THE TOOLKIT · TOOL 01

The FOCUS Decision Method

A Framework for High-Stakes Decision Making

- **F** Frame the Situation
- **O** Organize the Data You Have
- **C** Clarify What You Know
- **U** Understand Your Options
- **S** Select a Go-Forward Plan

In times of change, speed and accuracy are essential. The FOCUS Decision Method gives leaders a systematic approach to making critical decisions when time is short and stakes are high.

Elite leaders don't just respond to change. They anticipate it, with a structured decision process that turns chaos into clarity.

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WHY FOCUS

A Structured Process That Turns Chaos Into Clarity

Elite leaders don't just respond to change. They anticipate it, with a decision process the whole team can run, out loud, together.

The problem it solves

When time is short and stakes are high, most teams fall into one of two traps. They **freeze** while they wait for perfect information, or they **lunge** at the first plausible answer. Both feel like action. Neither is a decision process.

FOCUS is the middle path. It is five steps that take a high-stakes decision from a vague worry to a **one-page brief** with an owner, a timeline, and a review date. Each step earns the next, so the team builds shared understanding as it goes instead of arguing positions at the end.

> ***"People can accept a decision they disagree with. They cannot accept one they don't understand."***

Two ideas underneath the method

THE 40-70 RULE

Act when you have about **40 to 70 percent** of the information you wish you had.



Below 40, you're gambling. If you wait for 90, the moment has already passed. Perfect data isn't coming.

ONE-WAY AND TWO-WAY DOORS

A two-way door is reversible. You can walk it back at tolerable cost. Two-way doors deserve **speed**.

A one-way door is irreversible. It is hard or impossible to undo. One-way doors deserve **rigor**.

Knowing which door you are standing at tells you how much process the decision deserves.

What you walk away with

A CLEAR FRAME

What you are deciding, what you are not, and the constraints that box the answer.

HONEST DATA

Facts, unknowns, and assumptions, separated and said out loud.

A BRIEF THAT TRAVELS

The decision, the reasoning, the owner, and the review date, on one page.

THE MODEL AT A GLANCE

Five Steps. Each One Earns the Next.

Move left to right. Do not skip ahead to options before the frame and the data are on the table.

F
Frame the Situation
Framing the situation helps you avoid scope creep. It identifies the decision constraints.

O
Organize the Data You Have
What do you know? What are the unknowns? What are the assumptions?

C
Clarify What You Know
Learn to decide using the 40-70 rule when perfect data just isn't available.

U
Understand Your Options
Focus your resources on the high-impact actions aligned with business objectives.

S
Select a Go-Forward Plan
Execute the decision with clear ownership, timelines, and resource allocation.

What each step produces

STEP	THE QUESTION	WHAT YOU PRODUCE	THE TRAP IT PREVENTS
F · Frame	What exactly are we deciding, and what boxes the answer?	One-sentence decision, constraints, out-of-scope list	Scope creep. Three tangled decisions treated as one.
O · Organize	What do we know, what don't we know, and what are we assuming?	Three lists: facts, unknowns, assumptions	Treating assumptions as facts. Unspoken gaps.
C · Clarify	How much of the information we wish we had is in hand?	A 0-100 estimate and the one missing piece	Freezing for perfect data, or lunging on too little.
U · Understand	What are the real options, and how do they compare?	Two or more options rated on impact, effort, alignment	A single option dressed up as a decision.
S · Select	Which option, why, who owns it, and when do we review it?	The go-forward plan, the why, timeline, resources, review date	A decision nobody understands, owns, or revisits.

The full path

NAME THE DECISION → F O C U S → THE BRIEF → SHARE IT → REVIEW ON THE DATE

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Walking a sample decision through all five steps takes about **ten minutes**. Working a live decision with your team takes about **thirty**. The time is small. The cost of a fuzzy, unowned decision is not.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN · NAME IT

What Are We Actually Deciding?

Most hard decisions are three tangled ones. Name the real choice before you work it.

Before the five steps, write down five things. They take two minutes and they prevent most of the confusion that follows.

FIELD	WHAT TO WRITE	WHY IT MATTERS
The decision, in one sentence	A single, precise choice. Example: "Do we raise prices 6% on the core product line effective October 1?"	If you need "and" twice, you have more than one decision. Split them.
Decision owner	One name, not a committee.	Shared ownership is no ownership. Others advise; one person decides.
Decision needed by	A real date.	The deadline sets how much information you can realistically get.
Stakes	**High:** material to the year or the strategy. **Medium:** significant, recoverable.	Stakes tell the team how much attention this deserves.
Door type	**Two-way** (reversible) or **one-way** (irreversible).	Two-way doors deserve speed. One-way doors deserve rigor.

