



Making
Business Decisions
with bCisive

Overview and Guide

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I Introduction

Business decisions - what's the big deal?

The success of any business hinges crucially on the quality of the decisions made by managers at all levels. Good decisions drive an organisation or a project forward, and repeated bad decisions can be costly and damaging.

Business decisions range from the simple to the momentous. They are central to the operations of all types of organisations, from multi-national corporations to small local businesses, government departments, professional firms, non-profit organisations and churches. Regardless of the structure of the organisation, the decisions that must regularly be made in order to move the enterprise forward are “business decisions”.

Despite their importance, business decisions are generally made using an informal, deliberative process. This can result in a range of problems, including wrong decisions, anxiety about the decision, inefficiency and lack of accountability.

Mapping it

Business Decision Mapping (BDM) is a methodology that can be used to help avoid the problems often encountered in standard deliberative business decision making. It uses diagrams to present all the information involved in making a decision visually, clearly and succinctly. The structure mirrors the general intuitive form of most decision making: question, options, pros and cons. Figure 1 is an example of a basic decision map.

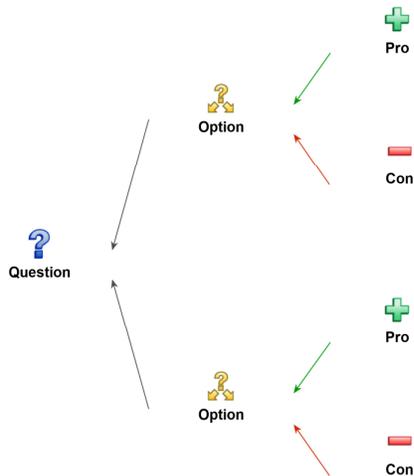


Figure 1 - A basic decision map

Mapping these elements visually allows more rigorous and better decisions to be made with more effective collaboration, less effort and more confidence.

For a more detailed analysis of the problems with business decision making as it's generally done and the theory behind BDM, please read our White Paper, available soon at bCisive.com.

bCisive to the rescue

bCisive™ is Austhink's software tool for Business Decision Mapping. It's currently the only tool designed specifically to support BDM.

This document is a simple step-by-step guide to making better business decisions using bCisive. We'll take you through the process of mapping a decision, assessing the options and making and communicating the decision using bCisive. To help us out, we've enlisted Cheryl Tobin, new CEO of fictional corporation Hammond Aerospace, who is facing a difficult decision.

Throughout this guide, "How?" sections describe the steps taken with bCisive to build the example maps; for example:

How?

- *Start bCisive by double-clicking on the bCisive icon on your desktop, or selecting it from the Programs menu.*

2 Business Decision Mapping with bCisive

Here is Cheryl's story, based on a *Harvard Business Review* case study¹:

Cheryl has just taken over as CEO of Hammond Aerospace, a world-leading company built up from humble beginnings by its charismatic former head. She's bringing with her more than just her experience as a division chief at Boeing though; there have been rumours floating around the industry that Hammond's success in landing foreign contracts might be due to carefully hidden payoffs. Should Cheryl launch an investigation into possible dirty dealings at Hammond? Cheryl is determined to ensure a spotless reputation for the company, but it's only her first day on the job, and she doesn't want to start by attracting negative publicity or putting the directors in a difficult position. On the other hand, she has to sign off on the quarterly financial reports in just two weeks' time, making her personally responsible for any 'cooking of the books' that has been going on.

In order to decide what action to take about her suspicions, Cheryl speaks to various senior staff at Hammond. Her executive assistant tearfully admits that she once glimpsed suspicious bank transfer records. The internal counsel warns her against taking the issue to the Board of Directors for advice, arguing that tougher new laws will require them to investigate fully to limit their own personal liability. Hank Bodine, head of the commercial division and the old CEO's right hand man, insists that an investigation will cause terrible damage to Hammond's reputation and share price, even if no evidence of shady dealings is found.

