

Decision Cycle Questions - Personal (Condensed)

A working set of questions and prompts for each step of the Decision Cycle, condensed version.

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THINK - STEP 1 - Frame the Decision

Define the decision clearly - the question, scope, constraints, and stakeholders.

The Question and Reframe

Stating what I am deciding and whether the question itself is framed correctly

1.1 What is the decision I am facing? Write it exactly as it first emerged.

Write it in the words you first used to describe it to yourself, before any analysis or editing.

1.2 Who or what has triggered this decision?

Was it a deadline, an event, another person's action, or something you began? If another person is driving or urging this decision, do you trust their motives, and do those motives align with your interests?

1.3 What outcome am I ultimately trying to achieve, and is this something I need, or something I want?

Not the decision itself, but the deeper goal. If things go well, what will be true? Then ask whether this is a need or something you want. The distinction matters. Needs tend to be non-negotiable, wants carry more flexibility about whether, when, and how.

1.4 Reframe this decision in at least three ways: broader, narrower, and from a different perspective. Which framing is most useful, and which is the truest? Does any reframe reveal options that the original question was ruling out?

Try inverting the question, broadening its scope, or focusing on a different goal. Write each reframe as a new decision question. Which version, if fully faced, is the most truthful? What does each framing include or exclude?

Drawing on Experience

What previous decisions and reflections can tell you about this one

1.5 Have you faced a similar decision before? What does your own record of it, or your memory of it, tell you about how it went?

Check any record you kept of earlier decisions of a similar type, or your Step 9 reflections on them. Look specifically for carry-forward points, root causes of any unexpected outcomes, and mental models you noted needed updating. If nothing was recorded, rely on memory, but treat it as less reliable than a written record.

1.6 Which of your own decision-making patterns, identified in previous reflections, are most likely to show up here, and what will you do differently this time?

Refer to what previous Step 9 reflections revealed about your patterns, such as overconfidence, delay, particular blind spots, or biases. Name which ones are relevant to this decision, and state specifically what you will do differently, not just that you intend to be careful.

Scale, Scope and Constraints

How significant is this decision, what falls within its scope, and what are the fixed limits I must work within

1.7 How significant is this decision (minor, moderate, or major) and how does it rank relative to my other current priorities right now?

Consider the size of the consequences if it goes well or badly, and how many people it affects.

1.8 Is this decision urgent, important, or both, and is acting on it equally urgent, or can implementation wait even if deciding cannot?

Urgent means it needs to be decided soon. Important means the consequences are significant. These are separate dimensions. Sometimes you must decide now but can act later. Also ask: is any sense of urgency self-imposed? Would waiting a week or longer make things worse?

1.9 What is within my control here, and what is not?

Be specific. List what you can influence and what you cannot. Don't waste energy on the latter.

1.10 Which constraints am I treating as given, and for each one, is it truly binding (legal, physical, or contractual) or is it an assumption about what is possible?

List the limits that feel non-negotiable. Then for each: is it legally, physically, or contractually fixed, or is it an assumption about what is possible?

Stakeholders and Timing

Who else is affected, and is now the right moment to decide?

1.11 Whose perspective am I most likely to be discounting or overlooking?

Think about people who are affected but not present in your conversations about this. Who is easy to overlook?

1.12 What is the deadline, and is it truly fixed (a legal, contractual, or physical constraint) or a soft assumption about timing? If it is soft, what would it cost to ask for more time?

State the actual date or milestone. Then distinguish between hard deadlines and soft ones driven by convention, preference, or assumed urgency.

Success Criteria

What will a good outcome look like in practice?

1.13 What does success look like? How will I know the right outcome has been achieved?

Write success in observable terms. Not how you will feel, but what will have happened. List each criterion separately; you will rank them in the next question.

1.14 If these criteria conflict, which takes priority?

Rank them now, before the pressure of choice distorts them. What matters most?

Carry forward: This is the first step. The output is a clear, agreed statement of the decision you are working with.

