, or in no program at all.

The second half of this lesson is knowing your person honestly. Describe the person your program serves as they actually are on day one, not as you wish they were. What do they already know? What words do they use? What worries them? What limits do they have — time, money, transport, language, confidence, equipment? A program designed for an imagined perfect participant fails real people. A program for new parents that meets at 7 p.m. with no children welcome will empty out no matter how good the teaching is. A program for new cashiers that assumes they already know the till software will produce quiet panic at the register. Write the starting point down in plain words. Then write the ending point: what can this person do, know, or feel at the end that they could not at the start? The gap between those two descriptions is exactly what your program must bridge — no more, no less.

Finally, decide how you will know the result happened. Choose proof you can actually see or count. "Customers feel welcome" is a hope. "Nine out of ten new customers complete a second order within thirty days, and support questions about how to order fall by half" is proof. You will refine your measures in Lesson 5. In Lesson 1, name at least one visible sign of success and write it into the purpose work. If you cannot name any sign, the purpose is still a wish, and the program is not ready to build.

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The Steps

1. Write your first purpose sentence in this shape: "This program helps [specific person] to [specific result], so that [visible sign of success]."
2. Read the sentence aloud. If a stranger could not tell who the program is for and what it produces, rewrite it until they could.
3. Write a short paragraph describing your participant on day one: what they know, what they lack, what limits their time, money, or confidence.
4. Write a short paragraph describing that same person at the end: what they can now do, know, or handle without help.
5. List everything you are tempted to add to the program. Cross out anything that does not bridge the gap between your two paragraphs.
6. Name one to three visible signs of success you could count or observe, and write them under the purpose sentence.
7. Show the purpose sentence to one person who does the work and one person like your participant. Ask each: "What do you think this program does?" Fix any mismatch in the wording, not in their understanding.

A Worked Example

Andre runs a small phone-repair shop with two technicians. Repairs are good, but customers keep calling days later confused about warranties, data backup, and why a repair takes two days when a part must be ordered. Andre decides to build a Customer Care Program. His first purpose draft is vague: "This program helps customers have a good experience." He rewrites it using the shape: "This program helps repair customers understand their repair, their warranty, and their timeline before they leave the shop, so that follow-up confusion calls fall and customers can explain their warranty to a family member without calling us." His day-one paragraph is honest: the customer is often stressed, their phone holds their banking and family photos, they do not know repair terms, and they are afraid of losing data. His end paragraph: the customer leaves with a one-page sheet in plain words, knows the expected ready date and what could change it, knows what the warranty covers, and knows the one phone number to call. The gap tells Andre exactly what to build — a five-minute explanation at drop-off, the one-page sheet, and a ready-for-pickup text that repeats the warranty line. He drops his earlier ideas for a loyalty card and a shop tour. They were pleasant, but they did not bridge this gap.

Common Mistakes

- **Writing a purpose that could describe any business.** "We help customers succeed" fits everyone and guides no one. Name the person and the result.
- **Designing for the participant you wish you had.** If real participants are tired, busy, new to the language, or short on money, the program must meet them there.
- **Adding good ideas that do not serve the purpose.** Every extra part costs staff time and participant attention. Park extra ideas on a separate list for a future program.

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- **Calling a feeling a result.** Feelings matter, but you need at least one result you can see or count, or you will never know whether to keep, fix, or stop the program.

Lesson 2 — Break It Into Parts: Inputs, Actions, and Outputs

Once the purpose is clear, resist the urge to write a schedule. First, break the program into parts. A part is one chunk of work with three things: an input (what must be ready before this part starts), an action (what happens during the part), and an output (what is finished and handed to the next part). A training program for new market-stall helpers, for example, might have these parts: prepare the stall guide (input: the owner's price list and rules; action: write and check the guide; output: a printed guide a helper can use alone), run the first supervised shift (input: guide and a trained supervisor; action: helper serves real customers while watched; output: a short list of what the helper did well and what to practise), and the solo-shift check (input: practice list completed; action: supervisor observes one full solo shift; output: a signed decision that the helper can work alone, or a new practice list). Each part is small enough to assign, cost, and check.

Breaking work into parts reveals hidden work. Owners often discover the part nobody had named: who prints the sheets, who books the room, who sends the reminder, who handles the person who arrives late or needs extra help, who cleans up and stores the materials. Hidden work is still work. If it has no part and no owner, it lands on the busiest person at the worst moment. As you list parts, keep asking two questions: "What must exist before this can start?" and "What will exist when this is done that did not exist before?" Those questions force vague ideas like "orientation" to become concrete: before orientation, the welcome sheet and name list must exist; after orientation, each participant must have the sheet, know where to go next, and be marked present.