Reading the door

TWO-WAY DOOR · REVERSIBLE

You can walk it back at tolerable cost: a pricing test, a pilot, a reorganization of one team, a new meeting cadence.

Posture: decide, learn, adjust. Do not over-process it.

ONE-WAY DOOR · IRREVERSIBLE

Hard or impossible to undo: selling a business line, a major acquisition, a long-term contract, letting a key leader go.

Posture: slow down deliberately, especially on thin information. Rigor is not the same as delay.

The common mistake: leaders in trouble reverse the two. They are casual about the irreversible and paralyzed by the reversible.

THE WORKED EXAMPLE USED IN THIS GUIDE

Decision: Do we raise prices 6% on the core product line, effective October 1?

Owner: CEO, with the CRO · **Needed by:** August 15 · **Stakes:** High · **Door:** Two-way (reversible)

F

STEP 1 OF 5

Frame the Situation

Framing the situation helps you avoid scope creep. It identifies the decision constraints.

Coach's note: Name what you are deciding, what you are explicitly NOT deciding, and the constraints (time, money, risk, reputation) that box the answer.

How to do it

1. **State the decision precisely.** One decision, in plain words. If it is really three decisions, split them and work them one at a time.
2. **List the constraints.** Time, money, risk, and reputation. These are the walls the answer has to fit inside.
3. **Write the out-of-scope list.** What this decision is NOT about. This is the scope-creep fence, and it is the line most teams skip.

Questions to ask the room

- If we made this call today, what exactly would change?
- What deadline, budget, or risk limit can we not cross?
- What related issue keeps pulling the conversation sideways? Put it out of scope.

WATCH FOR

- A decision statement with several "ands" in it.
- Constraints nobody has written down, which surface later as objections.
- An empty out-of-scope box. It is almost never empty.

IN THE EXAMPLE

Frame: A single pricing action on the core line only: raise list 6% effective October 1, with a defined exception band for contracted accounts.

Constraints: Top-20 customer contracts renew in Q4; competitor raised 4% in May and held share; gross margin is down 180 bps year over year.

Out of scope: Packaging changes, product redesign, and the entry-level line. Those are separate decisions.

STEP 2 OF 5

O Organize the Data You Have

What do you know? What are the unknowns? What are the assumptions?

Coach's note: Facts go in the first column. Everything you wish you knew goes in the second. Everything you are treating as true without proof goes in the third, and gets said out loud.

WHAT WE KNOW

Facts. Verifiable, sourced, real. If someone asks "how do we know?", there is an answer.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

The gaps, named honestly. These become the candidates for the one missing piece in step C.

WHAT WE'RE ASSUMING

Things treated as true without proof. Saying them out loud is the whole point.

How to do it

1. Ask each person to add items to all three lists. Quiet people often hold the best unknowns.
2. Challenge every "fact." If it cannot be sourced, move it to assumptions.
3. Keep the assumptions visible all the way to the brief, so everyone knows what would change the call.

WATCH FOR

- **No unknowns listed.** That is rarely true. It usually means they have not been said out loud yet.
- **More assumptions than facts.** You can still decide, but the brief must show it.

IN THE EXAMPLE

KNOW

- Input costs are up 9% over 24 months and we have absorbed all of it
- Competitor's 4% increase in May held; no share loss observed
- Our last increase (3% in 2023) produced churn under 1%

DON'T KNOW

- How our top three accounts will respond before renewal
- Price elasticity in the mid-tier segment

ASSUMING

- Volume dips less than 2% for two quarters, then recovers
- Sales holds discounts inside the current exception bands

C

STEP 3 OF 5

Clarify What You Know

Learn to decide using the 40-70 rule, because perfect data isn't coming.

Coach's note: Estimate how much of the information you wish you had is actually in hand. The zone between 40 and 70 percent is where good decisions get made.

Place the decision on the line



0-40 · Gambling | **40-70 · THE DECISION ZONE** | 70-100 · You're late

BELOW 40%

You are gambling, not deciding. Go get the missing piece.

40 TO 70%

You are in the decision zone. More information now costs more than it is worth. Decide.

ABOVE 70%

The moment has usually passed. If you are still gathering data, ask what you are avoiding.

How to do it

1. Ask each person for a number from 0 to 100. Discuss the spread before you settle on one.
2. Name **the one missing piece** that would most change the call.
3. Ask: can we get it before the deadline? If yes, get it. If no, decide without it.

WATCH FOR

A **one-way door on thin information** (below 40) deserves a deliberate slowdown. A **two-way door** in the zone deserves speed: decide, learn, adjust.