Back in her office, Cheryl has a headache. She's intimidated by Hank and for the first time in years she feels paralysed by indecision. Turning away from the huge window with its view over downtown Los Angeles, she sits down at her computer to begin a bCisive map.

What Cheryl is facing here is a good example of a business decision: a decision that has the potential to significantly affect the success of her enterprise. If she approached the decision using standard methods, she'd probably turn the options over in her head; maybe write lists of pros and cons; try to talk it through with someone. It may feel like a huge effort to get her head around the issues, and her anxiety over whether she was making the right decision would grow.

With bCisive's intuitive graphical interface, Cheryl can rapidly create a map of her problem, add options as they arise, attach pros and cons, arguments, evidence and suggestions and reorganise her thinking as needed, releasing a lot of the pressure she's feeling.

So where does she start?

¹ *Should Cheryl Initiate an Investigation at Her New Firm?* Harvard Business Review, October 2007, pp. 47-60. www.hbr.org.

2.1 Define the problem

A decision-making exercise begins with the awareness of a problem or a challenge that needs addressing, and the recognition that a decision must be made.

Decisions are generally a response to some perceived problem or challenge – in this case, Cheryl’s worries that there might be a history of illegal financial dealings at Hammond Aerospace. To initiate the process of finding a solution to the problem, she articulates it as a question at the top of her decision map, as shown in Figure 2. Generally, the question takes the form “What should we do about X?”.



Question

As new CEO what shall I do about my suspicions of corruption at Hammond?

Figure 2 - A Question node, the starting point for a decision map

How?

- Drag a Question map item from the Build Panel onto the workspace.
- Begin typing to add text.
- Later, double-click on the text to edit it.

The question should be open-ended. Instead of asking herself “Should I launch an investigation into corrupt dealings?” – a closed or “yes/no” question – Cheryl should ask “What should I do about my suspicions?”. This would leave the way open for a wider range of options to present themselves.

2.2 Identify options

An option is a possible course of action that could form a solution to the question, or lead towards one. This is where the brainstorming begins. As Cheryl comes up with options, she enters them below the question on the decision map, adding new option items as needed. The result is shown in Figure 3.

How?

- Drag an Option item from the Building Panel onto the workspace, near the Question already there.
- A red line will show you where the Option will attach.
- When you’re happy, release the mouse button and the Option will form a new map node attached to the Question.

Thanks to her open phrasing of the decision question, Cheryl has already seen a third option beyond doing nothing or immediately launching an investigation.

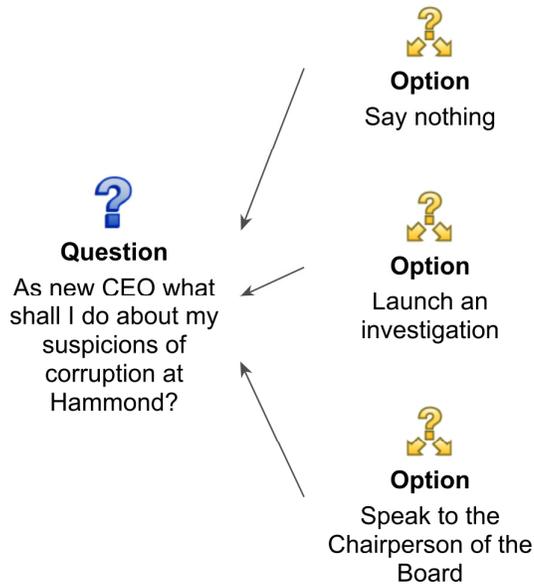


Figure 3 – The developing map: Question and Options

2.3 Assess the options

Having identified several possible courses of action, the next step for Cheryl is to think about and add relevant information that will help her to assess them.

Identify Pros and Cons

Cheryl starts by listing the features that she sees as positive and negative for each Option as Pros and Cons. Any number can be added, in the same way that the Options were added to the Questions earlier.