Keep parts to a size one person can own and finish. If a part needs three people, two weeks, and five different results, it is really several parts wearing one coat. Split it. If a part is so small it takes two minutes and produces nothing on its own, merge it into its neighbour. Most small business programs land between five and nine parts. Fewer than five usually means hidden work is still hiding. More than nine usually means you are listing tasks instead of parts — tasks belong inside a part, written later as that part's checklist. Name each part with a verb and a noun, like "Send the welcome message" or "Run the practice session," so anyone reading the list can picture the work.

Also mark which parts are essential and which are enhancements. An essential part is one the program cannot honestly run without. An enhancement makes the program nicer but the result still happens without it. This distinction saves you later. When money or time runs short — and at some point it will — you will know what can be paused without breaking your promise to participants, and what must be protected at all costs.

The Steps

1. On paper, write the program's starting point at the top and its finished result at the bottom.

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2. List the major chunks of work between them, using verb-plus-noun names. Aim for five to nine parts.

3. For each part, write its input: what must be ready, present, or decided before it starts.

4. For each part, write its action in one or two sentences: what actually happens, and who is involved.

5. For each part, write its output: the finished thing, decision, or record this part hands forward.

6. Hunt for hidden work: booking, printing, reminders, setup, cleanup, storage, follow-up, and help for people who struggle. Give each item a home inside a part.

7. Mark each part E for essential or X for enhancement. Check that removing every X part still leaves a program that keeps its purpose promise.

8. If any part has more than one output owned by different people, split it into two parts and repeat steps 3 to 5 for each.

A Worked Example

Priya manages a community kitchen that rents affordable cooking space to small food sellers. She wants a Starter Program that takes a new seller from first enquiry to their first successful selling day. Her first list has three parts: "Sign up," "Training," and "First sale." Applying the input-action-output test exposes the gaps. "Sign up" really contains two parts: Check Fit and Paperwork (input: the seller's food documents; output: a clear yes or no with reasons) and Book and Prepare the Kitchen Slot (input: a yes decision; output: a confirmed date plus a prep list sent to the seller). "Training" splits into Food Safety Walkthrough (output: seller demonstrates the cleaning and storage rules correctly) and Equipment Practice (output: seller uses the oven and till without help). "First sale" splits into Selling Day Support (output: seller completes a real selling day) and After-Sale Review (output: a short written note on sales, problems, and whether to book again). Priya now has six parts instead of three vague ones. The After-Sale Review was the hidden part — before, nobody reviewed anything, so the same problems repeated for every new seller. Now it has a name, and in Lesson 4 it will get an owner and a time.

Common Mistakes

- **Listing departments instead of parts.** "Marketing" and "Operations" are not parts. A part has an input, an action, and an output a person can finish.
- **Leaving follow-up out.** Programs often plan the exciting middle and forget the review, the thank-you, the record, and the cleanup. Those parts carry your reputation.
- **Making one giant part called "Deliver the program."** If you cannot tell when a part is done, you cannot staff it, cost it, or fix it.
- **Treating enhancements as essentials.** When everything is marked essential, nothing can flex under pressure, and the whole program snaps instead of bending.

Lesson 3 — Put the Parts in Order: Sequence, Dependencies, and Timeline

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Parts in the wrong order waste effort and embarrass everyone. Training people on equipment they will not touch for a month means retraining them later. Sending a welcome message after the first session means it welcomes nobody. Lesson 3 puts your parts into a sequence — the order they must happen — and then onto a timeline — when each part happens, how long it takes, and how much gap sits between parts. Sequence and timeline are different jobs. Sequence is logic: what must finish before what can start. Timeline is reality: given people's hours, room availability, delivery times, and participants' lives, when can each part actually happen?

Start with dependencies. A dependency means one part cannot start until another part's output exists. The practice session depends on the guide being finished. The invitation depends on the date and room being confirmed. Draw your parts in a line and connect the dependencies. Then look for the chain that controls your total length: the longest line of dependent parts, where each waits for the one before. Managers call this the critical path, but the idea is simple — if any part on that chain slips by two days, the whole program slips by two days. Parts off that chain have slack; parts on it deserve your best owner, your earliest start, and your closest watching.

