Framing the Strategic Question

- Framing is the first link in Decision Quality and the highest-leverage one: every later step inherits whatever the frame gets right or wrong.
- Most strategy work fails before the analysis starts, when a team accepts the question it was handed and answers the wrong problem.
- A good frame settles what decision is being made, what counts as success, what is in and out of scope, the horizon, the point of view, and who owns the call.
- This paper runs Binder and Watkins' E5 moves on a single page during the decision meeting, treating each as a gate with a test it must pass.
- Match the rigor to the stakes: a quick pass for a reversible choice, the full sequence for a one-way door.
- AI helps with the legwork, but cannot set objectives, weigh stakes, or decide who owns the call. Treat its output as input to the frame, not as the frame itself.

A lot of strategy work I see goes wrong before the analysis starts. A team takes the question it was handed without critiquing it, works it hard, and produces a careful **answer to the wrong problem**.[1] Framing is the first link in Decision Quality.[2] It is also, in my experience, the easiest to skip: under time pressure, the team treats the question as given and starts generating answers. A good frame establishes what decision we are making, what counts as success, what is in scope and what is out, over what horizon, from whose point of view, and who owns the call. Get the frame wrong and everything downstream inherits the error: the alternatives, the information, the trade-offs, the reasoning, and the commitment.

The theory in brief (why framing comes first)

Strategic choices don't unfold in a vacuum; leaders construct them through the frame they place around them. How you describe a choice changes how people judge it. Present the same situation as a likely gain, and people play it safe; present it as a looming loss, and they take risks they would otherwise refuse.[3] The effect is well established, and it does not stop at risk: **the way a question is posed** narrows the set of answers a team will consider before anyone has run a number. This is why framing is the first link in Decision Quality. It is the point at which we decide what decision we are making and what will count as success.[2]

Executives decide under time pressure, and Herbert Simon showed what that does to judgment: people **satisfice** rather than optimize, settling for an answer that is good enough because they cannot weigh every option.[4] Simon's answer was **procedural rationality**. When the best choice cannot be reasoned out directly, a systematic process that focuses limited attention on the right issues, at the right time, in the right order gets you close. Agreeing the question, the success measures, and the boundaries before the analysis begins is the start of that process, and teams that work this way reach more effective decisions.[5] Framing is the front door to the discipline.

Framing also depends on the **point of view**. A problem looks different from the finance chair than it does from the head of sales, because where a leader sits shapes which signals matter and whether a situation reads as a threat or an opportunity.[6] Making the point of view 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.

A frame also sets **boundaries**. It names what is in, what is out, and what is still undecided; it establishes the horizon over which success will be judged; and it records any constraint that is not up for negotiation.[2,7] Boundaries let a team search for alternatives and evidence without drifting into a hunt for solutions to a problem no one has defined. An essential complement to the boundary conditions is to include the **status quo** as an explicit option. It gives every other option something to be measured against and forces the question of whether a proposed solution actually beats staying the course.[7]

Framing is also **political**. When a situation is ambiguous, rival framings compete within the organization: one team sees it as a threat and another as an opportunity, and the version that wins the argument tends to set the strategy.[8] The job of leadership is to surface those competing frames, test each against the evidence and against what the organization actually values, and choose deliberately rather than defaulting to the loudest voice or the first one heard. This discipline also guards against plunging in, the common pattern in which a team fixes on its first statement of the problem and races to solutions. Investing in the frame early is one of the few process changes consistently linked to better decisions.[9,10]

Those are the reasons framing carries so much weight. The harder question is how to do it inside a real decision meeting, where time is short, and the first frame is already on the table. The rest of this paper sets out the moves I use for that, so you can apply them in the room.

From theory to practice (the E5 framing moves)

The five moves are Binder and Watkins' **E5** approach to problem-framing: expand, examine, empathize, elevate, and envision, each with its own tool.[10] We use a simple one-pager to make these moves visible and auditable in the room (see Exhibit 1: **Strategic Framing Canvas**) and treat each move as a gate with a test it has to pass before we move on.

