

▶ The Critical Path

▶ Newsletter of the Dayton/Miami Valley Chapter of PMI

April/May 2003

Volume 6 Issue 2

▶ Gimme Three Options

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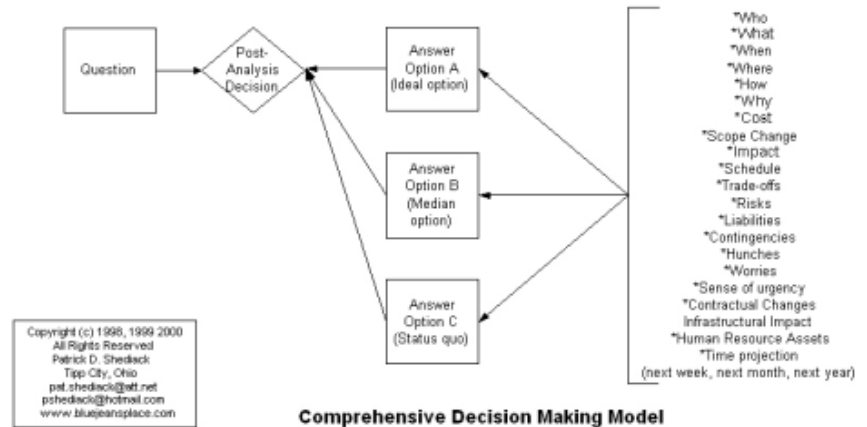
Ever try unsuccessfully to push a customer's team along to make a decision? Ever bitten your lip in meetings as your clients argue among themselves what they should discuss in private? Ever squirm while watching one of the client's staff repeatedly shoot political arrows at every project idea? Sure, we all have been there. You try all your usual tricks, but nothing works and when the meeting ends, you're ready to scream.

You-and your project team-need a new trick to nip these predicaments in the bud while still keeping your PM authority and customer relationship intact. Sounds hard, right? No; it's really pretty easy with a little diplomacy, some public speaking, a whiteboard or butcher block paper pad, a marker--and a comprehensive decision making decision model.

A comprehensive decision making model? Yes, one that drives your team to ask a question and then generate responding answers which contain all sorts of angles to them. Figure 1 shows a variation of such a model used informally by the Ballistic Missile Office, the US Air Force's intercontinental ballistic missile organization, in the early 1980s. (BMO's predecessors, in the 1950s and 1960s, pioneered many of the PM concepts and theories we use on a daily basis.) While BMO did not formally document this model, it was used often enough that the enlisted personnel nicknamed it as the "Gimme three options" decision making style:

- Option A - What is the ideal solution?
- Option B - What is an intermediate solution?
- Option C - What is the status quo?

In a given situation, you could add or subtract intermediate options. At all times, you must include the "status quo" option as your last option so you have a starting point of reference.



Over the years, I added various conditions which adapted the model to different project situations. Some are right out of the PMBOK such as risks, contingencies, scope, impact, schedule, cost, resources and contractual changes. Others are School of Hard Knocks lessons such as who, what, when, where, why, how, impact, trade-offs, liabilities, hunches. Again, you add and subtract conditions as you do with the number of options to fit a project situation.

Let's use a hypothetical situation where a team member suggests using a Linux-based web server instead of what's in the data center today. Looking at the following figure, our question would be "What happens if we use Linux for the web server's operating system?" That question would be the "new" ideal

Option A and the existing web server operating system in the data center would be the "status quo" Option C. Brainstorming further will bring out other options such outsourcing the server to a web hosting company.

Now, PM, grab your pen, walk up to the whiteboard or the easel and start walking your team through each option to identify not just the project issues, but also all the technical, business and political impacts. While it might seem backwards, listing Option C, first and brainstorming through all the conditions and issues helps to document the status quo while also calming the meeting situation. Your next transition line might be, “Now that we’ve documented the status quo, let’s go through a similar exercise with the other suggested option, namely Linux, and any other options we discover.”

Before you know it, your options brainstorming is documented by the whole team, the options are ready to be reduced to writing for a decision maker’s action, and your PM credibility is preserved.

Oh, how do you deal with that absolutely obnoxious person who’s demands their option be adopted while shooting arrows at everyone else’s ideas? Easy--you caveat each option with the name of its primary advocate. If there’s a private agenda here, the business owner will catch on to it very quickly without you raising a diplomatic flag.

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