

## MANAGING COMPLEXITY | DECISION QUALITY

### DEFINITIONS

*MANAGING COMPLEXITY:* Making sense of complex, high quantity, and sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ information to effectively solve \_\_\_\_\_.

*DECISION QUALITY:* Making good and \_\_\_\_\_ decisions that keep the organization moving \_\_\_\_\_.

*MANAGING COMPLEXITY:*

#### SKILLED BEHAVIORS

- Asks the right questions to accurately analyze situations.
- Acquires data from multiple and diverse sources when solving problems.
- Uncovers root causes to difficult problems.
- Evaluates pros and cons, risks and benefits of different solution options.

#### LESS SKILLED BEHAVIORS

- Misses the complexity of issues and force fits solutions.
- Doesn't gather sufficient information to assess situations completely.
- Relies solely on intuition, even when contrary information exists.
- Is caught off guard when problems surface without an obvious solution.

#### COMMON TRAPS

- Over-simplification: assuming a simple solution exists when it does not.
- Paralysis by analysis: trying to consider every possible factor, leading to decision fatigue.
- Reactive problem-solving: focusing on short-term fixes, putting out fires, instead of addressing root causes.
- Missing the big picture: i.e. how different elements of the organization influence one another.
- Jumps to conclusions.
- Disorganized.

#### COMMON BIASES

- Confirmation Bias: we favor information that supports our preexisting beliefs and ignore contradictory evidence.

- Anchoring Bias: clinging to the first piece of information they receive, even when better data emerges.
- Groupthink: Teams conform to dominant opinions rather than exploring diverse viewpoints, leading to blind spots.

### *DECISION QUALITY:*

#### SKILLED BEHAVIORS

- Makes sound decisions, even in the absence of complete information.
- Relies on a mixture of analysis, wisdom, experience, and judgment when making decisions.
- Considers all relevant factors and uses appropriate decision-making criteria and principles.
- Recognizes when a quick 80% solution will suffice.

#### LESS SKILLED BEHAVIORS

- Approaches decisions haphazardly or delays decision making.
- Makes decisions based on incomplete data or inaccurate assumptions.
- Ignores different points of view or makes decisions that impact short-term results at the expense of longer-term goals.

#### COMMON TRAPS

- Relying Too Heavily on Past Experiences: assuming that what worked before will work again, even in different contexts.
- Making Decisions Too Quickly (or Too Slowly).
- Overvaluing Intuition Without Supporting Data.
- Failing to Involve Key Stakeholders.
- Chasing Perfection (Analysis Paralysis): overanalyzing and delaying decisions, waiting for perfect information that may never come.

#### COMMON BIASES

- Confirmation Bias: favoring information that supports your existing beliefs and ignoring contradictory data.
- Frequency Bias: more likely to believe something you hear or see repeatedly over time.
- Recency Bias: what you've learned most recently carries more weight.
- Negative Bias: stored negative emotional memories of similar situations or people cloud your judgment.
- Attachment Bias: holding on to a status quo you helped shape.

**SELF-ASSESSMENT****Instructions:**

Rate yourself on the following statements using the scale below: 1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often, 4 = Consistently

**Manages Complexity:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ I effectively break down complex problems into manageable parts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I can identify patterns and root causes in ambiguous situations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I remain calm and focused when faced with uncertainty.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I prioritize effectively, even when multiple urgent issues arise.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I seek input from diverse perspectives to navigate complexity.

**Decision Quality:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ I gather relevant data before making important decisions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I balance speed and thoroughness when making decisions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I anticipate risks and consider unintended consequences.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I communicate decisions clearly and explain the rationale.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I adjust my decisions when new information becomes available.

**Common Traps and Biases:**

Which of the following traps and biases do you tend to fall into? (pick one or two per category)

Managing Complexity

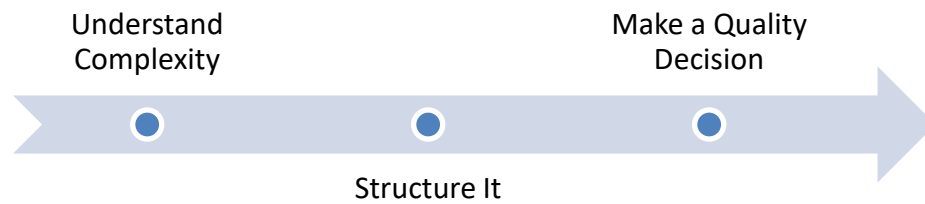
- ☐ Over-simplification: assuming a simple solution exists when it does not.
- ☐ Paralysis by analysis: trying to consider every possible factor, leading to decision fatigue.
- ☐ Reactive problem-solving: focusing on short-term fixes, putting out fires, instead of addressing root causes.
- ☐ Missing the big picture: i.e. how different elements of the organization influence one another.
- ☐ Jumps to conclusions
- ☐ Disorganized

