Pracademic Project Management: "Yes, But or Only If" Conditional Decision Making[1, 2]

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Abstract

Project Management and Project success is based on finding the correct decision in many complex and evolving situations. The traditional methods for making decisions, based on a "Yes or No" action, does not fit many of the situations we experience in the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) working project environments.

The "If-Then" and "Switch" terminology used in logic diagraming & programming is problematic and there now exists the need to add conditional decision making terminology and models that describe "But if", "But only", "No and", No but if" and "Maybe if" conditions to clarity current project scenarios.

Keywords: Project Management Decision Making, Conditional Decision Making, Conditional Decision Making Plus, Decision-making, Strategic Alignment, Project Management, Leadership, Conditional Frameworks, Bounded Rationality, Uninhibited Decision Making.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an exploration of the conditional decision making process for project managers and project team members to excel in their situational decision making. The problem can be a difficulty in choosing a direction due to challenges like unclear goals, too much or conflicting information, or emotional biases preventing the optimal decision from being made. A Pracademic approach to decision making is an integration of practical experience based

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on professional lessons learned, experimentation (experiments) and the academic perspective of theory (conceptual) based logic. This blend of an integrated and interconnected thinking allows a Project manager to balance the traditional mindsets and the conditional approach. Project Management Institute (PMI) acknowledges the recent introduction of a "Hybrid" approach to decision making based on an adaptive & predictive mindset (PMI, 2025).

Additionally, there may be decision paralysis caused by elements such as complexity, lack of positive motivation, and cognitive biases. While a single, difficult decision might be impossible to identify due to complexity and ambiguity in the information we have, there are opportunities for clarification if we explore conditional decision making.

Decision-making in project management requires structured tactical reasoning that allows project managers to determine the feasibility, alignment, and strategic integration of proposed actions. The use of conditional decision-making models can help project practitioners evaluate proposed project components or changes with pracademic clarity. This paper introduces a conditional decision-making framework consisting of five proposed decision outcomes.

These decision making conditions are: ***No, But If***; ***Maybe, If***; ***Yes, But Only***; ***Yes, And***; & ***No, And.*** The proposed framework provides operational definitions, application guidance, and examples to support project managers in leading strategic decisions. Two additional problems for project managers when making decisions are a fear of failure and a lack of information. Both of these can be solved thru traditional decision making processes and personal skills training. Our focus for this publication is to describe new areas of non-traditional decision making, i.e. conditional decision making.

Traditional Decision Making

Traditional decision-making is defined as thinking methods that rely on analysis, logic, experience, and existing procedures to make project choices. It includes relying on basic intuition, formal habits, standard operating procedures, lessons learned and best practices for routine decisions. Additionally, it represents an established hierarchy where only top management can make final decisions. An alternative "traditional" view emphasizes a consensus-based process that seeks to balance and incorporates everyone's voice through respectful discussion and compromise.

The top three problems with Traditional Decision-Making in Project Management are highlighted and explained below:

Limited Stakeholder Engagement & Perspective Integration

Traditional decision-making processes can rely on hierarchical authority, where critical decisions are made by senior leaders or technical experts rather than collaboratively. This reduces the

inclusion of experienced project members knowledge, operational context, and diverse viewpoints. Research shows that decisions made without adequate stakeholder input result in lower commitment, increased resistance, and reduced implementation success (Müller, Turner, & Dulewicz, 2018). This limitation can also lead to misalignment between project planning and practical execution requirements.

Overreliance on Linear & Rational Models in Dynamic Environments

Typical decision frameworks assume that there are stable conditions and rational evaluation of alternatives based on risks and opportunities. However, project environments are frequently uncertain, complex, and time-constrained. Herbert Simon (1997) proposes that decision-makers operate under bounded rationality, meaning they cannot evaluate all of the variables nor access complete information. In project and program management, this leads to decisions that may appear logical on the surface but fail to adapt to evolving or dynamic changing conditions, reducing responsiveness and resilience (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992).