Now build the timeline with honest durations. Ask the person who will do the work how long it really takes, including setup, travel, waiting, and cleanup — not just the visible middle. A one-hour workshop is rarely one hour of work: there is an hour to prepare, thirty minutes to set up, the hour itself, thirty minutes to clear away and write notes. That is three hours, and a timeline that budgets one will quietly steal the other two from someone's evening. Add breathing room before any part that involves the public. Rooms fall through, deliveries arrive late, key helpers get sick. A program with zero slack is a program designed to be late in public.

Finally, check the timeline from the participant's side. Lay the parts out as the participant experiences them. Are there long silences where they hear nothing and assume you forgot them? Is there a week where three demanding parts land at once on someone with a job and children? Is the gap between learning and practising so long the learning fades? Adjust gaps deliberately: a short reminder message in a long silence, practice within days of learning, demanding parts spaced apart. A program is a journey for the participant, not just a work plan for the staff, and the timeline must read well from both sides.

The Steps

1. Write each part on its own card or line. Arrange them in the order their outputs are needed, not the order you thought of them.
2. Draw or note each dependency: write "needs output of ___" beside any part that cannot start without another part finishing.
3. Find the longest chain of dependent parts. Mark it clearly — this chain sets your earliest possible finish date.
4. For each part, ask its future owner for a full duration: preparation, setup, the work itself, cleanup, and notes. Write that full number down.
5. Place parts on real calendar dates, respecting opening hours, delivery times, paydays, holidays, and participants' known limits.

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6. Add slack: at least one spare day before any public-facing part, and extra time before any part that depends on an outside supplier.

7. Read the timeline as a participant, start to finish. Mark any silence longer than a week and any week with too many demands. Fix both.

8. Write the final timeline in one place — part, start date, finish date, owner — and date this version. Future changes create a new version, not a scribbled edit.

A Worked Example

Marcus is building a four-week Beginner Computer Skills Program for a neighbourhood centre. His parts are: Confirm Room and Dates, Send Invitations, Prepare Printed Guides, Session One — Files and Folders, Session Two — Email and Safety, Practice Afternoon, and Final Check and Certificates. The dependencies quickly show the problem in his first timeline. He had planned to send invitations three weeks before Session One, but invitations need the confirmed room and dates, and the centre only confirms rooms ten days ahead. That chain — room confirmation, then invitations, then Session One — is his critical path, and it means invitations can go out ten days before the start at the earliest. He redesigns honestly: he prepares the invitation text and the printed guides early, because they depend on nothing but his own time, so the moment the room confirms he can send within a day. He also moves the Practice Afternoon to three days after Session Two instead of two weeks later, after realising participants would forget their new email skills in a fortnight's gap. His final timeline budgets each two-hour session as four hours of staff work, including setup and notes. When the room confirmation does arrive late, the program still starts on time, because the slack was built where the dependency was tightest.

Common Mistakes

- **Scheduling by hope.** "The supplier will probably deliver early" is not a timeline. Use confirmed times, then add slack where outsiders are involved.
- **Counting only the visible work.** A workshop's real cost in time includes preparation, setup, cleanup, and notes. Timelines that ignore them burn out good staff.
- **Long gaps between learning and doing.** Skills fade. Put practice close after teaching, and fill necessary long gaps with a short reminder or check-in.
- **One timeline with no version date.** When dates change and nobody knows which plan is current, people work from different plans. Date every version and share the newest one in one place.

Lesson 4 — People, Tools, and True Cost: Staffing the Program Honestly

A program plan that names parts and dates but not people is a wish. Every part needs an owner: one named person responsible for that part finishing well and on time. Note the difference between the owner and the helpers. Helpers do pieces of the work. The owner makes sure the whole part happens, notices trouble early, and speaks up when it needs help. When

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two people are "both in charge," in practice neither is, and problems surface late. One owner per part, named in writing, is one of the cheapest quality improvements any business can make. Choose owners by fit, not just availability: the person who explains patiently owns the welcome part; the person who loves order owns records and follow-up.

For each part, also list what the owner needs: tools, materials, access, information, and decisions. A part fails just as often from a missing password, an unbooked room, or an unmade decision as from a lazy worker. Write the needs beside the part while you are planning, when fixing them is cheap. Include training needs honestly. If the owner has never run this part before, the plan must include shadowing someone, a practice run, or a simpler first version. Pretending a new owner needs no support does not save time; it moves the cost into public mistakes.