- ☐ Confirmation Bias: we favor information that supports our preexisting beliefs and ignore contradictory evidence. Example: A leader dismisses employee feedback that contradicts their view of the company's culture
- ☐ Anchoring Bias: clinging to the first piece of information they receive, even when better data emerges. Example: A CEO bases a market expansion decision on early reports and ignores new warning signs.
- ☐ Groupthink: Teams conform to dominant opinions rather than exploring diverse viewpoints, leading to blind spots. Example: A leadership team unanimously supports a flawed strategy because no one wants to challenge the CEO.

### Decision Quality

- ☐ Relying Too Heavily on Past Experiences: assuming that what worked before will work again, even in different contexts.
- ☐ Making Decisions Too Quickly (or Too Slowly)
- ☐ Overvaluing Intuition Without Supporting Data
- ☐ Failing to Involve Key Stakeholders
- ☐ Chasing Perfection (Analysis Paralysis): overanalyzing and delaying decisions, waiting for perfect information that may never come.
- ☐ Confirmation Bias: favoring information that supports your existing beliefs and ignoring contradictory data.
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### **Reflection:**



*NOT SURE WHERE TO START? DEFINE THE \_\_\_\_\_.*

*THINGS TOO VAGUE? GATHER RELEVANT \_\_\_\_\_.*

*HAVING DIFFICULTY FINDING THE ANSWER? ASK BETTER \_\_\_\_\_.*

*TROUBLE GETTING AT WHAT'S UNDER THE SURFACE? DRILL DOWN TO*

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## FRAMEWORKS FOR MAKING QUALITY DECISIONS

For fast decision-making in dynamic, high-pressure environments.

### 1. OODA LOOP (OBSERVE, ORIENT, DECIDE, ACT)

**Best for:** Fast, iterative decision-making in dynamic, high-pressure environments.

**Useful for situations where:**

- Situations unfold rapidly (e.g., traffic stops, pursuits, or high-risk encounters).
- You need to observe, orient quickly to changing conditions, and act decisively.
- Stay ahead of unfolding situations rather than just reacting.

**How it works in the field:**

1. Observe – Scan the environment.
2. Orient – Assess risk, use training & experience to understand intent.
3. Decide – Choose the best response based on available data.
4. Act – Execute the decision while remaining flexible to adapt as needed.

**Example:**

A trooper pulls over a vehicle and notices nervous behavior and a concealed weapon in the car. Instead of immediately reacting, they cycle through OODA:

- Observe (body language, behavior shifts).
- Orient (consider prior incidents, suspect demeanor, and legal context).
- Decide (approach carefully, call for backup).
- Act (communicate commands confidently, take control of the situation).

## 2. RECOGNITION-PRIMED DECISION (RPD) MODEL

**Best for:** Decisions under extreme time constraints with limited information.

**Useful for situations where:**

- You need to make split-second decisions based on experience rather than waiting for perfect information.
- You need to identify patterns and recognize familiar situations to predict outcomes.
- You need to reduce hesitation in life-threatening situations where action must be immediate.

**How it works in the field:**

1. Assess the situation and compare it to past experiences.
2. Recognize patterns (does this look like something I've seen before?).
3. Mentally simulate possible outcomes (if I do X, what will happen?).
4. Act based on the best match to prior knowledge.

**Example:**

A trooper approaches a stopped vehicle and instantly recognizes behaviors (e.g., furtive movements, excessive nervousness) similar to prior encounters with armed suspects. Instead of analyzing every detail, they act decisively by adjusting their approach, calling for backup, and maintaining tactical advantage.

## 3. HEURISTIC-BASED DECISION MAKING

**Best for:** Quick, experience-driven decisions using mental shortcuts.

**Useful for situations where:**

- No time for deep analysis—you need to rely on training, instincts, and mental shortcuts.
- You need to filter out unnecessary data to focus on immediate risks.