THINK - STEP 2 - Explore the Evidence

Discover what you know, what you don't know, and what you're assuming.

Discovery

Finding out what I know, what I don't, and how reliable each piece is

2.1 What do I know? For each piece of information, is it a fact, an assumption, or someone's opinion?

Sort what you know into three categories: verified facts, working assumptions, and others' views. Be clear about which is which.

2.2 What do I not know? And of those gaps, which ones are critical to fill before deciding?

List the gaps first. Then assess them. Not all gaps matter equally. Which ones, if unresolved, could lead you to a fundamentally wrong decision?

Information Gathering

Identifying the gaps in my knowledge and deciding what to find out

2.3 Where can I find the information I need, and is there someone (trusted or professional) whose input would be valuable? For each source, note the action and set a date.

List specific sources - people, documents, websites, institutions. Think about both informal input (someone who knows you well) and formal specialist advice. Then note the action and set a date. If you do not know yet, write down how you will find out. Information gathering without a deadline tends not to happen.

Evidence

Checking whether the evidence I have is sufficient, reliable, and relevant to this decision

- 2.4 How confident am I that this course of action will achieve what I want? If the evidence is thin, note the assumption I am making by proceeding anyway. Confidence ratings are: not at all confident / somewhat confident / fairly confident / very confident / certain.**

Note which assumption you are making by proceeding with limited evidence.

Resources

Checking whether I have the resources needed to see this through - time, money, energy, and support

- 2.5 Which initial and ongoing resources will I need (time, money, energy, support) to proceed? Are these confirmed and available, or still uncertain or dependent on others?**

Consider everything it will take. Initial costs are often the most visible. Look ahead to what this will require over time, not just at the start. Resources that are expected but not confirmed are not the same as resources in hand. Note what is secured and what is assumed.

Assumptions

Naming the things I'm treating as true without having checked them

- 2.6 What assumptions am I making (including the assumptions my evidence rests on) and for each significant one, what would it take for it to be wrong?**

List every given that is built into your thinking, including the assumptions your evidence rests on. Every conclusion depends on them, and if they do not hold in your situation, the evidence may not apply. For each significant assumption, note the condition under which it would fail. This makes assumptions testable rather than invisible.

The Outside View

How have similar decisions turned out for other people in similar situations?

- 2.7 What have other people done in similar situations, and what does that outside view suggest my inside view might be missing or distorting?**

Set aside your sense that your situation is unique. Your inside view is based on your specific situation and feelings; the outside view is based on what typically happens. Learning what others have done, and what happened, is one of the most underused inputs to decisions. Look for real examples, not just ones that confirm your preference. Where do the two views diverge, and why?

Carry forward: Carry forward the agreed frame from Step 1.

THINK - STEP 3 - Challenge Your Thinking

Test the frame and your assumptions before committing to a direction.

Challenge the Frame

Testing whether I've identified the right problem

- 3.1 Is this the right question? What does the current framing exclude that might be important, and could I be solving a symptom rather than the cause?**

Test the question itself. Could you be solving a symptom rather than a cause? Is there a more fundamental issue underneath? Many poor decisions are technically correct answers to the wrong question. Every framing has edges. What it excludes is often as revealing as what it includes. Consider who, what, or which options are invisible in the current framing.

Test Assumptions

Finding which assumptions matter most - and what happens if they're wrong

- 3.2 What would have to be true for my preferred direction to make sense, have I tested them, and what am I simply taking on faith?**

Think backwards from your preferred outcome and list every assumption that must hold for it to work. For each, check: have you verified it, or are you taking it on faith? Untested assumptions are not necessarily wrong, but they represent a risk. This includes trust placed in sources of information and in people whose motives you have not examined.

3.3 What is the most critical untested assumption, and how could it be tested before committing?

Pick the assumption that, if wrong, would most change your direction. Is there a small, low-cost test you could run?