Then cost the program truly. Most small programs are under-costed because owners count only purchases and forget time. Your true cost has four layers. First, direct purchases: materials, printing, room hire, food, software. Second, staff time: hours for every part, including preparation and follow-up, multiplied by what those hours actually cost the business, even if the person is salaried or is you. Your own hours are not free — an evening spent on this program is an evening not spent on something else. Third, overhead share: a fair slice of rent, utilities, insurance, and equipment wear for the space and tools the program uses. Fourth, a contingency: add ten to fifteen percent for the thing you forgot, because there is always a thing you forgot. Write the cost per run of the program and the cost per participant. Those two numbers let you set a price, ask for funding, or decide the program must shrink — with facts instead of feelings.

If the true cost is more than the program can carry, do not quietly squeeze the owners' hours and call it solved. Cut enhancements first, as marked in Lesson 2. Shorten the program while keeping its purpose. Reduce the group size. Or raise the price or funding honestly. A program that only works when staff donate exhausted evenings will work for one run and then collapse, taking your reputation with it.

The Steps

1. Beside every part, write one owner's name. Confirm with that person, in person, that they accept the part and its date.
2. Beside every part, list its helpers separately from the owner, with the specific piece each helper does.
3. For each part, list needed tools, materials, room or access, information, and any decision that must be made before it starts. Arrange each item now.
4. Note any owner who is new to their part. Add their support to the plan: shadowing, a practice run, or a paired first run.
5. List direct purchases with prices. Get real prices from suppliers or recent receipts, not guesses from memory.
6. Add staff time: write the full hours for each part from Lesson 3 and multiply by the real hourly cost of each person, including your own time valued honestly.

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7. Add a fair overhead share and then a contingency of ten to fifteen percent. Total the cost per run and divide by expected participants for cost per person.

8. Compare the true cost with the money available. If they do not meet, cut enhancements, shrink the group, shorten the program, or raise price or funding — in writing, before launch.

A Worked Example

Sofia runs a small cleaning company and builds a New Home Client Program: enquiry call, home visit and written quote, first deep clean, regular-clean setup, and a two-week check-in call. Costing it honestly surprises her. Purchases are small — printed welcome packs and a checklist clipboard per team. But staff time dominates: the home visit takes ninety minutes with travel, the quote write-up forty minutes, the check-in call twenty minutes plus notes. Her own time across one new client's program totals almost four hours she had been treating as free because "it's just admin." Overhead and contingency bring the true cost per new client to a figure well above the small setup fee she had planned to charge. Sofia does not panic and does not squeeze. She cuts one enhancement — the printed welcome pack becomes a clear one-page email, keeping the part's purpose but not its printing cost — she groups home visits by neighbourhood on two fixed afternoons a week to cut travel, and she raises the setup fee to a level the numbers support, explaining it plainly as covering the visit, the written quote, and the check-in. The program now pays for itself, and her check-in calls stop being the first thing dropped in a busy week, because they are costed, scheduled work rather than favours.

Common Mistakes

- **Two owners for one part.** Shared ownership usually means no ownership. Name one owner; name the others as helpers with clear pieces.
- **Counting the owner's own time as free.** Unpaid-looking hours are still hours. A program balanced only by invisible labour is not balanced.
- **Forgetting contingency.** The forgotten cost always arrives. Ten to fifteen percent set aside in advance turns a crisis into a shrug.
- **Solving a cost problem by squeezing people.** If the numbers do not work, change the program's size, parts, or price — not the staff's rest.

Lesson 5 — Run Small, Measure Honestly, Improve in Writing

The final lesson turns your plan into a living program. The rule is simple: run small first. A pilot is a real run of the program with a small group, a short length, or a limited area, run exactly so you can learn before you commit fully. A pilot is not a sloppy run. Participants in a pilot deserve the full purpose promise — but the owner gets to watch closely, ask questions, and discover which parts wobble while the stakes are low. Choose pilot size you can observe personally: one group, one team, one week, five clients. Tell participants honestly that this is a first run and that their feedback will shape the next one. People are generous with first runs they are told about, and unforgiving of experiments they discover.

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During the pilot, collect three kinds of evidence. First, your measures from Lesson 1: did the visible signs of success happen, and for how many participants? Count completions, results, repeat orders, correct demonstrations — whatever your purpose named. Second, part-by-part notes: for each part, did it start on time, did the owner have what they needed, where did confusion or delay appear? Third, participant words: ask two or three short questions while the experience is fresh — what helped most, where did you get stuck or confused, what should we change first? Write answers down in their words. Do not argue, explain, or defend during feedback. Thank, record, and decide later, in calm.

