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Framing the Strategic Question (So the Answer Actually Matters)

Great teams don't fail for lack of brainpower—they fail because they brilliantly answer the **wrong** question. Framing is the first link in **Decision Quality (DQ)**: it defines *what decision we are actually making*, the success criteria, the scope and boundaries, the time horizon, the perspective, and the decision owner. When the frame is off, everything that follows—alternatives, information, trade-offs, reasoning, and commitment—gets distorted.[5]

The theory in brief (why framing determines strategy)

Strategic choices don't unfold in a vacuum; they are constructed through the **frame** leaders place around them. Decades of research show that description alone can tilt judgment: present the same situation as a potential gain or a looming loss and risk preferences often flip—a core **framing effect** that reliably shifts how executives search for information, weigh evidence, and define "good" outcomes.[1] In other words, *the way we pose the question* preselects the answer set. That is why framing is the first link in Decision Quality: it is the moment we decide what decision we are actually making and what will count as success.[5]

Because executives operate under pressure, Herbert Simon's insight matters: people **satisfice**—they do not optimize—when time and attention are scarce.[11] What separates strong decision practice from improvisation is not more heroics but **procedural rationality**: a clear, information-rich process that channels limited attention to the right issues, at the right time, in the right order. When teams make that process visible—agreeing the question, success measures, and boundaries before analysis—strategic decisions tend to be more effective.[8] Framing is the front door to that discipline.

Framing is also about **vantage point**. Senior teams don't merely discover problems; they *construct* them. Where each leader sits—function, level, prior experience—shapes which signals feel salient and how threats and opportunities are categorized.[3] Making the **perspective** explicit (enterprise vs. BU lens, investor vs. customer priorities, whose criteria will actually govern trade-offs) counteracts blind spots and helps reconcile legitimate differences in how the issue is seen.[3]

Equally important are **scope and boundaries**—the operational guardrails of a frame. A sound frame names what is **in**, what is **out**, and what is **undecided**; it makes the **time horizon** explicit (over what period will success be judged?); and it records any non-negotiable constraints.[5,13] With those boundaries set, teams can search for alternatives and evidence efficiently rather than drifting into solutioneering. A small but powerful complement is to include the **default/status-quo** as an explicit option, which anchors valuation and exposes whether a proposed change truly beats "stay the course."[5,13]

Finally, framing is social. In ambiguous environments, organizations experience **framing contests**: competing constructions (e.g., "threat" vs. "opportunity") vie for legitimacy, and whichever frame prevails often steers strategy.[4] Good leadership surfaces those alternatives, tests them against facts and values, and then synthesizes—rather than letting the loudest or earliest frame win. This discipline also mitigates the common **plunging-in** failure mode, where teams lock onto the first problem statement and race to solutions; investing early in framing is one of the few interventions linked to higher decision success.[6,2]

Put simply: framing translates bounded rationality into procedural rationality; it aligns vantage points, fixes boundaries and horizon, makes the baseline explicit, and manages the social dynamics of competing narratives. Do that well, and the rest of the Decision Quality chain—alternatives, information, values & trade-offs, reasoning, commitment—has a solid foundation to stand on.[5]

From theory to practice: the E5 framing moves

The five moves are adapted from Binder & Watkins' HBR "E5" approach, tuned for executive decision forums.[2] We use a simple one-pager to make these moves visible and auditable in the room; see Exhibit 1: Strategic Framing Canvas.

Expand

Why it works.	What good looks like.
Teams under pressure often **plunge in**, locking onto the first problem statement and narrowing too soon—an error strongly associated with lower decision success.[6] Systematically **widening the lens** before analysis counters premature closure and confirmation bias, reliably producing materially different *problem constructions* that expand the option set.[2,3,7]	A one-page **Frame Brief** that states the "Should we…?" question, **Purpose**, and crisp **Scope** (in / out / undecided) with the **time horizon**, **default option**, **success measures**, and the named **D**. Evidence that you truly widened the lens: two assumptions challenged and at least one dropped.

Examine

Why it works.	What good looks like.
Framing improves when you **move from events to causes**. Simple tools (iceberg model, 5 Whys, causal maps) shift attention from symptoms to structures and beliefs that generate them, so frames target leverage—not noise.[7] This honors bounded rationality by focusing scarce attention on the few drivers that matter[11] and builds a **shared fact base** correlated with better strategic decision effectiveness.[8]	A concise **Problem Anatomy** that links evidence to 3–5 plausible drivers and sharpens the question. A visible **disconfirming fact** for the leading hypothesis, and a note on any **scope implications** the causes reveal.

Empathize

Why it works.	What good looks like.
Leaders default to the **inside view**; framing improves when you surface how customers, frontline teams, partners—and regulators—*experience* the problem. Empathy injects the **outside view**, revealing needs and frictions that data alone may miss and often reframes the question (e.g., from "fix NPS" to "restore trust").[3,9] Bringing stakeholder perspectives forward also increases adoption of the eventual answer.[3]	A simple **stakeholder view** (two short empathy snapshots with verbatim quotes) and a question rewritten in human terms. Clarity on **whose criteria govern trade-offs** and one explicit **tension you will honor** (e.g., speed *and* safety).