The Other Side

Taking the opposing view seriously and looking for evidence against my current direction

3.4 What is the strongest argument against my preferred direction, and what would a well-informed critic say? Write their argument as they would make it, not as you would summarise it.

Don't settle for a weak version of the opposing case. Note the person (real or imagined) who would argue most forcefully against your preferred direction, then write their argument as they would make it, not as you would summarise it. A useful test: if you showed your answer to an opponent, would they say you had represented their position fairly?

3.5 What evidence am I not giving enough weight to, or explaining away?

What facts or signals have you noticed but set aside because they're inconvenient? Note them.

3.6 What would I need to see to change course?

Define the conditions that would move you to a different option. If you can't think of any, that's a warning sign.

Cognitive Biases

Checking whether your own thinking - not just the information - may be distorting your view

3.7 Which cognitive biases are most likely affecting my thinking? In particular, am I seeking confirming evidence rather than challenging it, and am I more confident than my track record justifies?

The Bias Awareness Checklist covers 21 different biases. Pay particular attention to two: confirmation bias (have you sought the strongest case against your preferred option?) and overconfidence (compare your confidence against what typically happens in comparable situations, not what you hope for here).

Second-Order Effects

What happens next - and then what happens after that?

3.8 Apply two-level thinking in both directions. If you go ahead, what happens directly and what does that cause next? If you step back or choose differently, what follows, and what does that cause?

Trace at least two levels: the immediate effect, and then what that effect triggers. Think in chains - A causes B, B causes C. Be specific rather than vague. Apply the same two-level thinking to the alternative or to inaction. Sometimes the consequences of not acting are more serious.

Pre-Mortem

Imagining the decision has failed, and asking why

3.9 If this decision fails completely, what will be the most likely reason, and what specific warning signs should I watch for that would tell me it is going wrong?

Imagine it is a year from now and the decision has failed. What went wrong? Note the single most likely cause rather than a full list, since Step 5 covers the range. Then work backwards: what would you have been able to observe, before it was too late, that would have told you things were heading that way?

Carry forward: Carry forward the agreed frame from Step 1 and the key unknowns from Step 2.

THINK - STEP 4 - Weigh the Options

Generate and compare the full range of options available.

Generate Options

Listing all realistic choices, including the ones that are easy to overlook

4.1 What are all the options currently on the table, including doing nothing? List everything, even options you consider unrealistic or unattractive. Check whether 'doing nothing' is truly available and what it would involve.

List everything, even options you consider unrealistic or unattractive. Exclude nothing at this stage.

4.2 What options have I dismissed too quickly?

Go back to the ones you ruled out early. Was the dismissal based on solid reasoning or a reflex response?

Compare Options

Weighing each option against the criteria that matter most

4.3 For each option, how does it perform against the criteria that matter most?

Use the success criteria from Step 1. Note how each option performs against each criterion. Options differ in the risk they carry as well as in what they deliver, so note that too. Step 5 examines it properly.

4.4 Which option best balances what matters most, and does that feel right?

After a rational comparison, check your gut. Does the analysis match your instinct, and if not, which one is pointing to something real?

The Front-Runner

Identifying which option is currently leading - and why

4.5 Which option do I prefer and why?

Note it clearly. Then list the two or three reasons it is ahead of the alternatives.

4.6 What is the strongest alternative, and what would make me switch to it?

Note the runner-up option and the specific conditions that would make it preferable to your front-runner.

Carry forward: Carry forward the agreed frame from Step 1. Before generating options, restate your success criteria and weighting from Step 1.

CHECK - STEP 5 - Assess the Risks

Identify and assess the leading option's risks and the outcomes (positive and negative).

Risk Overview

A first look at the risk landscape, including the cost of not deciding

5.1 What makes me most nervous about the leading option, and how much risk am I willing to accept?

Note your biggest worry, even if it feels vague. It is the first step to assessing it properly. Then step back and ask how much risk you are prepared to carry. Your answer will calibrate how hard you should work on the risks you have identified.

