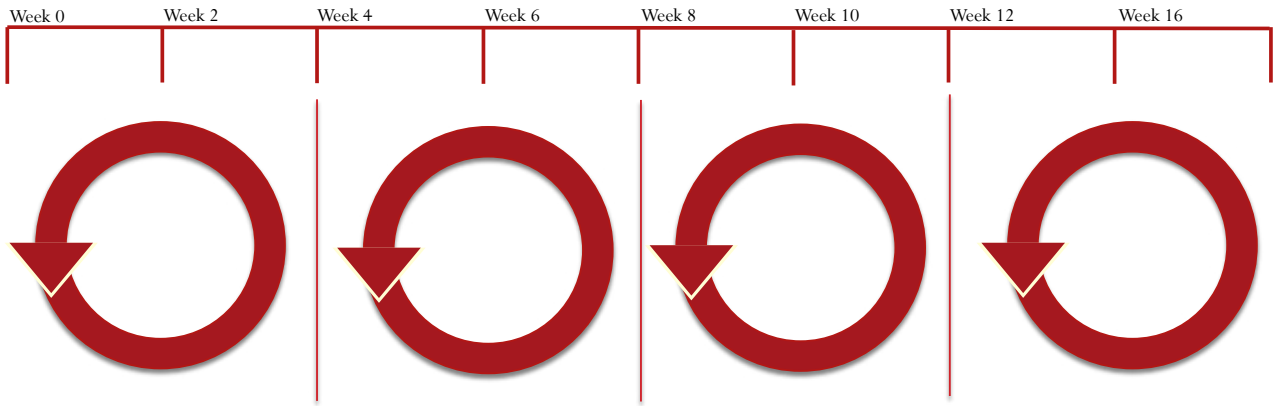
Cadence for Rapid Learning Cycles

How Long Should My Rapid Learning Cycles Be?

By Kathy Iberle



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How Long Should My Rapid Learning Cycles Be?

Key Takeaways

- **A cadence is a regular rhythm within a process which reduces overhead.**
- **Rapid Learning Cycles create a cadence for analyzing and using the answers to Critical Questions and Knowledge Gaps.**
- **The Rapid Learning Cycle should be short enough to maximize feedback, and long enough to minimize overhead.**

What is a Cadence and Why Should I Have One?

A cadence is a regular, predictable rhythm within a process. For instance, a particular meeting happens on the same day of every week, or your website is refreshed on the same day of every month.

A cadence saves time by reducing waste. When an activity happens at a regular, predictable time, people plan their work to take advantage of the cadence. When a bus runs on time reliably, you'll take the bus that will reach your destination just before your appointment. If that bus is often late, you'll take an earlier bus just in case. Depending on the actual arrival time of the bus, you'll be waiting either at the bus stop or at your destination. This creates waste.

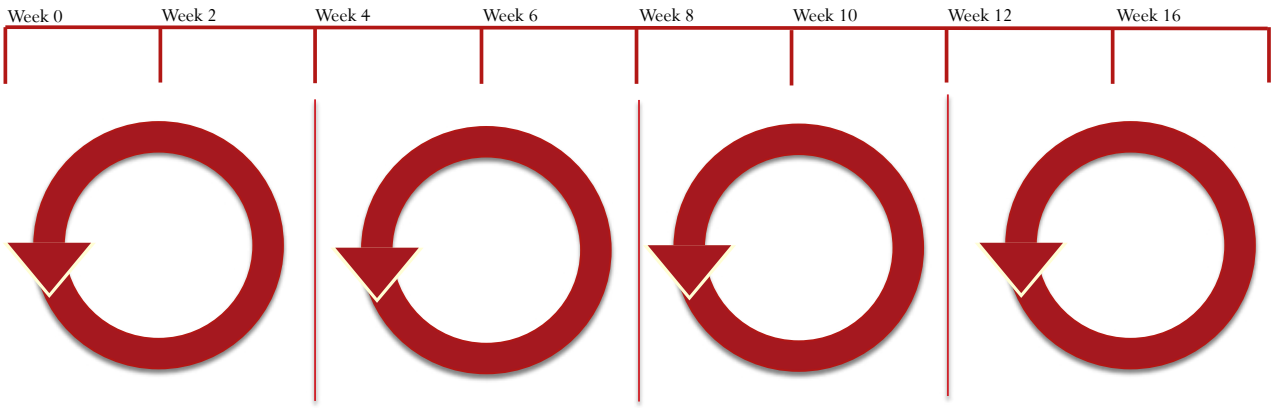
A cadence saves time by reducing overhead. Instead of coordinating everyone's availability and looking for a meeting room every time a meeting is held, the calendar coordination and meeting room reservation is done just once.

Rapid Learning Cycles on a Cadence

A cadence puts the "cycle" in Rapid Learning Cycles. Each Rapid Learning Cycle is the same length, so the decision meeting at the end of the Rapid Learning Cycle happens on a regular cadence. Putting these decisions on a cadence makes the process more efficient, by reducing the overhead of planning and scheduling the decision meetings. A cadence also tends to "pull" work through the system by making progress easily visible.