After the pilot, hold a short review and improve in writing. Go part by part: keep what worked, fix what wobbled, cut what added cost without adding result. Every fix becomes a change to the written program — the checklist, the timeline, the script, the cost sheet — not just a good intention in someone's memory. Date the new version. This written improvement loop is what separates a program from an event. An event happens once and its lessons evaporate. A program gets better every run because its learning is stored in the document, where the next owner can use it even if the first owner is away.

Decide, with your numbers in front of you, one of three outcomes: run again as improved, grow carefully, or stop. Growing carefully means changing one variable at a time — more participants, or a second location, or a new owner — never all three at once, so you can see what caused any new problem. Stopping is a legitimate success of the system, not a failure of the person: the Builder exists so you learn cheaply, in a pilot, what would have been expensive to learn at full scale. A program that is stopped on evidence, with its lessons written down, has still paid for itself in knowledge.

The Steps

1. Choose your pilot scope: the smallest real run you can observe closely — one group, one team, or a handful of clients.
2. Tell pilot participants it is a first run, what result the program promises them, and that you will ask for their feedback at the end.
3. Before the pilot, print or open your measures from Lesson 1 and a blank note page for each part of the program.
4. During the pilot, record results as they happen: numbers for your measures, and a short note per part on timing, missing items, and confusion points.
5. At the end, ask each participant the same two or three short questions and write their answers in their own words.
6. Within a week, hold a review with the part owners. For each part decide: keep, fix, or cut. Assign every fix an owner and a date.
7. Write all agreed fixes into the program document and save it as a new dated version. File the pilot notes with it.
8. Decide and record the outcome: run again, grow by changing one variable only, or stop — with the evidence for the decision written in one paragraph.

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A Worked Example

Leah owns a dog-grooming studio and builds a Puppy's First Groom Program: a short visit to meet the studio, a gentle first wash, owner guidance on brushing at home, and a follow-up check. Her pilot runs with six puppies over two weeks. Her purpose measure was that at least five of six owners would book a second groom within six weeks and demonstrate the home brushing routine at the follow-up. The result: four booked, and only three could show the brushing routine correctly. Part notes showed the wash and visit parts ran smoothly, but the guidance part — a talk given while puppies were excited and owners were gathering leads and coats — was where learning was lost. Feedback confirmed it in the owners' own words: "I couldn't really listen at the end." Leah's fix is precise and written into version two: the brushing guidance moves to the quiet first visit, with a one-page sheet to take home, and the follow-up check keeps the demonstration. She grows by one variable only — eight puppies in the next run, same studio, same staff. In run two, seven of eight owners demonstrate the routine and book again. The program did not improve because Leah tried harder in general. It improved because the pilot showed her the exact part to fix, and the fix was written where the next run would find it.

Common Mistakes

- **Launching at full size first.** Full-size launches turn small, fixable problems into public failures. Pilot small, learn cheap.
- **Collecting only praise.** Compliments feel good and teach little. Ask where people got stuck, and write the answers down word for word.
- **Fixing from memory.** If the improvement is not written into the program document as a new version, the next run repeats the old problem.
- **Changing everything at once when growing.** New location, new staff, and double the participants together make problems impossible to trace. Change one variable at a time.

Try It

Choose a real program you want your business to run — a training path, a customer welcome, a regular workshop, a service package — and build its first version this week using all five lessons in order. Day one: write your purpose sentence, your day-one and end-point participant paragraphs, and your visible signs of success. Day two: break the program into five to nine parts, each with an input, an action, and an output, and mark essentials versus enhancements. Day three: order the parts, map the dependencies, find the critical chain, and place honest full durations on a real calendar with slack before public parts. Day four: name one owner per part, list each part's tools and decisions, and cost the whole program truly — purchases, all staff time including your own, overhead share, and contingency — ending with cost per run and cost per participant. Day five: choose your pilot scope, tell your pilot participants it is a first run, prepare your measure sheet and per-part note pages, and set the review date within a week of the pilot's end.

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Keep the whole build in one document: purpose at the top, parts in order, timeline, owners, costs, measures, and — after the pilot — the dated list of fixes that becomes version two. That single document is the Program Builder working as designed. When you can hand it to a capable person who was not in the room and they can run the program from it without calling you, you have built a program. Until then, you have built a good plan — and the pilot and the written fix are how the plan earns the name.

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