5.2 What could go wrong financially?

Consider costs, losses, unexpected expenses, income effects, and knock-on financial consequences.

5.3 What could go wrong for the people involved, and could this cause harm to anyone, or raise any legal or ethical concerns?

Think about relationships, health, wellbeing, and the effect on people you care about or are responsible for. Also consider whether any aspect of this decision could cause foreseeable harm to others, or conflicts with any legal, regulatory, or ethical obligation you are subject to.

5.4 If I do nothing, what will the consequences be financially, emotionally, and for the people involved? Is inaction a realistic option?

Imagine the situation six months or a year from now if nothing changes. Can it continue, or is inaction itself a choice that carries costs?

Outcome Range

Mapping the realistic spread of results, from best to worst

5.5 What is the best realistic outcome if this works well?

Not the best imaginable outcome, but the best realistic one. What does success look like?

5.6 What negative outcomes will this decision produce, and for each, is it avoidable (and if so, how?) or unavoidable (and if so, what is the plan)?

Even good decisions have costs and downsides. List them. For each, note one action that would reduce its probability or impact. Some costs are unavoidable. Acknowledging them and planning for them is better than pretending they do not exist.

Causes and Prevention

What could make this go wrong, and what can I do to stop it?

5.7 What are the most likely causes of this option failing, and what could I do to make each one less likely?

For each cause, name the specific condition or event that would have to occur. Then, for the ones that matter most, note the preventive action you could take and whether taking it is within your power.

Reversibility and Resilience

Can this be undone, and will it leave me better or worse placed for what comes next?

5.8 Can I reverse this if it doesn't work out, and if so, what would recovery require, and how long would it take?

Some decisions close doors permanently. Others can be revisited. If reversal is possible, be realistic and list the steps and the timeframe for getting back to where you are now.

5.9 How does the leading option affect my overall resilience (my capacity to absorb setbacks, adapt to changed circumstances, and recover if things go wrong)?

Does this choice build your capacity to weather future shocks, or does it leave you more exposed, depleted, or locked in to something that may be a disadvantage?

Risk Response

What will I do if a key risk materialises?

5.10 For each significant risk, should I Reduce it, Accept it, Transfer it, or Avoid it?

Go through your risk list. Assign one of four responses: Reduce (take action to lower it), Accept (note it and proceed), Transfer (pass it to another party via contract or insurance), or Avoid (choose a different path that removes this specific risk, which may mean adjusting the option rather than abandoning it entirely).

5.11 What early warning signs would tell me a risk is emerging?

For your key risks, define specific signals (not vague feelings, but observable events) that would tell you something is going wrong.

5.12 What is my contingency if the worst case happens?

Not whether the worst case is likely, but whether you could survive it if it did happen. If the answer is no, that changes how much risk you should accept.

Risk Verdict

The overall judgement on the leading option once the individual risks have been responded to: Pass, Mitigate, Accept, or Return.

5.13 Having assessed all the risks, what is my overall verdict on the leading option?

Choose one of four responses. Pass - the risks are acceptable as they stand: proceed to Step 6. Mitigate - the risks are significant but can be reduced: define the specific mitigating actions before proceeding. Accept - the risks are significant and cannot be fully mitigated, but no better option exists or the cost of inaction is greater: document the risks and proceed. Return - the risks are unacceptable and a better option may exist: go back to Step 4 and reassess. If your verdict is Return, do not proceed to Step 6.

Carry forward: Carry forward the leading option from Step 4.

CHECK - STEP 6 - Test Your Values

Check that the decision aligns with your values and principles.

Values

Does this reflect what matters most to me?

- 6.1 Which of my values does this decision activate, and is my preferred direction consistent with them?**
Note the specific values (e.g. honesty, loyalty, independence, security, fairness, ambition) that feel most at stake here. Then ask not 'does it feel comfortable?' but instead 'is it in line with what I believe is right?'
- 6.2 What do my actual choices reveal about what I am prioritising, and does that align with what I say I value?**
Your revealed preferences (what you do) sometimes differ from your stated values. If you told a close friend what you were about to do and why, would they say it matches what you claim to care about?
- 6.3 Which two values are in most direct tension here, and in this context, which takes precedence?**
When values conflict, then noting the tension prevents the decision from being made as if the conflict does not exist. Decide which value takes precedence in this specific context, and note why.