Expand

Why it works.	What good looks like.
Under pressure, teams lock onto the first statement of the problem and narrow too soon, the pattern running through decisions that later fail.[9] Settling for the first workable frame is satisficing under scarce attention, and the risk is frame blindness: answering a well-posed version of the wrong problem without noticing the frame was a choice.[1,4] **Frame-storming** the problem several ways before settling on one is the counter, and the discipline is to confirm you are solving the right problem before you solve it.[10,11]	Three or four genuinely different statements of the problem written down, not one. At least two assumptions behind the original question named, and at least one dropped or changed. A draft "Should we...?" question sharper than the one you walked in with.

Examine

Why it works.	What good looks like.
A frame aimed at a symptom fixes a symptom. The **iceberg model** works down from the events on the surface to the behavior patterns beneath them, then to the structures driving the behavior, and finally to the mental models the organization has stopped questioning.[10,12] Done honestly, it keeps attention on the few drivers that matter rather than the many that don't and builds a shared fact base correlated with better strategic decision effectiveness.[4,5]	3–5 plausible causes, each tied to a piece of evidence rather than asserted. One disconfirming fact that challenges your leading explanation. A note on any scope implications the causes reveal.

Empathize

Why it works.	What good looks like.
Leaders start from the inside view, the picture they already hold.[13] Where someone sits decides what they see: managers at different levels read the same strengths, weaknesses, and uncertainties differently, so the leader's read is one account among several rather than the truth of the matter.[6] Mapping what customers, retailers, and investors **say, think, feel, and do**, from interviews rather than guesswork, often changes the question itself, turning "our price is too high" into "the price no longer matches the quality."[10]	The viewpoint of two or three stakeholders described in their own words, with a real quote each, not a persona invented at the table. The frame is rewritten the way they would put it. A clear answer to whose criteria settle the trade-offs, and one explicit tension you will honor (e.g., speed and safety).

Elevate

Why it works.	What good looks like.
A frame that makes sense for one function can still be wrong for the business. Reading the same issue through a **structural, human resource, political, and symbolic** lens surfaces constraints and options a single-function view misses.[14] It also brings the rival frames into the open, and since the framing that wins legitimacy tends to set the strategy, the choice of which should govern is worth making deliberately and recording.[8]	The frame is tied to one or two strategic pillars and the external trends that bear on it. The interfaces and non-negotiables with other parts of the business named, not assumed. A short record of the competing frames you considered, why you chose this one, and a check that the frame is high enough to matter to the board and low enough to act on.

Envision

Why it works.	What good looks like.
Describing the outcome you want in measurable terms and **working back from it** tests whether the frame is aimed at anything worth having.[10] It also translates the frame into guardrails: the criteria a good solution must meet and the risks it must avoid.[15] This is the bridge to the rest of the Decision Quality chain: the values and trade-offs, the reasoning, and the commitment, so that answering the question predictably delivers the outcomes you care about.[2]	A one-sentence description of success with 3–5 time-bound key results under it. Threshold rules that put options in or out, such as a floor on margin or a ceiling on risk. The status quo listed as the baseline every option is measured against, and one test before you lock the question: if you answered it perfectly, would you get 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:

- **Scope is the hardest part to get right** — Set the boundary too narrow and you optimize a part while the real problem sits outside the frame; set it too wide and the work never converges. There is no formula for the right width. Make the first cut, then put a checkpoint on the calendar, tied to a real event such as a pilot result or a market signal, where you can widen or narrow the frame on what you have learned by then.[2,7,10]
- **Some decisions can't wait for a settled frame** — In a genuinely uncertain situation you may have to frame and act at the same time. Treat the frame as a hypothesis rather than a conclusion: commit to it but fix in advance the points at which you will revisit it as the situation resolves.[8]
- **Framing can become its own form of delay** — Framing is meant to speed up the decision and is not an end in itself. Match the effort to the stakes: a reversible, two-way-door choice rarely needs more than a quick pass, while a one-way door with large consequences earns the full sequence. The best teams in fast-moving markets stay both quick and thorough, matching rigor to what is at risk rather than treating every call the same.[16] As a rough guide, spend something like the first tenth of the decision's timeline on the frame, then move.[2]
- **The biases E5 is meant to catch will creep back in** — Even a good process drifts. Confirmation bias keeps the original frame alive, and status quo bias quietly favors doing nothing. A short check before you commit helps: ask what evidence would change your mind, and what the outside view says about choices like this one.[13]
- **Frames carry power** — A frame decides what counts and who is accountable, so the choice is never purely analytical.[8,14] Bring the competing frames into the open, keep the discussion on the evidence and on what the enterprise is trying to do, and when you have to pick, say why and record it.