Sub-options

During the process of identifying Pros and Cons, Cheryl realizes that in fact she has more than one Option if she chooses to launch an investigation: internal or external? She lists these as Sub-options, as shown in Figure 4, and thinks about their Pros and Cons too.

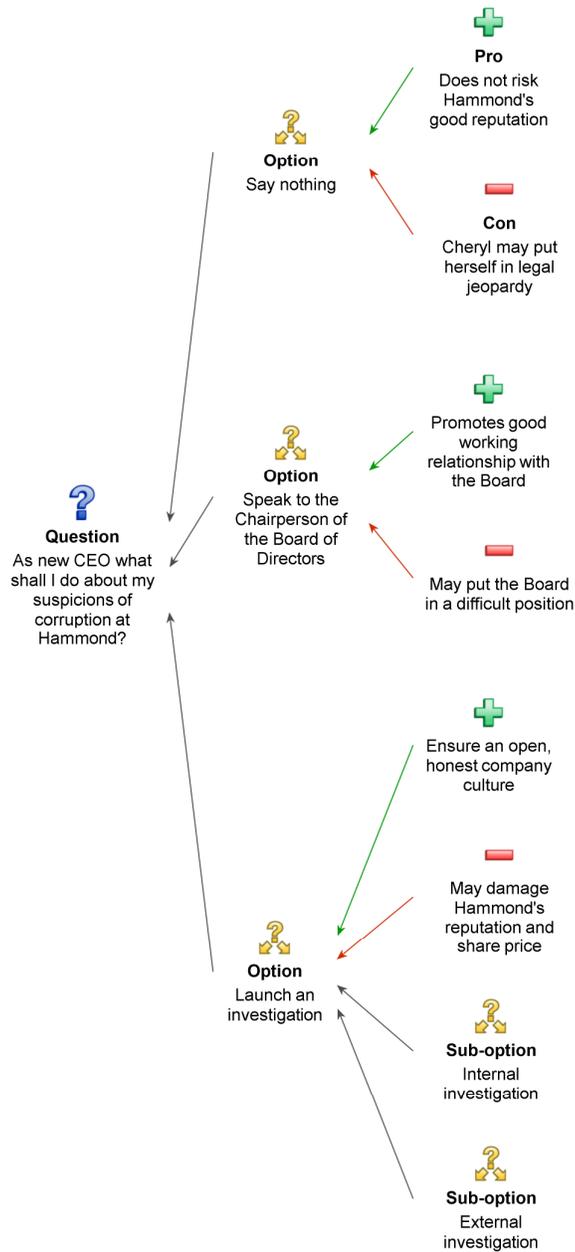


Figure 4 - Listing Pros and Cons, and identifying Sub-options

Further information

The process of identifying Options and their Pros and Cons will quickly start to generate ideas, objections, further questions and so on. bCisive offers a diverse range of items – building blocks for the decision map – to help Cheryl capture all this information quickly. She can add to her map information like evidence, examples, links to documents or websites, or flags that further information is required.

To make sure her decision-making process is robust and complete, Cheryl should attempt to gather information in the logical sequence illustrated in Figure 5.

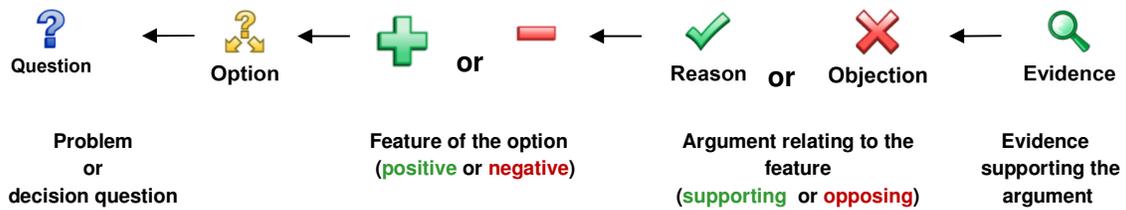


Figure 5 - The sequence of information behind a robust decision-making process

Reasons and Objections

An ability to weigh the available Options against each other is central to the decision-making process. Is some listed Pro or Con a valid feature of an Option? If so, how important is it? Reasons and Objections can be used to back up or deny these two aspects of Pros and Cons.