Value Tests

Stress-testing the leading option against your values from outside your own perspective - through a mentor's eyes, your future self, public scrutiny, trust, fairness, and ethics

- 6.4 Mentor Test: Could I explain this decision to someone whose judgement I deeply respect and then feel at ease?**
Think of a specific person, living or not. Imagine explaining your decision to them face to face. Are you at ease?
- 6.5 Future-Self Test: Would the person I want to become be proud of this choice?**
Look forward, first five years, then to the end of your life. Would the person you want to become look back on this decision with satisfaction or discomfort?
- 6.6 Is this decision fair to everyone it affects, not just to me?**
If it is not, decide whether the unfairness is something you can adjust, something you can offset elsewhere, or something you are knowingly accepting anyway. Note your reasoning rather than letting it pass unexamined.
- 6.7 Setting aside what I want from this, is it the ethical thing to do?**
If it is not, ask what would need to change about the option for it to become ethically acceptable. If nothing would change that, weigh how much that should count against the option, even if it succeeds on every other measure.

Precedent

Does this decision set a pattern I'm comfortable with?

- 6.8 Does this set a precedent for my own future behaviour, or for what others will expect of me, and am I comfortable with that?**
If you make this choice, what will you (or others) expect next time a similar situation arises? Is that a precedent you want to set?

Values Verdict

Overall assessment of the leading option against your values before proceeding

- 6.9 Having worked through your values, what is your overall verdict on the leading option?**
Choose one of four responses. Pass - the option is consistent with your values: proceed to Step 7. Resolve - there is a values tension but it can be addressed: note which value takes precedence, define any conditions on how the option is implemented, then proceed. Accept - there is a values conflict that cannot be fully resolved, but no better option exists or the cost of inaction overrides it: acknowledge the conflict and proceed. Return - the option is fundamentally inconsistent with your values and a better option may exist: go back to Step 4. If your verdict is Return, do not proceed to Step 7. A values conflict you carry forward is a risk like any other, and belongs in your record alongside the Risk Verdict from Step 5.

Carry forward: Carry forward the leading option and risk verdict from Steps 4 and 5.

CHOOSE - STEP 7 - Decide and Commit

Make the decision and commit to it - acknowledge trade-offs, close the door, communicate, and establish accountability.

Taking Stock

Weighing up the evidence

7.1 Having worked through all previous steps, what does the overall picture say?

Stand back and read the whole picture. What does the totality of your analysis point to?

7.2 What does my analysis say? What does my gut sense say? Where do they diverge?

Write both views down separately, then compare them. Divergence between head and intuition is information. It's not a problem, but something to interpret.

The Decision

Arriving at my choice

7.3 What am I accepting by choosing this option, and what am I giving up? Note the most significant trade-offs. And am I at peace with them, or hoping they won't matter?

Note what you are taking on - commitments, costs, responsibilities, risks. Then be specific about what you are trading away. Every choice excludes something.

7.4 What is my decision?

State it in one clear sentence. If you can't, you may not have decided yet.

7.5 What is the single most important first action that follows from this decision?

It's one action, not a list. The first concrete step that makes the decision real.

Commitment

Closing the door - the decision is made

7.6 Have I clearly noted the choice and closed the door on revisiting it?

Have you decided, or are you still holding it open? Revisiting a closed decision is different from reviewing it in light of new information.

7.7 Under what conditions would it be legitimate to reopen this decision?

Define the specific circumstances (e.g. new information, a changed context, a trigger) that would justify returning to this question.

Accountability

Who will make sure I follow through?

7.8 Who will hold me accountable for following through?

Name a specific person, not a vague commitment to yourself. Tell them.

