

Generating Options

Techniques for expanding your choices - a guide to Step 4 (Weigh the Options) of the Decision Cycle

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The quality of your decision is bounded by the quality of your options. You cannot choose well from a poor set of alternatives. Most people generate fewer options than they could, and settle on the first workable idea. This guide describes techniques for expanding the range of options you consider, the rules that make generation work, the failure modes that limit it, and how to know when an option is well-defined enough to evaluate.

PART 1 Where option generation fits in the Decision Cycle

The primary location for option generation is Step 4 (Weigh the Options) - specifically the Generate phase, before comparing and evaluating alternatives. It also has a role in Step 2 (Explore the Evidence), where generating a wider range of possibilities helps identify information gaps and assumptions that might not be visible if only the obvious options are on the table.

The Step 4 questions also ask what you have dismissed too quickly, what broader and narrower versions of your current direction look like, and what someone who strongly disagreed with you would recommend.

A common mistake is to begin evaluating options before generation is complete. Once evaluation starts, new ideas stop arriving - the mind shifts from expansive to critical mode. The techniques below are all designed for the generation phase only. Evaluation belongs in the comparison section of Step 4, and the Options Comparison Worksheet supports that stage separately.

PART 2 Three rules of effective option generation

Rule	Why it matters
Separate generation from evaluation	Judging ideas while generating them stops people offering half-formed ones - which are often the most original. Keep the two phases distinct.
Quantity before quality	The best options rarely arrive first. Producing more ideas - including weak or unlikely ones - increases the chance of finding something good.
Nothing is too obvious	Restating the obvious often reveals the option that was being overlooked because it felt too simple. Include doing nothing or staying with the current situation as options.

PART 3 Seven techniques for generating options

1 Classic Brainstorm

State the decision question clearly, then generate as many options as possible without stopping to judge them. Write every idea, including weak or impractical ones. Set a time limit (10-15 minutes). Review and group afterwards.

How: Work quickly. Go for volume. When ideas dry up, push for a few more before stopping.

Best for: Any situation where you want a wide initial sweep. Works best as a starting point before using other techniques.

If you involve other people, ask them to write their ideas down separately before you discuss them. Groups brainstorming aloud usually produce fewer ideas than the same people working separately (Diehl and Stroebe, 1987).

2 Reverse Brainstorm

Instead of asking "what options would solve this?" ask "what would guarantee the worst possible outcome?" or "what would make this decision fail?" Generate those negative options freely, then reverse each one into a positive alternative.

How: Run a full generation round on the reverse question first. Then go through each negative idea and ask: what is the opposite or the corrective of this?

Best for: Situations where the obvious options feel exhausted. Excellent for finding options that are easy to overlook because they feel uncomfortable or counterintuitive.

3 “How might I...?”

Restate the decision as a “How might I...?” question. The phrasing is deliberately optimistic and open - it assumes a solution exists and invites multiple approaches. Generate as many completions of the question as possible.

How: Frame the question carefully: specific enough to be actionable, open enough not to imply a single answer.

Example: “How might I spend more time with my children without losing income?” rather than “Should I go part-time?”

Best for: Decisions that have been framed as problems or constraints. The phrasing shifts the frame from “what is wrong?” to “what is possible?” and often unlocks options that were invisible under the original framing.

4 Remove a Constraint

Take the decision as currently framed and remove one of its constraints - budget, time, authority, policy, convention. Ask what you would choose if that constraint did not exist. Then ask whether the constraint is fixed or simply assumed.

How: Work through constraints one at a time. For each, note: what option does removing it make visible? Then test: is this constraint truly immovable, or has it simply not been challenged?

Best for: Situations where all options feel unsatisfactory. Often reveals that the real constraint is an assumption rather than a fixed limit.

5 Outside Examples

Ask: how have others handled this kind of decision? Look for comparable situations - similar decisions made by different people, in different circumstances, or in different fields. What options did they consider that you have not?

How: Be specific about what you are looking for. “What did other people do when caring for a parent while working full time?” is more useful than “How do others cope?”

Best for: Decisions where you feel limited by the options visible from inside your own situation. The outside view often reveals options that are well-established elsewhere but have not yet been considered.

6 Hybrid

Take the strongest elements of two or more options and combine them, or sequence them so the least disruptive is tried first, with others held as fallbacks.

Best for: When no single option meets all your success criteria.

7 If the front-runner were unavailable

Imagine your preferred option is no longer possible. What would you do instead? Removing the favourite forces you to look for alternatives that may be better in some respects.

Best for: When one option has dominated your thinking from the start.

PART 4 Common failure modes

Stopping too soon. The first two or three ideas come easily. The options that arrive after pushing past that point are often better. Set a minimum - aim for at least twice as many options as you expect to need.

Evaluating while generating. Saying “that won’t work” during a generation round kills momentum and narrows the output. Reserve all judgment for the evaluation phase.

Omitting the status quo. Doing nothing, or continuing with the current approach, is always an option - and often the implicit default. Write it down. It should be evaluated on the same terms as every other option, not simply assumed.

Generating variations instead of alternatives. If most of your options are minor variations of the same basic approach, the generation phase has not done its job. Push for at least one option that represents a fundamentally different direction.

PART 5 What makes a well-defined option

Before moving from generation to evaluation, check each option against these criteria.

- ☐ It is specific enough to be implemented - not just a direction but an actual path

- ☐ It is distinct from the other options being considered

- ☐ It addresses the decision as framed in Step 1, not a different question

- ☐ It has at least some realistic chance of being chosen - it is not included simply to make another option look better

- ☐ The option of doing nothing, or maintaining the current situation, has been considered

For use with Step 4 (Weigh the Options) of the Decision Cycle questions · See also: Options Comparison Worksheet · Gathering Information Well (Step 2)

Sources

Osborn, A. F. (1953). *Applied imagination: Principles and procedures of creative problem-solving*. Scribner.

The original work introducing brainstorming as a structured technique. Established the rules described in this guide, including the separation of generation from evaluation and the emphasis on quantity before quality.

Diehl, M., & Stroebe, W. (1987). Productivity loss in brainstorming groups: Toward the solution of a riddle. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53(3), 497-509.

Found that groups brainstorming aloud produce fewer ideas than the same number of people working alone.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Relevant to the discussion of anchoring in option generation - the risk that early options constrain the search for further alternatives.