Escalation of Commitment to Failing or Misaligned Decisions

Traditional decision making project environments often encourage compliance to previously approved decisions due to sunken costs, organizational political pressure, or the fear of PM reputational loss. This common phenomenon, known as an "escalation of commitment", results in continued commitment to failing projects, even when evidence suggests that termination or a project redesign would yield better outcomes (Staw, 1981). The absence of structured reevaluation checkpoints further enables these failures to continue.

Examples of these problematic traditional decision making methods are prevalent in *Rational Decision-making*, *Bounded Rationality*, *Intuitive Decision-making* and *Creative Decision-making* techniques. These types of techniques are based on a linear start-to-finish serial process flow as seen in the figure below.

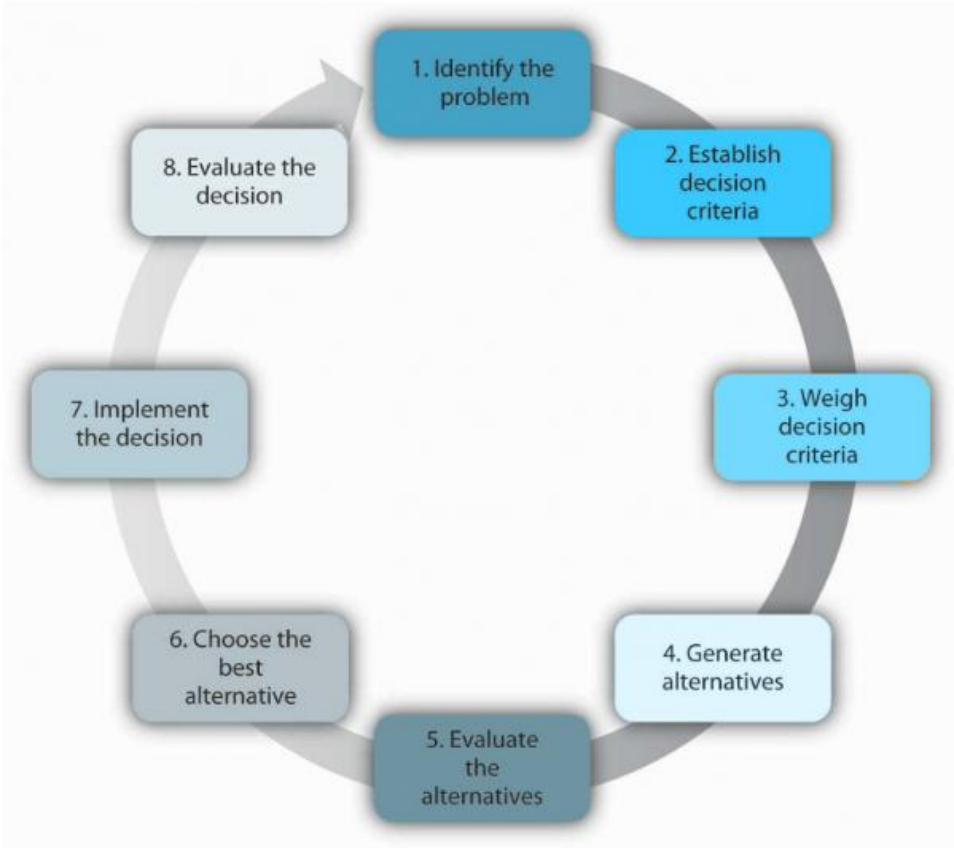

Figure 1.0. Rational Decision-making Model
(Image: Saylor Academy. Human Relations, CC BY-NC-SA 3.0. Color altered from original.)

As you can see from the image above, these decision making models typically leave no flexibility between the process steps of evaluating alternatives and then choosing the best alternative you ultimately constrained with an "either or" philosophy. By choosing only one of two or more options as you see in the "Implement the Decision" step, you create a binary choice.

This single decision process flow seems easier but limits opportunities and creativity. This can cause a potential logical fallacy (false dilemma) that ignores integrated and positive conditional solutions. A false dichotomy or an "either/or" fallacy, is an example of a logical fallacy that presents only two extreme options as if they are the only two possibilities, ignoring other valid alternatives or middle grounds. This oversimplifies a complex issue and forces an extreme choice.