Telling Others

Telling others: who needs to know, when, how, and in what form?

7.9 Who needs to know about this decision and by when, and who should not be informed at this stage, and why?

List people individually. Note the date by which each needs to be informed. Also consider who should not be told at this stage, and why. Sometimes timing of disclosure matters as much as who is told.

7.10 Should I share or announce this decision, and if so, through what channel, in what format, and in what tone?

Is this decision relevant only to those directly involved, or does it need broader communication? Format, channel, timing, and tone all matter

Carry forward: Carry forward outputs from all previous steps - frame, exploration, challenge, options, risk, and values.

ACT - STEP 8 - Do and Deliver

Translate the decision into action - plan, assign, and create conditions for success.

Implementation

What needs to happen, in what order, and by when?

8.1 How will this change be implemented?

Describe the process at a high level. What needs to happen, in what sequence?

8.2 Am I able to carry this through with the skills, resources, energy, and access required? What might prevent me, internally or externally?

Do you have the skills, resources, energy, and access required? If not, what is missing? Identify specific obstacles - internal (motivation, capacity) and external (people, systems, circumstances).

8.3 What are my first three concrete actions, who is personally responsible for each one, and by what specific date will each be completed?

Not a general plan, three specific, datable actions. For each: note one person responsible (shared responsibility often means no responsibility) and commit to a date. Approximate is better than none.

Help and Support

What resources or people will I need to make this work?

8.4 Will I need help to carry this through, and who could provide it? Beyond direct help, who could offer encouragement, perspective, or access that would improve the odds?

Be honest about what is beyond your capacity to do alone. If help is needed, list people specifically and note what kind of help each could provide.

Deliver and Monitor

Carry out the plan, but stay alert to what's working and what isn't

8.5 What is my prediction? What do I expect to happen, and when?

Write a specific prediction: "If I do X, then Y will happen by [date]." This makes your thinking testable.

8.6 What signals will tell me the plan is on track, and what would tell me something is going wrong?

Define two or three observable signs that things are going as expected, and two or three warning signs that would prompt a reassessment. Note specific signals, not vague feelings.

8.7 When will I schedule a review to assess early signals?

Write a date. Don't rely on noticing things naturally, schedule the review.

| Carry forward: Carry forward the decision from Step 7 and the commitment from Step 8.

GROW - STEP 9 - Reflect and Learn

Close the loop - review decision quality, capture lessons, and update future thinking.

How You Will Know

How will I know whether the decision was good?

9.1 How will I know if this was the right decision?

Define the criteria for judging the decision in hindsight. What will "right" look like?

9.2 When will I review whether it is working out as hoped?

Set a specific review date, not "in a few months". The review should be far enough out to see real results.

Outcomes vs Process

Was the result good? Was the reasoning itself sound?

9.3 Was the outcome good, and did I achieve what I set out to achieve, and was that mainly the result of the quality of my decision, or of factors outside my control?

Judge against the success criteria you defined in Step 1. Be accurate. Good intentions do not equal good outcomes. This last question matters: a good outcome from a poor process is luck, not skill, and should not reinforce the habits that produced it.

9.4 Was the decision-making process good? Did I reason well, consult appropriately, and handle uncertainty well?

This is a separate question from the outcome. A good process can still produce a bad outcome (and vice versa). Evaluate each independently.

Reflection

What would I do differently if I faced this again?

9.5 What would I do differently in how the decision was made, and in how it was carried out?

Consider both the process (steps, consultation, timing, quality of thinking) and the implementation (actions, communication, follow-through).

Lessons

What should I remember for future decisions?

9.6 What specific lessons does this decision offer for future similar decisions?

Write something concrete that a future version of you could use, not a generic principle.

9.7 What does this decision reveal about my typical decision-making patterns?

Look for patterns where you were overconfident, where you delayed, what you overlooked, what you got right.

Carry forward: Return to this step after implementation has had time to show results. There is no carry-forward to record here.