

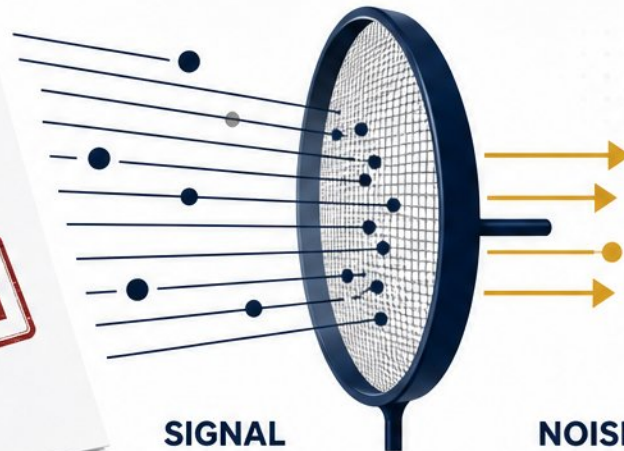
Writing a Decision Memo: Turning Ambiguity into Reviewable Rationale



- A short, structured document framing a choice, comparing options, and recommending a path for approval.
- Used when choices affect budget, staffing, vendors, product direction, compliance, or cross-functional work.
- Forces an explicit choice and creates an audit trail — unlike updates, minutes, or full reports.
- Learning objective: Structure a memo covering problem, options, rationale, recommendation, and open conditions.

What a Decision Memo Is (and Isn't)

A DECISION MEMO IS



SIGNAL

Clear, focused,
actionable

NOISE

Cluttered, unfocused,
hard to act on

A DECISION MEMO ISN'T



Concise:

Gives context,
options, risks, and
implementation
detail for a call



Not:

A slide deck in
prose, a report,
meeting minutes,
or a hidden
argument



Test:

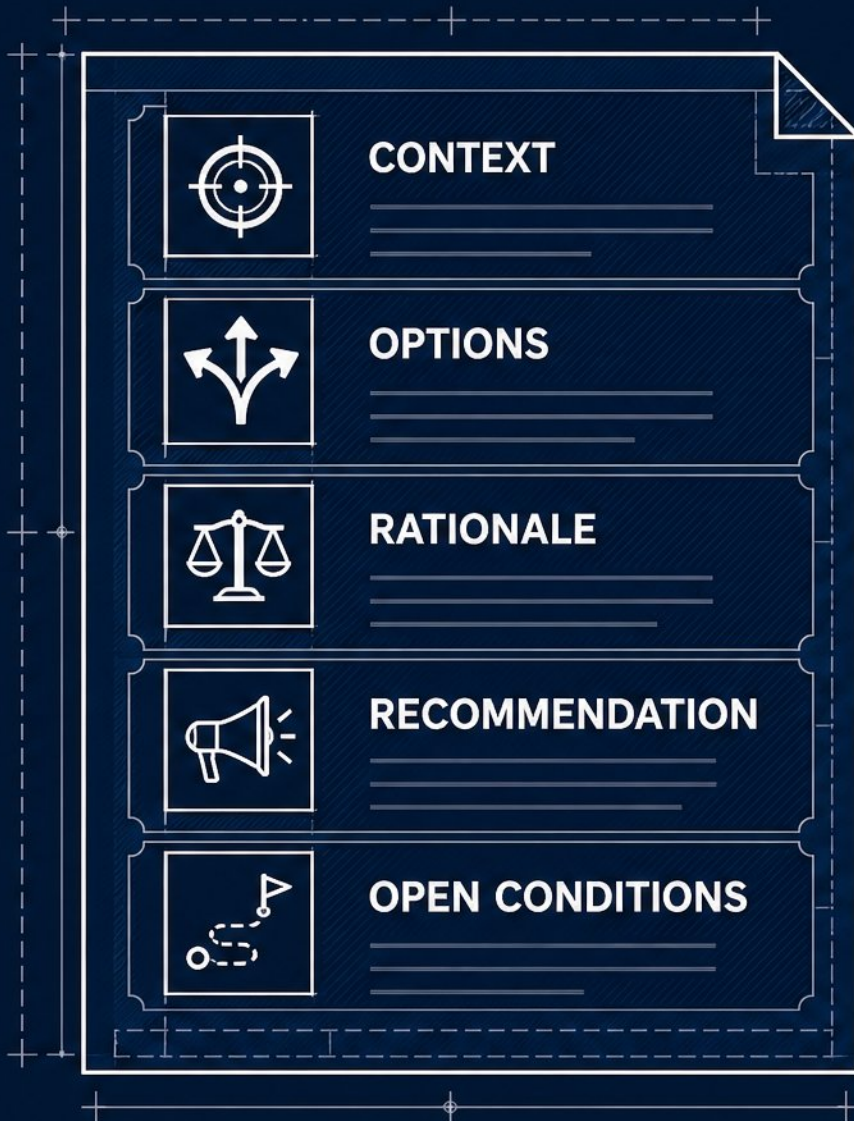
Forces an explicit
choice with a
named owner and
deadline