Elevate

Why it works.	What good looks like.
Local frames can optimize the part and harm the whole. **Elevating** connects the issue to strategy, values, and system linkages, using multiple organizational lenses (structural, human, political, symbolic) to reveal constraints and levers single-function views miss.[10] In uncertainty, groups run **framing contests**—which frame becomes legitimate shapes strategy—so leaders must surface and synthesize explicitly.[4]	A frame that **fits the strategy**: explicit links to pillars and external trends, plus **critical interfaces/non-negotiables** called out. A brief record of **competing frames considered—and why this one wins**, and an **altitude check** (board-level relevance vs. actionable scope).

Envision

Why it works.	What good looks like.
Backcasting from a vivid, measurable future sharpens the frame and tests whether it is aimed at real value; it also translates framing into **actionable guardrails** for criteria and risk posture.[7] This is the bridge to the rest of the **Decision Quality** chain—values & trade-offs, reasoning, and commitment—so that answering the question predictably delivers the outcomes you care about.[5]	A one-sentence **vision of success** with 3–5 time-bound key results and **threshold rules** that bound acceptable solutions. The **default option** listed as the evaluation baseline, and a **coherence test**: would answering this question perfectly predictably deliver those results?

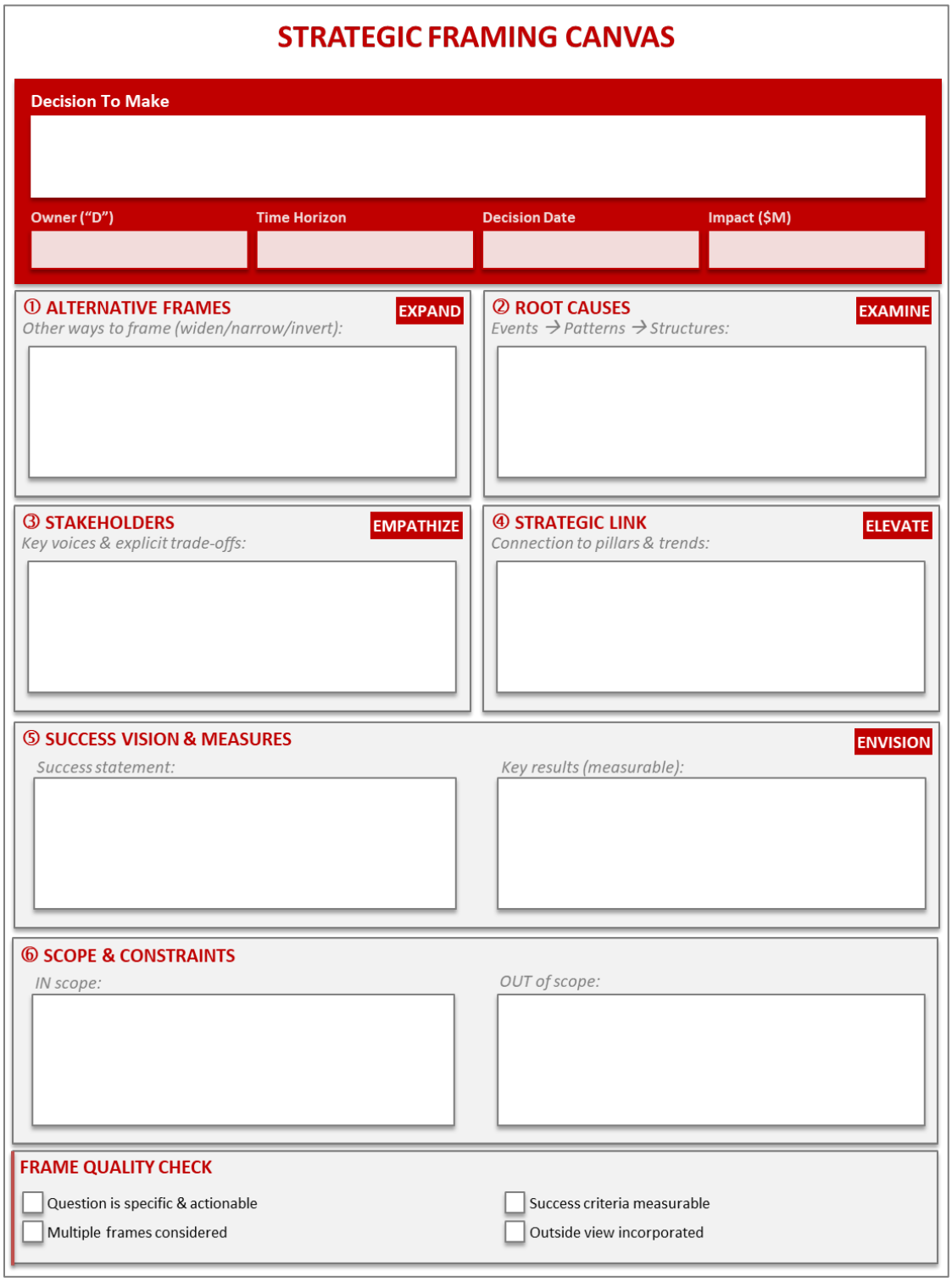
Practical limitations (and how to work with them)