Conditional Decision Making

True conditional decision making is a concept and approach illustrated across multiple industries and disciplines, including cognitive psychology, economics, and computer science. We don't have a "father" of decision making but Herbert Simon is seen as a primary originator of bounded rationality. Simon and Ward Edwards laid the groundwork for "if-then" choices. What I am proposing is a conceptual model that contains five unique conditional statements, each with its own perspective and decision impact. These can be seen in figure 2.0 below.

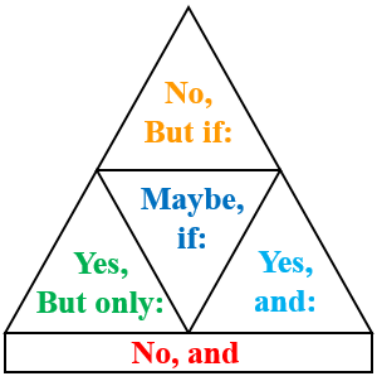

Figure 2.0. Conditional Decision Making Plus (CDM+) Model

The five proposed conditions outlined in the model are as follows:

- ***No, But if*** = No, the decision is unacceptable, but could be reconsidered if certain conditions are changed or added.
- ***Maybe, if*** = There is the possibility of "something" if certain conditions are created.
- ***Yes, but only*** = Yes, the decision is acceptable but only if a certain "condition" exists.
- ***Yes, and*** = Yes, the decision is acceptable and it requires the addition of "something".
- ***No, and*** = No, the decision is unacceptable even with the addition of "something". [a firm and final no].

Reviewing the *Conditional Decision Making Plus Model* helps to graphically illustrate the tactical trigger statements, but does not provide any sense of process flow. It is recommended by the author that you start at the top of the *CDM+* model and work your way clockwise around all 5 statements. You may find a new solution perspective not originally seen. The flexibility in the *CDM+* model allows you to incorporate new ideas and possibilities into your thinking methodology.

Benefits of Conditional Decision-Making

When we review the reasons why we want to embrace conditional decision making, we can clearly identify three major benefits to flexibility in decision making. The proposed reasons are:

Increased Clarity and Precision in Decision Communication

Conditional decision-making provides a clear language to describe the status, requirements, and constraints of a decision (e.g., Yes, but only… or No, but if…). This structured communication reduces the possible ambiguity, helps stakeholders clearly understand why decisions are made, and clarifies what conditions must be satisfied for approval or reconsideration. Improved clarity enhances shared understanding and decreases the possibility of misinterpretation during execution (Larson & Gray, 2021; PMI, 2021, 2025).

- *Key Outcome: Clearer decisions reduce rework, confusion, and misaligned expectations.*

Enhanced Stakeholder Alignment and Engagement

Using decision statements that specify conditions encourages discussion, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving. This approach recognizes stakeholder interests and integrates diverse viewpoints into final decisions. Research indicates that inclusive decision processes increase the organizational buy-in, reduce the instinctive resistance to change, and improve implementation effectiveness (Müller, Turner, & Dulewicz, 2018).

- *Key Outcome: Project stakeholders feel respected and invested in the outcomes, improving cooperation and commitment.*

Improved Adaptability in Hybrid or Uncertain Project Environments

Conditional decision frameworks can enable project managers to avoid binary (yes/no) choices that may prematurely close viable options. Instead, these frameworks allow decisions to evolve as information, constraints, or resources change. This supports adaptive project management, especially in project environments seen in complexity, evolving requirements, or technology challenges (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Kerzner, 2022).

- *Key Outcome: Decisions can become more flexible and responsive to evolving project conditions.*

These three benefits can also be translated into an increase in project performance for schedule compression and a reduction in cost overruns and expenses. According to a quick "Google" search, it is projected that over 90% of projects experience delays and cost overruns. It goes on to state that globally about 70% of all projects fail the original performance requirements with poor communication, poor planning, scope creep, unrealistic estimates and weak management, all rooted in bad decisions as the major culprits.