Why:

Converts discussion
into commitment,
creating an audit
trail others can
execute without
re-litigation

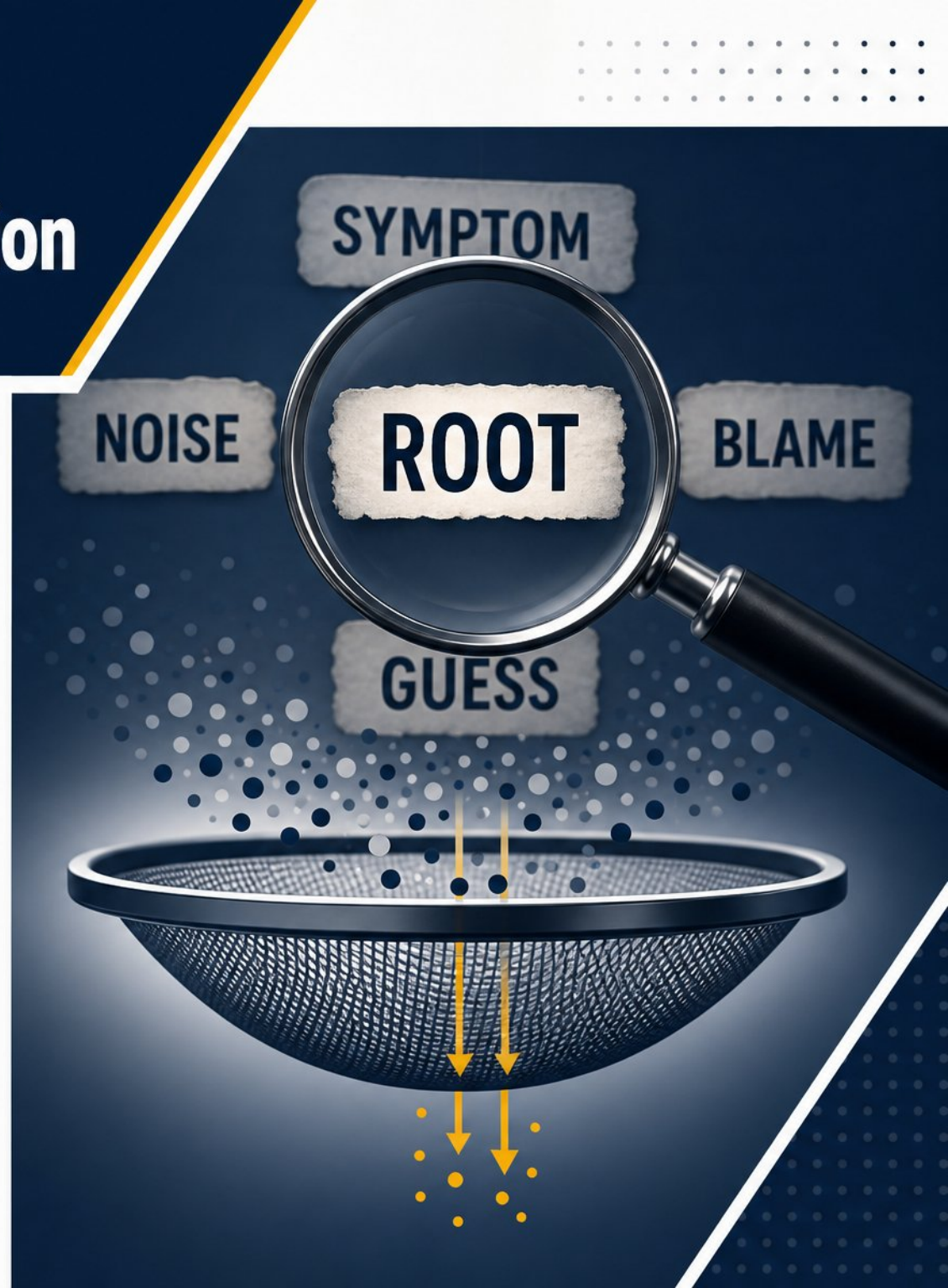
The Five Core Sections: A Reviewer's Map