IN THE EXAMPLE

Information in hand: 65%, inside the decision zone.

The one missing piece: A pre-read from the top three accounts. The CRO can get soundings in two weeks, before the August 15 deadline.

STEP 4 OF 5

U Understand Your Options

Focus your resources on the high-impact actions aligned with business objectives.

Coach's note: Force at least two real options, and let "do nothing" compete honestly. Rate each on impact, effort, and alignment; the table does the arguing for you.

The scoring guide

RATING	IMPACT	EFFORT / COST	ALIGNED WITH OBJECTIVES
3 points	High	Low	Yes
2 points	Medium	Medium	
1 point	Low	High	Partly
0 points			No

Add the three ratings for a score out of 9. `8-9` look here first `5-7` worth discussing `0-4` weak. The score is a **conversation starter, not a verdict**: high impact, low effort, and aligned is where to look first.

IN THE EXAMPLE

OPTION	IMPACT	EFFORT	ALIGNED	SCORE
Raise 6% at once on October 1, with an exception band for contracted accounts	High	Low	Yes	**9/9**
Stage it: 3% in October, 3% in April	Medium	Medium	Yes	**7/9**
Hold price; cut cost to defend margin instead	Medium	High	Partly	**4/9**

How to do it

1. Generate at least two real options. Include "do nothing" honestly.
2. Rate each one as a group. Argue about the ratings, not the people.
3. Look hardest at the top scorers, then test them against the constraints from step F.

WATCH FOR

One option is not a decision; it is a conclusion. Force a real alternative, even if it is "do nothing."

S

STEP 5 OF 5

Select a Go-Forward Plan

Execute the decision with clear ownership, timelines, and resource allocation.

Coach's note: Pick the option, write the why in one sentence the whole company could repeat, and set the review date before you act.

The five parts of a go-forward plan

PART	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE
The go-forward option	One option from step U, named exactly as it was rated.
The why	One sentence the whole company could repeat. Say it out loud. People can accept a decision they disagree with, not one they cannot understand.
Timeline and first milestone	Real dates, starting with the first visible step.
Resources and support	The people, budget, and air cover the owner needs to execute.
Review point	A date, set before you act, when you will examine the evidence and adjust.

> ***"Set the review point before you act. Decide today, and name the date you will examine the evidence."***

IN THE EXAMPLE

Go-forward: Raise 6% at once on October 1, with an exception band for contracted accounts.

"We have absorbed nine points of cost for two years; one clear move with a disciplined exception band protects both margin and credibility, and the competitor just proved the market will hold."

Timeline: Sales talk track by Aug 22; customer letters Sep 2; effective Oct 1. **Resources:** Pricing letter, CRO-led account soundings, exception approvals red-lined above 3% discount. **Review:** November 15.

WATCH FOR

- **A missing why.** The team will fill the silence with its own story.
- **No review date.** Without one, a reversible decision quietly becomes permanent.
- **An owner who is a committee.** Put one name on it.

THE ARTIFACT

The Decision Brief

One page. The decision, the reasoning, the owner, and the review date. This is what travels.

Every FOCUS session ends with a brief. It carries one section per step, so anyone who reads it can follow the reasoning, not just the conclusion. Here is the worked example as a finished brief.

FOCUS DECISION BRIEF · CONFIDENTIAL

Do we raise prices 6% on the core product line, effective October 1?

Owner: **CEO, with the CRO** · Needed by: **August 15** · Two-way door, reversible; deserves speed · Stakes: High

F · THE FRAME

A single pricing action on the core line only: raise list 6% effective October 1, with a defined exception band for contracted accounts.

Constraints: Top-20 contracts renew in Q4; competitor raised 4% in May and held share; gross margin down 180 bps. **Out of scope:** Packaging, product redesign, the entry-level line.

O · THE DATA

KNOW · 3 Input costs up 9% over 24 months, all absorbed · Competitor's 4% increase held · Last increase (3%) churn under 1%

DON'T KNOW · 2 Top three accounts' response before renewal · Mid-tier price elasticity

ASSUMING · 2 Volume dips under 2% for two quarters, then recovers · Sales holds discounts inside exception bands

C · INFORMATION IN HAND: 65%

In the decision zone. **The one missing piece:** a pre-read from the top three accounts; the CRO can get soundings in two weeks.

U · THE OPTIONS

OPTION	IMPACT	EFFORT	ALIGNED	SCORE
Raise 6% at once, with exception band ★	High	Low	Yes	**9/9**
Stage it: 3% in October, 3% in April	Medium	Medium	Yes	7/9
Hold price; cut cost to defend margin	Medium	High	Partly	4/9

S · THE GO-FORWARD PLAN

Raise 6% at once on October 1, with an exception band for contracted accounts.