Collaboration

At any stage of the development of her decision map, Cheryl can approach others for their input – her executive assistant, the internal counsel, or Hank Bodine for example. She can communicate her thinking to them quickly, and the clear, structured diagram of the issue can help defuse even the power-play tactics of Hank Bodine and encourage productive collaboration. Their comments – whether given verbally, by email, by memo, by sticky note – are easily added to the map and thus captured in one place for the record.

At the end of this stage of the process, Cheryl’s map might look like the one in Figure 6.

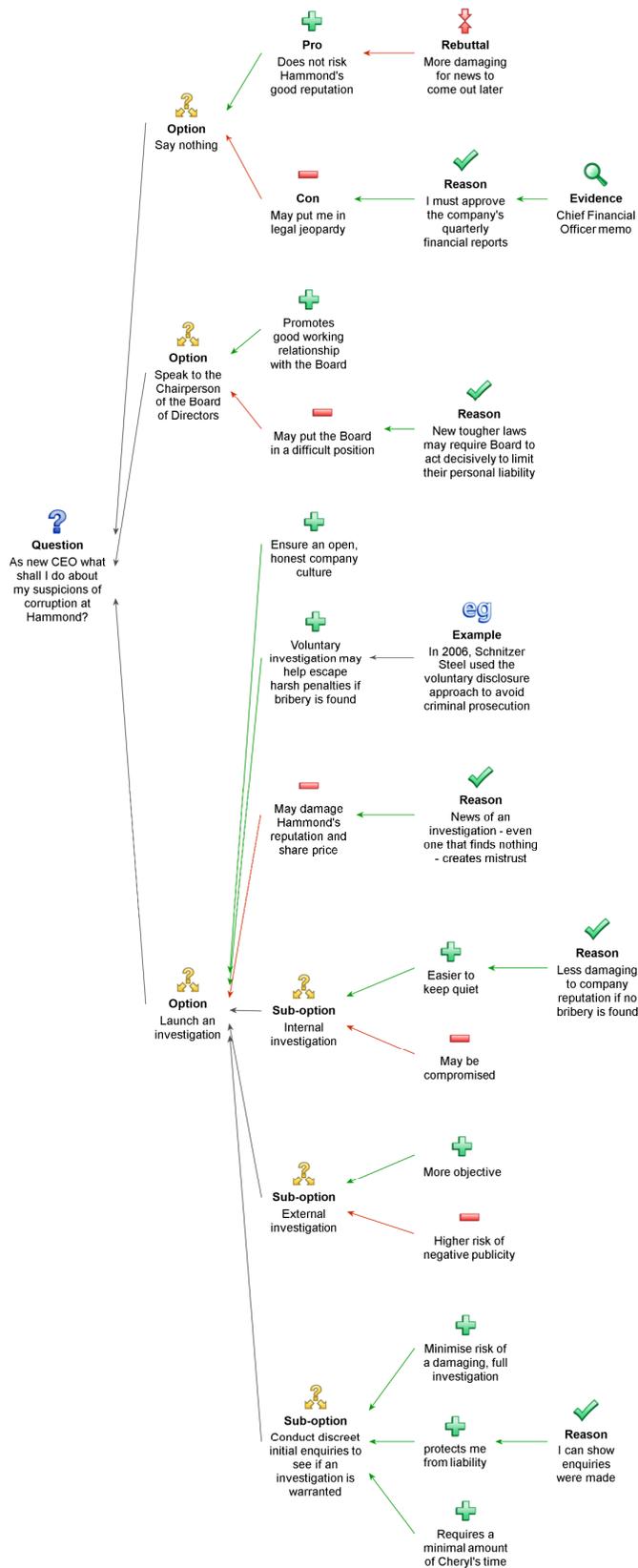


Figure 6 - The completed decision map

2.4 Make the choice

The next step is to make the decision. bCisive won't do the thinking or make the choice for Cheryl. But in the process of generating the map, the relative importance of the arguments for and against the various options should become clearer for her; any areas requiring further information can be noted and followed up; and when she's satisfied that the map covers the extent of the problem a decision can be made on the balance of the evidence and arguments laid out.

When to stop and make the decision

A decision map is never 'finished' in an objective sense – it's possible to go on adding Options and information indefinitely. Several factors might govern when Cheryl stops the process of gathering information and assessing the Options, and gets down to making the decision.

- **Sufficient buy-in:** when she and her collaborators reach a point of sufficient consensus on one of the options.
- **No longer making progress:** when the information gathering seems complete and no further avenues of investigation are apparent.