- ● **Decision Required & Context:** What to decide and why now
- ● **Options:** What realistic choices exist (include status quo)
- ● **Rationale & Trade-offs:** Evidence, criteria, and what's sacrificed
- ● **Recommendation:** The direct ask, not buried in analysis
- ● **Open Conditions & Next Steps:** Risks, owners, and first actions

Defining the Problem That Drives the Decision

- ▶ – Write a specific, measurable problem statement without solution bias.
- ▶ – Separate symptoms from root causes: 'low CSAT' vs. 'delayed responses'.
- ▶ – Use the formula: Current State - Desired State = Gap/Impact.
- ▶ – Avoid writing a decision memo when no real choice is needed.



Crafting Comparable, Credible Options



- Present 2-4 distinct, executable paths plus a status quo baseline



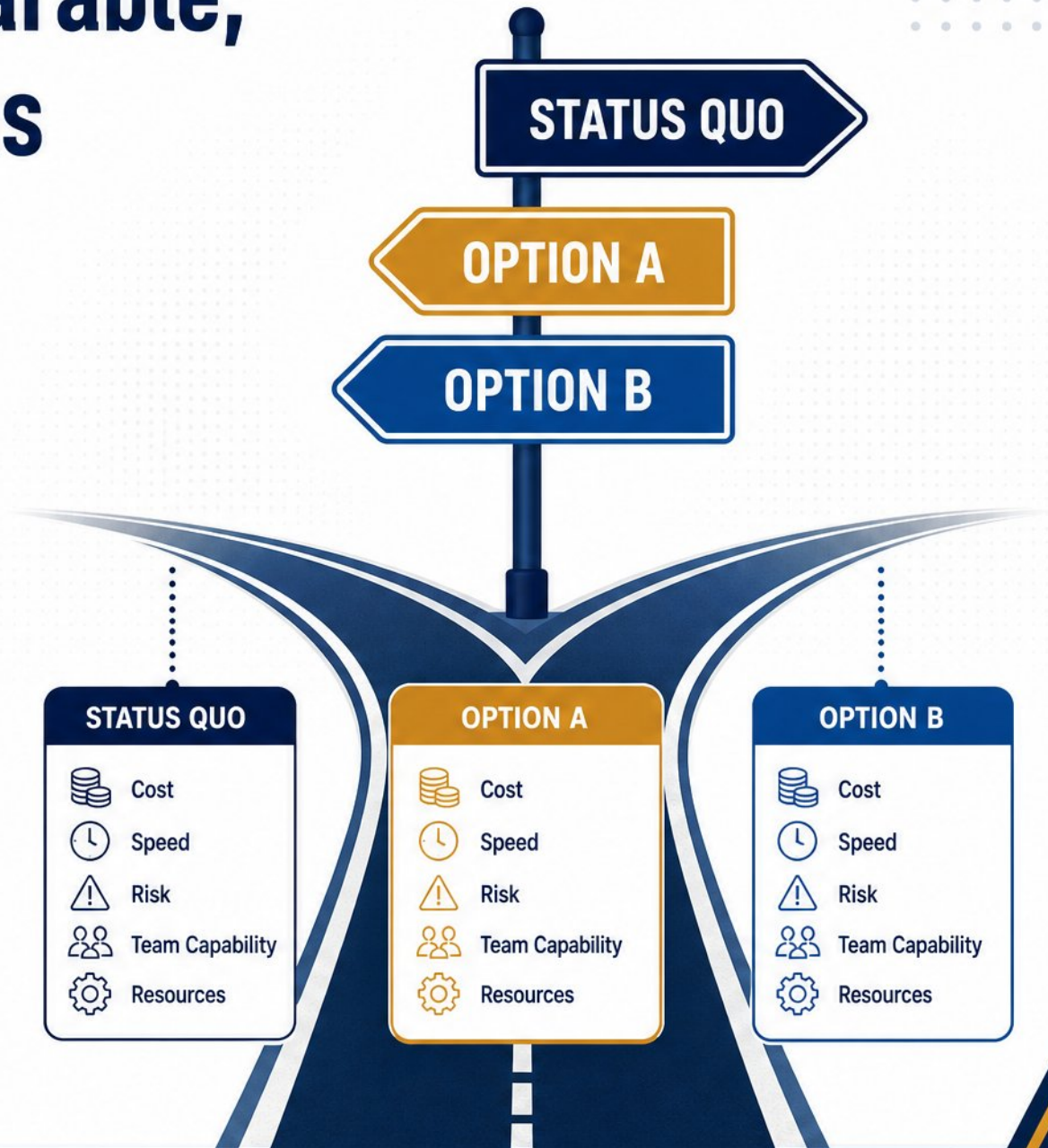
- Ensure options are MECE: mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive



- Avoid straw-man alternatives; include the strongest objection honestly



- Describe each option consistently: cost, speed, risk, team capability, resources



Building the Evaluation: Criteria, Evidence, and Trade-offs



- Weight criteria by business priorities: cost, speed, risk, strategic fit.



- Separate hard facts (metrics, ticket volumes) from judgment (risk appetite).



- Surface trade-offs openly: state what each option sacrifices, not just gains.



- Use a scannable decision table or weighted model to compare options.

Criteria	Weight (by priority)	Options		
		Option A	Option B	Option C
 Cost	— — —	●	◐	○
 Speed	— — —	◐	●	◐
 Risk	— — — —	○	◐	●
 Strategic Fit	— — —	◐	○	●
Overall				



Evidence provenance

Sourced from cross-functional assessment notes.

Stating a Clear, Supportable Recommendation

- Place the recommendation near the top — never bury it in analysis.
- Link directly to criteria: best balance of cost, speed, and risk.
- Use confident, action-oriented language: 'We recommend approving...'.
 - Avoid hedging: skip phrases like 'we might consider' or 'could explore.'
- State explicit thresholds: budget cap, risk tolerance, key assumption.



Managing Risks and Open Conditions Without Killing the Decision

RISK



Identify and understand what could go wrong.



MITIGATION



Define the concrete actions that reduce or eliminate the risk.