It seems like the larger the project, the more likely they were to have issues with both time, scope and budget allocations. To embrace the conditional decision making process does not require eliminating current traditional decision making techniques, it simply requires you to add another framework. This creates a "Hybrid" approach where there is a blending of an adaptive and predictive mindset.

Conditional Decision-Making Framework

To clearly understand the possibilities of a conditional decision-making framework, we need *Operational Definitions*, *Application Explanations* and practical project management *Examples* tailored for current VUCA project applicability as seen below.

No, But If

Operational Definition: The decision is currently not acceptable; however, reconsideration is possible if specific changes occur.

> **Application Explanations:**
> Useful when proposals lack feasibility, data support, resourcing, or alignment but could become viable under revised parameters.
>
> **Example:**
> "No, but if the vendor can reduce cost by 12% while maintaining service levels, the contract proposal may be reconsidered."

Maybe, If

Operational Definition: The decision is uncertain and contingent upon the creation or confirmation of required conditions.

Application Explanations:
Effective during exploratory planning, feasibility studies, or early-phase risk assessments.

Example:
"Maybe, if the engineering team validates that performance requirements are technologically and realistically achievable within three months."

Yes, But Only

Operational Definition: The decision is acceptable only under a limited, non-negotiable condition.

Application Explanations:
Appropriate when protecting critical project constraints, compliance requirements, or mandatory organizational policies.

Example:
"Yes, but only if our legal counsel confirms regulatory process compliance before execution."

Yes, And

Operational Definition: The decision is acceptable and requires the addition of an enabling action to optimize success.

Application Explanations:
Useful when approval is given but requires supplemental support such as training, funding, or stakeholder alignment.

Example:
"Yes, and we will develop a change-management communication plan to support the adoption."

No, And

Operational Definition: The decision is unacceptable under any circumstances, including proposed additions or modifications.

Application Explanations:
Represents a firm and final rejection based on negative risks, ethic issues, legal challenges, or strategic incompatibility.

Example:
"No, and we will discontinue evaluation of this proposal due to unacceptable safety risks."

Each of the proposed conditional decision expressions described above allows for a unique and flexible perspective for a possible project decision. The Yes/No traditional decision making impact can be a "My way or the highway" interpretation by team members and internal/external stakeholders. Traditional decision making shuts down any opportunities for exploring alternative possibilities.

Additionally, decision making accountability is seen from a "Not invented here" perspective where people may continue to do the wrong thing longer because the traditional decision was dictated by a higher authority. By embracing the "Conditional Decision Making" philosophy, Project Managers can ultimately increase the likelihood that their decisions are tactically adaptable to changing project environments.

Project Triple Constraints

Project managers typically make decisions from *Planning* (scope, budget, resources, risk) to *Execution* (task assignment, conflict resolution, changes) and *Monitoring/Closing* (performance correction, lessons learned). The Iron Triangle Triple Constraints model seen in figure 3.0 is a hybrid flexible interconnected understanding of your project constraints where any changes to one element can ripple thru to other elements. By utilizing Conditional Decision making, the three pillars illustrated in the image can be optimized to help project managers make decisions based on informed trade-offs. Current Project Managers are required to focus on immediate decisions controlling the resources, schedule, budget, scope and quality project elements in a firefighting mode. This firefighting perspective forces a serial series of actions many times ignoring the future impacts or consequences.

Figure 3.0. Iron Triangle-Triple Constraint
(Originally posted by Caret Growth Strategies)

Any project decision should take into account the interconnected impacts of each of the elements of the Triple Constraints. Similar to a rubber band stretching one area may cause other areas to stretch also. If we reduce the time element by crashing a project, it is typically understood that you may need to make concessions on quality and that the budget will increase. Trying to reduce a projects cost may require reducing the quality elements and take longer to complete certain interconnected areas.