"One clear move with a disciplined exception band protects both margin and credibility, and the competitor just proved the market will hold."

Timeline: Talk track Aug 22; letters Sep 2; effective Oct 1 · **Review point:** November 15

BEFORE YOU ACT

The Coach's Read: A Self-Check

Read your brief against these signals before it goes out. Each one points to a specific fix.

SIGNAL	IF YOU SEE THIS	WHAT IT MEANS, AND WHAT TO DO
STOP	Information in hand is below 40%	Deciding here is a gamble. Name the missing piece and go get it before the deadline.
STOP	A one-way door on information below 40%	This deserves a deliberate slowdown. Rigor is not the same as delay, but here it is warranted.
STOP	An option is selected, but the why is missing	People can accept a decision they disagree with, not one they cannot understand. Write the sentence.
STOP	An option is selected, but no review date is set	Set the review point before you act. Decide today, and name the date you will examine the evidence.
CHECK	Only one option was named	One option is not a decision; it is a conclusion. Force a real alternative, even if it is "do nothing."
CHECK	No unknowns are listed	That is rarely true. It usually means they have not been said out loud yet.
CHECK	More assumptions than facts	Keep the assumptions visible in the brief so everyone knows what would change the call.
CHECK	Information in hand is above 70% and the decision is still open	The constraint probably isn't information. Ask what you are avoiding.
GO	Information in hand is between 40% and 70%	This is where elite leaders decide. Waiting longer buys comfort, not accuracy.
GO	It is a two-way door	This decision deserves speed. Decide, learn, adjust.
GO	Owner, rationale, and review date are all set	This decision is ready to travel.

Applied to the example: 65% information in hand (GO), a two-way door (GO), three named options, unknowns listed, and an owner, a why, and a November 15 review date all set (GO). The brief is ready to travel.

PUTTING IT TO WORK

How to Teach FOCUS to Your Team

A decision that lives in one head is a bottleneck. FOCUS works best when the whole team can run it.

FIRST, RUN THE SAMPLE · 10 MINUTES

In a leadership meeting, walk the five steps with the pricing decision in this guide so everyone sees the shape of the method before the stakes are real.

THEN RUN A LIVE ONE · 30 MINUTES

Take a real decision your team is currently circling and work it through FOCUS together. The brief becomes the record, and the rationale travels with the decision.

A suggested 30-minute agenda for a live decision

TIME	SEGMENT	WHAT THE FACILITATOR DOES
3 min	**Name the decision**	Agree on the one-sentence decision, the owner, the deadline, and the door type.
5 min	**F · Frame**	Capture constraints and the out-of-scope list. Park anything outside the fence.
7 min	**O · Organize**	Fill the three lists. Push every "fact" to prove it is not an assumption.
3 min	**C · Clarify**	Get a 0-100 number from each person, settle on one, and name the missing piece.
7 min	**U · Understand**	Name at least two options, including "do nothing," and rate them together.
5 min	**S · Select**	The owner chooses, says the why out loud, and sets the timeline and review date.

Make the decision travel

- **Share the brief** where the team can see it: email, Slack, or the board pack.
- **Keep one record per decision,** and name it by the choice, not the date.
- **Park a decision mid-flight** if you need the missing piece, and finish it with the team in the room.
- **Hold the review** on the date you set. Compare what happened with what the assumptions predicted.

> ***"Set the review point before you act. Decide today, and name the date you will examine the evidence."***

FOCUS WORKSHEET

One Decision, One Page

Date: _____

THE DECISION, IN ONE SENTENCE

OWNER (ONE NAME)

NEEDED BY

STAKES · DOOR

High · Med · Two-way · One-way

F FRAME · WHAT WE ARE DECIDING

CONSTRAINTS

OUT OF SCOPE

O ORGANIZE THE DATA

WE KNOW	WE DON'T KNOW	WE'RE ASSUMING

C CLARIFY · INFORMATION IN HAND (MARK IT)

0-40 · Gambling | **40-70 · Decide** | 70-100 · Late

THE ONE MISSING PIECE

U UNDERSTAND YOUR OPTIONS · SCORE = IMPACT + EFFORT + ALIGNED (OUT OF 9)

OPTION (INCLUDE "DO NOTHING")	IMPACT H3 M2 L1	EFFORT L3 M2 H1	ALIGNED Y3 P1 N0	SCORE

S SELECT A GO-FORWARD PLAN

THE OPTION

THE WHY, IN ONE SENTENCE

TIMELINE

RESOURCES

REVIEW DATE