- Separate pre-conditions from post-decision monitoring triggers



- Pair each major risk with a concrete mitigation



- Signal uncertainty honestly with a controlled rollout plan



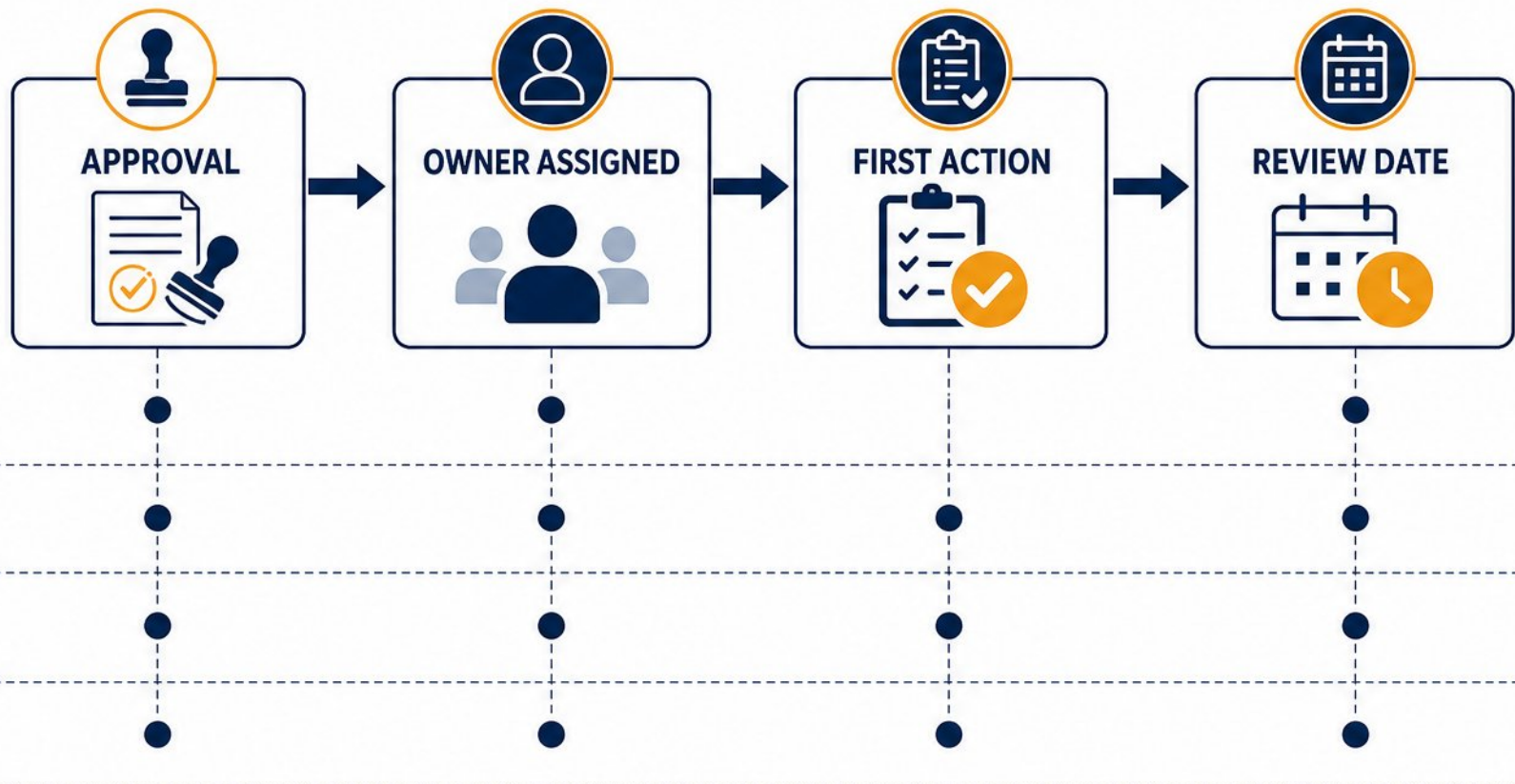
- Define exit triggers: metrics that pause or roll back the decision



- State open conditions with owners and resolution dates

Actionable Next Steps: From Approval to Execution

- Close with a concrete owner, first action, timeline, and success measure
- Structure implementation as an assigned task list: Who, What, By When
- Define the approval workflow: decision owner, approvers, consulted parties, deadline
- Specify the immediate next step after approval so execution can start without ambiguity



Writing for Busy Executives: Clarity, Brevity, Scanability



- **Lead with Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF):** recommendation, decision, and urgency first.



