

Second-Order Effects Worksheet

Mapping the consequences beyond the obvious

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How to use this worksheet

Most thinking about consequences stops at the first level - what will happen immediately as a direct result of this decision. Second-order effects are what happen next: the consequences of the consequences. They are often more significant than the first-order effects, and far less obvious. Use this worksheet alongside the Second-Order Effects questions in Step 3 (Challenge Your Thinking).

Work through the tables in order. Complete Part 2 before Part 3. You do not need to fill every row - stop when you have run out of meaningful effects to identify. Part 4 (third-order effects) is optional and most useful for high-stakes or complex decisions.

PART 1 The Decision and Direction Being Examined

Specify the decision and the direction you are examining. The Step 3 questions ask you to trace effects in both directions, so complete Parts 2 and 3 a second time for doing nothing or stepping back.

Decision

Direction being examined

PART 2 First-Order Effects

List the direct, immediate consequences of going this way. What happens first? Include both intended and unintended consequences.

Immediate effect (direct result of this decision)	Intended or unintended?	Positive, negative, or mixed?

PART 3 Second-Order Effects

For each first-order effect, ask: what happens next as a result? Work through each effect from Part 2 and map where it leads.

Which first-order effect does this follow from?	What happens as a result of that effect?	Who or what is affected?

PART 4 Third-Order Effects (Optional)

For complex or high-stakes decisions, trace the most significant second-order effects one level further. What happens as a result of the second-order effects?

Third-order effects

PART 5 Assessment

Reflect on what you have mapped.

Which second or third-order effects are most significant, and why?

Are there any unintended consequences that change your view of this direction?

Are there any second-order effects that could be mitigated or amplified with the right actions?

What effects might this choice have on the people, resources or conditions that made the decision possible, and does that create any obligations?

Source: the “and then what?” discipline follows Sowell, T. (2009). Applied economics: Thinking beyond stage one (2nd ed.). Basic Books.