The decision meeting is the point at which valuable information is harvested from the investigations and made useful to the overall organization. Understanding the value that this information represents – what it allows you to do or not do – is a critical part of choosing a good cadence. For instance, a Rapid Learning Cycle may yield information suggesting that you should drop a planned investigation, add a new investigation, change the scope or staffing of an ongoing investigation, allow more (or less!) time for a future investigation, or even close out an entire project.

For optimum efficiency, the cycles must be short enough but not too short.



Rapid Learning Cycles Should Not Be Too Short

It is possible to hold decision meetings too often. If there's no new information ready to analyze at the end of a cycle, or the information seems too sparse to justify the effort of holding a meeting, the Rapid Learning Cycles may be too short.

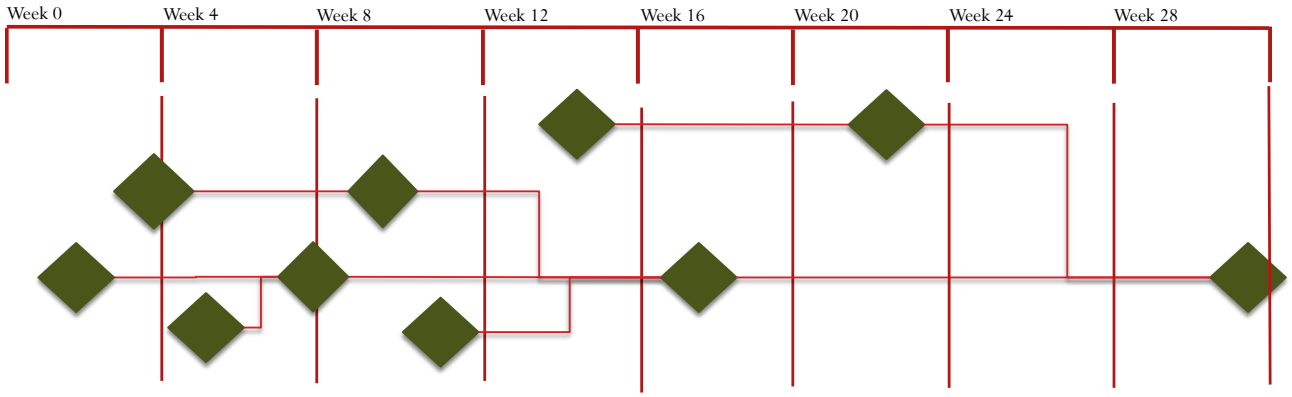
Rapid Learning Cycles Should Be Short Enough

A "short enough" Rapid Learning Cycle really means that we are holding the final decision meeting often enough. The decision meeting should be often enough to:

- Stop investigation into a Knowledge Gap promptly when enough information exists to close that Knowledge Gap. Don't waste time continuing to investigate.
- Make system integration problems visible quickly, so design doesn't continue down inappropriate paths.
- Reduce or eliminate the need to discuss or change the project plan in between decision meetings.

How to Choose a Good Length for a Rapid Learning Cycle

- As a team, make a list of the feedback you get every time a Rapid Learning Cycle ends.
- Consider what changes you are able to make to your plan when you have that feedback, and other advantages of having the feedback quickly. Ideally, how often would you like to get that feedback?
- What would be too often? Consider the minimum time that it takes to have a new piece of representative feedback, and the overhead of having a decision meeting.
- Pick a Rapid Learning Cycle length that is
  - between "often enough" and "too often".
  - a whole number of weeks or months.
  - an even number of weeks, if possible. (Mechanical and hardware engineering investigations often find a cadence of 2, 4, 6, or 8 weeks to be optimal.)
- Now test the proposed cadence by laying the cadence on top of your Critical Question schedule. At the end of every Rapid Learning Cycle, there should be at least one Critical Question to discuss. It's better if there are two or three, so you can see the interactions.



Slowing the Cadence Down

During the later stages of a project, it often takes longer to create useful feedback and there are fewer Critical Questions to answer. If this is the case, a cadence that is ideal early in the project is too fast for the later stages. If you want to lengthen your Rapid Learning Cycles, try doubling the cadence by dropping every other decision meeting.

Next Steps

- ❑ Choose a cadence for your Rapid Learning Cycles, following the rules above.
- ❑ Schedule your decision meetings (the meeting which closes your Rapid Learning Cycle).
- ❑ Look for other meetings or activities associated with the Rapid Learning Cycle which can be put on this same cadence.

About the Author

Kathy Iberle has been working with agile software development and Lean development teams for many years, and has developed unusual expertise in the challenging area where hardware and software meet.

Kathy recently retired from Hewlett-Packard after a long career as a programmer, quality engineer, and process improvement expert and is now the principal consultant and owner of the Iberle Consulting Group. She has published regularly since 1997, served as co-chair of the Program Committee of the Pacific Northwest Software Quality Conference (PNSQC) in 2009, and participated in the invitation-only Software Test Managers Roundtable for five years.

Kathy has an M.S. in Computer Science from the University of Washington, and an excessive collection of degrees in Chemistry from the University of Washington and the University of Michigan. Visit her website: www.kiberle.com

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