**Examples of heuristics:**

- "If it looks wrong, it probably is." (Pattern recognition)
- "When in doubt, create distance." (Officer safety priority)

- "Slow is smooth, smooth is fast." (Maintaining composure under pressure)

**Example:**

A trooper sees a vehicle weaving erratically on a highway. Instead of running through every possible cause (medical emergency, distraction, DUI, fatigue), they use heuristics to prioritize pulling the driver over safely before overanalyzing.

For decisions with more time, requiring consistency, such as customer service, handling uncertainty with policies, and situations without complete information.

**1. RAPID MODEL (RECOMMEND, AGREE, PERFORM, INPUT, DECIDE)**

**Best for:** Structured, policy-driven decisions that involve multiple roles (frontline agents, supervisors, compliance officers).

**Useful for situations where:**

- Many decisions require clear accountability (who can approve exceptions, escalate issues, or enforce policies).
- Need to avoid bottlenecks by defining who has the final say and who provides input.
- Need to ensure fairness and compliance with state regulations while allowing for customer service flexibility.

**How it works in the field:**

- Recommend – A frontline agent recommends an action (e.g., approving an ID renewal with missing documents).
- Agree – A supervisor agrees to an exception or requires additional verification.
- Perform – The final decision is executed based on policy.
- Input – Compliance officers provide insights if the case is unusual or escalated.
- Decide – The designated authority (e.g., manager) finalizes the decision when needed.

**Example:**

A customer is missing one required document for a Real ID application but has two alternative forms of ID. The agent recommends an exception, a supervisor reviews and agrees or denies, compliance provides input if needed, and a final decision is made based on state guidelines.



## 2. FIRST PRINCIPLES THINKING

**Best for:** Problem-solving and policy interpretation when standard answers don't apply.

**Useful for situations where:**

- Customer issues don't fit neatly into policy, requiring creative problem-solving.
- Employees need help to break problems down to the fundamental requirements rather than blindly following past procedures.
- Useful for modernizing outdated processes (e.g., making online renewals more efficient).

**How it works in the field:**

1. Identify core requirements – What must be true to approve this request?
2. Break down assumptions – Are we requiring something because it's always been done that way, or is it actually necessary?
3. Find a new solution – Can we meet legal requirements in a different way without unnecessary barriers?

**Example:**

An elderly customer can't provide a birth certificate but has several other identifying documents. Instead of immediately rejecting their application, an agent uses First Principles Thinking to determine if an alternative form of proof can satisfy legal requirements.

## 3. DECISION TREES

**Best for:** Consistently handling customer inquiries based on predefined rules.

**Useful for situations where:**

- Employees face repetitive but slightly varying situations (e.g., "What do I do if a customer's license is expired but they moved states?").
- A structured, flowchart-based approach is needed to ensure decisions are consistent, fair, and policy-compliant.
- Ambiguity needs to be reduced, so employees don't have to guess or escalate every decision.

**How it works in the field:**

- Employees follow a structured path based on customer responses.
- If an exception arises, they know when to escalate rather than making arbitrary decisions.

**Example:**

A customer applies for a name change but only has a marriage certificate (no court order). Instead of guessing, the agent follows a decision tree:

1. Does the marriage certificate match state requirements? → If yes, proceed.
2. If no, does the customer have another supporting document? → If yes, proceed.
3. If neither works → Escalate to a supervisor.

**TAKEAWAYS****ABOUT MARK**

Mark Kenny works with leaders who want to silo mentalities and break down barriers to build a functional, collaborative, aligned team.

Mark brings three decades of experience, first in IT and operations, followed by running a software company, and later in keynote speaking and consulting. Over the course of his career, Mark has worked with multiple industries including public sector, technology, healthcare, manufacturing, engineering, financial services, and retail and in a variety of organizations such as Nissan, Mars, State of Tennessee, Ohio State University, HCA, Vanderbilt, and the US Army.

Mark is the author of *The Hippo Solution: Eliminate Territorial Thinking and Unleash the Power of Teams*, and a part-time high-school basketball coach. He currently lives outside of Nashville, Tennessee.

To book Mark to speak for your leadership retreat or event, connect with him at [mark@markskenny.com](mailto:mark@markskenny.com), call (615) 656-0465, or learn more about his work at [MarkSKenny.com](http://MarkSKenny.com).