- **Time pressure:** when time's up and a decision is required straight away.

What to do if the decision isn't clear

If none of the alternatives she's considered seems like a clear winner, Cheryl may need to gather more information to clarify the relative strengths of her Options. The clear structure of her map will help her to spot areas where more investigation or evidence could help. She could also request input from a wider range of people.

If she is still stuck, she may benefit from returning to Step 2.2 and identifying new Options.

2.5 Communicate the decision

The first step in implementing a decision is often to communicate it to others and secure their support: making the case.

Use the decision map as a prop

The decision map itself is a powerful visual tool, and can be used effectively as means of presenting the decision-making process and justifying the decision reached. Complex maps can be manipulated using layout and hide-and-show features to display different parts of the argument clearly, focusing attention on what's relevant and improving insight.

How?

- *To hide a branch of the map, select its parent node.*
- *Click on the small 'subtract' symbol that appears in the lower corner of the node.*
- *A 'plus' symbol shows that information has been hidden.*
- *Click on the 'plus' to reveal the branch again.*

In Figure 7, the Pros and Cons of Cheryl choosing an external investigation have been hidden.

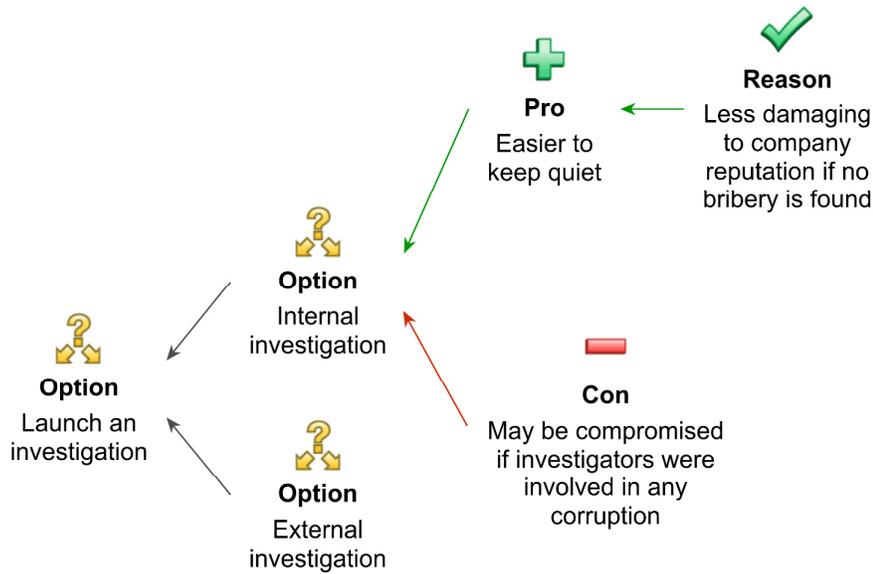


Figure 7 - Part of the decision map with some information hidden

Add maps as graphics in reports

Maps can also be exported for use as images in reports or presentations, conveying the extent of the argument visually and succinctly. The map can be saved in a variety of image formats, and pasted easily into presentation documents.