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.

Strategic Framing Canvas

Decision: ____
____

☐ **Type 1** ☐ **Type 2** **Date:** ____________ **Owner:** ________________ **Version:** _____

PURPOSE: Define strategic question boundaries through E5 framework (Expand-Examine-Empathize-Elevate-Envision). Complete before diving into alternatives; update at each Decision Quality gate to record reframes.

① ALTERNATIVE FRAMES (Expand) EXPAND

Other ways to frame this decision (widen/narrow/invert):

② ROOT CAUSES (Examine) EXAMINE

Events → Patterns → Structures:

③ STAKEHOLDERS (Empathize) EMPATHIZE

Key voices & explicit trade-offs:

④ STRATEGIC LINK (Elevate) ELEVATE

Connection to pillars & trends:

⑤ SUCCESS VISION & MEASURES (Envision) ENVISION

Success statement: *Key results (measurable):*

⑥ SCOPE & CONSTRAINTS

IN scope: *OUT of scope:*

FRAME QUALITY CHECK

☐ Question is specific & actionable ☐ Success criteria measurable
☐ Multiple frames considered ☐ Outside view incorporated

Generative AI as scaffold (not substitute)

AI can genuinely help with framing, but decision-makers need to take care not to offload judgment calls to it. It is good at breadth and first-pass structure, and those happen to be the laborious parts of framing, not the hard ones. But what it produces is not the frame; rather, it is the input for the team to work on.

What it should not do is make the calls framing exists to make. It can't set the objectives or thresholds, decide who owns the decision, weigh the political stakes, or settle which of several live frames should govern. Those are leadership judgments, and handing them to a model launders a choice into something that looks like an answer. Treat the model's output as input to the frame, not the frame itself.

Prompts for each move. The wording below is a starting point; adapt it to your decision and your data.

- **Expand** — "Give me twelve genuinely different ways to frame this decision: some wider, some narrower, some that invert the assumption. Surface the assumption hidden in each." Keep the two or three that change your thinking.
- **Examine** — "Map this evidence from events to patterns to structures to mental models. Propose three causal hypotheses and the fact that would disconfirm each." Then go and collect those facts yourself.
- **Empathize** — "Cluster these stakeholder comments into Say / Think / Feel / Do, and write five interview questions that would test whether our current frame is wrong." Use real verbatims, not invented ones.
- **Elevate** — "Relate this problem to our strategic pillars and to these external trends. What enterprise-level risk would a single-function frame hide?"
- **Envision** — "Draft a one-sentence vision of success with three to five time-bound results, plus three threshold rules covering margin, customer, and risk." Edit them to match what the organization actually values.

A few guardrails keep this honest. The decision owner signs the final frame, not the model. Keep a short log of what you asked and what the model drew on, so the reasoning can be retraced. Use an approved workspace and keep proprietary detail out of prompts unless the environment is secured for it. And run one check before you commit: where did the model make us narrower, or more certain, than the evidence warrants?

Bottom line

Framing is the cheapest link in Decision Quality to improve and the one with the most leverage, because every later link inherits whatever the frame got right or wrong. The E5 moves are a way to do it deliberately inside the room where the decision gets made, on a single page, in the time you actually have. None of it guarantees the right answer. What it buys you is the assurance that you are **answering the right question**, which is the part teams most often get wrong and least often notice. In my experience, the hour spent settling the frame is the highest-returning hour in the whole decision.

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