Like all powerful frameworks, E5 has constraints. Understanding these limits helps you apply it wisely:

- **Boundary risk—too narrow vs. too broad.** Scope must be explicit **and right-sized**. Too narrow and you optimize the part; too broad and timelines slip. Set the first cut, then **time-box** a re-frame checkpoint tied to learning milestones (e.g., after a pilot or market signal).[2,5,13]
- **Ambiguity won't vanish.** Some contexts are so uncertain you must **frame and act simultaneously**. Treat the frame as a **hypothesis**, time-box it, and set **re-frame checkpoints** as you learn.[4,8]
- **Over-framing = analysis paralysis.** Framing is a means, not an end. Calibrate rigor to **reversibility** (two-way vs. one-way doors). Time-box: ~10–15% of the decision cycle for framing, then move. Use **DQ gates** to avoid endless loops.[5,6]
- **Cognitive drift and bias creep.** Even with E5, confirmation and status-quo bias pull you back. Add a five-minute **bias/consistency check** before commitment: What would change our mind? Are we using the same yardsticks as last time? What's the **outside view**?[9]
- **Politics are real.** Frames shift power and blame. Surface the **stakes** explicitly; invite competing frames; use neutral facilitation; anchor on evidence and enterprise strategy. When you must choose, **explain the rationale** and record the chosen frame in the brief.[4]

Exhibit — Strategic Framing Canvas (1-page)

Use at the start of any major decision; update at each Decision Quality gate to record reframes and keep boundaries, horizon, and thresholds explicit.



The AI Revolution in Framing: Scaffold, Not Substitute

Generative AI is a powerful **scaffold** for the first link of Decision Quality. It can (a) **widen the lens** by drafting 10–20 alternate ways to pose the question; (b) surface **outside-view** material—reference classes, adjacent cases, comparable choices by peers; (c) structure messy inputs into **issue trees**, **cause maps**, and "events → patterns → structures → assumptions" summaries; (d) cluster **voice-of-customer** comments and frontline notes into themes you can test; (e) propose **stakeholder personas** and prompts for empathy interviews; and (f) generate **scenario sketches** you can backcast from. Used this way, AI accelerates **Expand**, **Examine**, **Empathize**, **Elevate**, and **Envision** without consuming scarce executive attention.[2]

What AI should not replace. Framing is ultimately a **leadership judgment** about goals, trade-offs, risk appetite, scope, and ownership. AI cannot (and should not) set **values & thresholds**, decide the **owner ("the D")**, resolve **political stakes**, or confer **legitimacy** on one frame over another. Treat AI outputs as **inputs** to your framing—not as the frame.

How to use Gen-AI across the five moves.

- **Expand.** Prompt for diverse problem constructions: "Give 12 materially different ways to frame 'Should we…?'—widened, narrowed, inverted, stakeholder-centric—and surface assumptions in each." Harvest the two or three that genuinely change your thinking.[2]
- **Examine.** Paste a brief evidence pack (trends, win/loss, VOC snippets). Ask: "Map events → patterns → structures → assumptions. Propose three causal hypotheses and the **disconfirming facts** that would overturn each." Then go collect those facts.
- **Empathize.** Feed anonymized customer quotes or frontline notes. Ask AI to cluster themes, propose **empathy-map** drafts (Say/Think/Feel/Do), and write five interview questions that could falsify your current frame.
- **Elevate.** Ask: "Relate this problem to our strategic pillars (X/Y/Z) and external trends A/B/C. What enterprise-level risks are hidden by a local frame?" Use the synthesis to check altitude and system linkages.
- **Envision.** Prompt: "Draft a one-sentence **vision of success** and 3–5 **key results** (12–18 months). Suggest three **threshold rules** (e.g., margin, CX, risk) and a backcasted milestone path." Edit to match your values and constraints, then finalize the question.

Governance & guardrails. Keep framing **human-owned**: the chair or "D" signs the final **Frame Brief**; log AI's role (prompts used, sources referenced, confidence notes). Use **approved workspaces**, strip personal data, and avoid proprietary details in prompts unless your environment is secured and compliant. Add a micro **bias/consistency check**: "Where did AI make us *narrower* or *more certain* than the evidence warrants?"

Bottom line.

Gen-AI can dramatically increase **throughput and breadth** in the framing phase—more alternatives, cleaner causal hypotheses, faster synthesis—while you reserve human judgment for **objectives, stakes, and commitment**. That's "scaffold, not substitute" in action—and it makes the first link of Decision Quality both stronger and faster.[2,5]

Framing is not a prelude to "the real work." It **is** the real work that makes the rest work. Make it the first slide in every strategic deck and the first gate in every decision process. When you **frame first**, you gather better information, generate better alternatives, make cleaner trade-offs, reason more coherently, and commit with confidence—the very essence of **Decision Quality**.[5]

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