Uninhibited Decision Making

Finally, there is another decision making technique that is prevalent but rarely discussed. Some Project Managers use an Uninhibited Decision Making process when a decision is required based on intuition, gut feel and/or instinct. The three steps to that process are:

- ***See it*** – A visual trigger allows you to "See" what is interpreted as the correct decision.
- ***Feel it*** – Intuition and Gut Feel about the correct decision to make.

- ***Know it*** – Instinct based on the reflex of knowing what to do.

After the completion of this cognitive flow, the Project Manager makes a decision for the team and project. Some people call this "Flying by the seat of your pants". It is never seen as an optimal decision making technique but in certain situations, you need to make a decision based on no historical perspective or information. You may be left with only 2 obvious choices and a required decision to move forward. This is the only situation where an Uninhibited Decision Making process should be used as seen in figure 4.0 below.

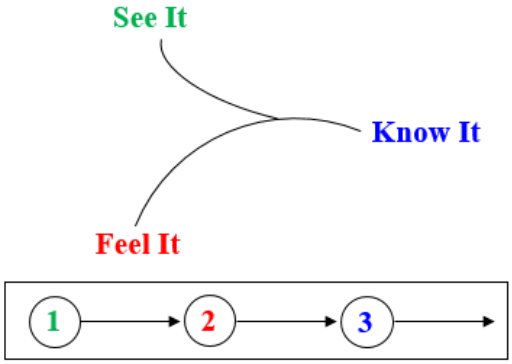

Figure 4.0. Uninhibited Decision Making

The use of the *Uninhibited Decision Making* technique should be a last resort method. When using this process, sometimes a decision maker only needs one or two steps before they can make a decision. It removes the ability for a team to drive to logical consensus and brings decision making into a realm of removing thinking from the process. Examples of this can be seen in choosing what to eat, reacting to a swerving car, or instinctively helping someone in an emergency, using mental shortcuts (heuristics) for speed rather than deep analysis, and can range from trivial daily choices to life-saving actions. In Project Management, the use of conditional thinking methods, when added to traditional decision making methods, is much more productive to project performance.

Conclusion

Traditional project management decision-making approaches, while historically foundational, reveal significant limitations in modern project and organizational environments. The increased complexity and dynamic nature of modern work requires flexible hybrid project decision frameworks. These frameworks need to be clear, conditional, adaptive, and collaborative. Structured conditional decision language, such as the *No, But If / Maybe, If / Yes, But Only / Yes, And / No, And* frameworks, can help address these shortcomings.

These improvements will be seen in improving project clarity, communication, performance, adaptability, and stakeholder alignment. The conditional decision-making framework also provides project managers with structured, precise, and a repeatable language for evaluating alternatives and communicating decisions. PMI describes the difference between structured and self-governance, acknowledging that key challenges in self-governance models is the potential for "Fragmented Decision Making"….. hence the need for Holistic Project Planning to embraces a decision making techniques integrated into ***a Conditional Decision Making flow*** or ***model***.

By integrating this framework into tactical systems, organizations may improve alignment, stakeholder clarity, and strategic coherence. A Pracademic Project Manager approach embraces the conditional decision making approach, which can provide decision frameworks that focus on tactical reasoning utilizing the proposed five unique decision outcomes.

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Dr. Dale S. Deardorff worked for Boeing Integrated Defense Systems and Space Propulsion Development divisions as a Project and Program manager for over 20 years. He worked for the Lockheed Burbank "Skunk" works and Aircraft division for almost 10 years and a high technology Valencia California start up for a couple of years. This 30 plus years' experience is a "Pracademic" blending of commercial, military, government, NASA and high technology organizations. Dale has taught Project Management "online" for multiple universities as an adjunct instructor since 2003 and continues to contribute to project management methodologies and philosophies as a current thought leader.

He created the Rocky Peak Leadership Center in 2010 and has helped modern organizations as an enterprise and executive consultant in the areas of thinking methodologies, and Innovation and leadership training and facilitation. Dr. Deardorff volunteers with youth leadership programs and supports local youth training in the areas of personal mastery and effective collaboration techniques.

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