- **Format for skimming:** clear headings, 3-4 sentence paragraphs, and bulleted comparisons.



- **Use plain language:** replace 'due to the fact that' with 'because'; avoid hedging.



- **Keep the core memo to one or two pages;** move methodology to appendices.

PROJECT MEMO

BLUF
RECOMMENDATION: _____
DECISION: _____
URGENCY: _____

BACKGROUND

ANALYSIS

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

CONSIDERATIONS

RECOMMENDATION

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Lead with Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF)

Clear headings and short paragraphs for skimming

Bulleted comparisons for quick contrast

Methodology moved to appendices

The 6-Line Quick Memo for **Fast Operational Decisions**

- Compressed one-page format:
six lines, one decision
- Template: Decision → Options →
Criteria → Recommendation →
Trade-off → Owner and next step
- Best for product scope,
sequencing, staffing shifts,
buy-vs-build, and process changes
- Not for legal, regulatory, safety,
or major financial decisions;
use as summary page with
deeper analysis attached

	1 DECISION	
	2 OPTIONS	
	3 CRITERIA	
	4 RECOMMENDATION	
	5 TRADE-OFF	
	6 OWNER & NEXT STEP	

Practice: From Vague Request to Structured Memo



- **Scenario:** Support ticket spike after recent policy change



- **Apply framework:**
Decision → Options → Evidence → Recommendation



- Craft one-page model memo with annotations for each section



- Highlight evidence hygiene, assumptions register, and decision rule

MEMO

Subject: Response to Support Ticket Spike After Policy Change



DECISION

Decision needed:



OPTIONS

Considered options:



EVIDENCE

Key evidence and analysis:



EVIDENCE HYGIENE

- Source credibility
- Completeness
- Recency



RECOMMENDATION

Recommended course of action:



ASSUMPTIONS REGISTER

Key assumptions:



DECISION RULE

How the decision will be made:

Prepared by: _____ Date: _____

APPROVED



State the call:
Make the decision request explicit.



Show the landscape:
List viable options without bias.



Prove it: Present credible, complete, and current evidence.



Protect quality:
Maintain evidence hygiene standards.



Take a stand:
Clearly recommend the best path forward.



Surface assumptions:
Make unknowns explicit and testable.



Define the rule:
Establish how the decision will be made.

Common Traps and Reviewer Complaints



- **Burying the ask:** Lead with the recommendation in the first few seconds.



- **Straw-man options:** One real option erodes reviewer trust instantly.



- **Naked risks:** List risks only with a paired mitigation and owner.



- **Skipping execution:** A memo ending at “approved” invites re-litigation.



- **Hedging and fog:** Missing data, mixed facts/opinions, no approval deadline.

Pre-Submission Checklist: Before You Hit Send



CLEAR DECISION

- Decision clarity: one sentence, named owner, explicit deadline



CREDIBLE OPTIONS

- Option integrity: $\leq 2-3$ credible paths, status quo, MECE, fair



STRONG RECOMMENDATION

- Recommendation: findable in 10s, linked to stated criteria



MITIGATED RISKS

- Risk & execution: top risks paired with mitigations, open conditions, implementation owner



ASSIGNED OWNER

- Readability: $\leq 1-2$ pages, rounded numbers, minimal jargon



SCANABLE FORMAT

- Readability: $\leq 1-2$ pages, rounded numbers, minimal jargon

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