How?

- Select the top node of the map required.
- In the Export to File section of the Output ribbon, select Image.
- Choose a location to save your file, a filename and the type of file you want.
- Click 'Save'.

Generate a Decision Summary

Alternatively, once the decision is made and the favoured Option is identified, bCisive will generate a Decision Summary in text form, as shown in Figure 8. This summary of the reasoning can be used as the basis for a written report explaining the issues considered and highlighting the important factors that influenced the decision.

How?

- Having made the decision, select that Option on the map and click 'Decision' on the Home ribbon.
- The chosen Option is automatically converted into a Decision item.
- A Decision Summary is generated in the Text panel, based on the supporting arguments for choosing that Option that appear in the map.

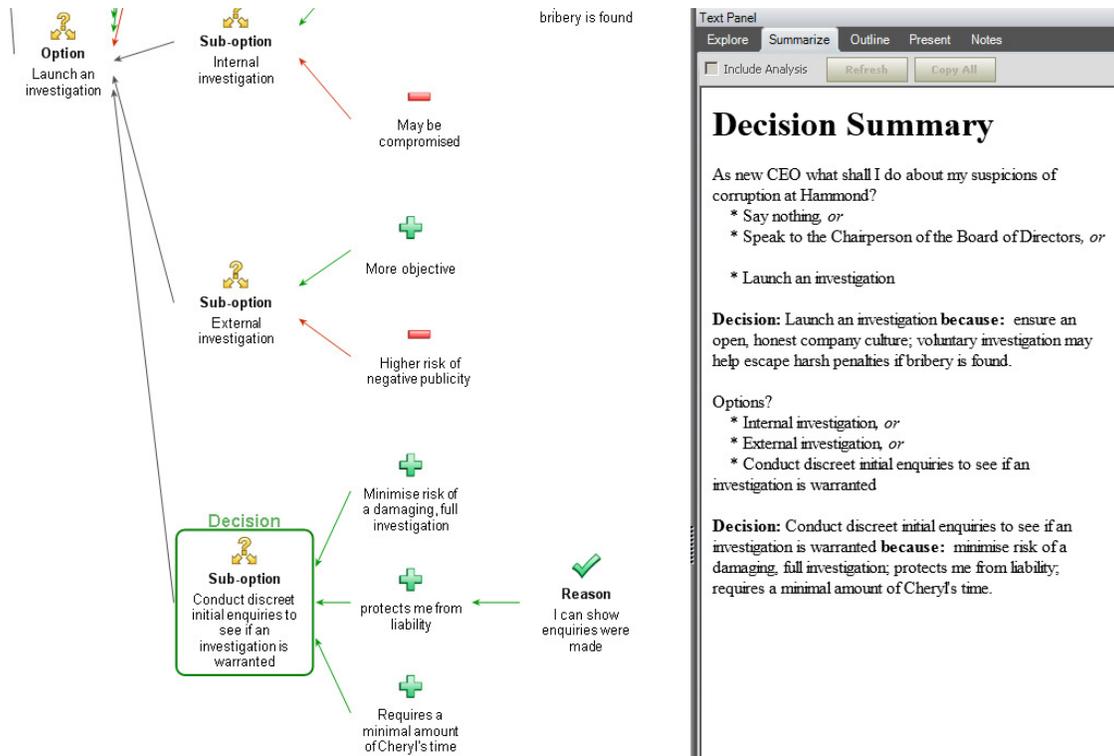


Figure 8 - The Decision marked, the Decision Summary is generated

Information management

The decision map and the associated Decision Summary provide a concrete record of the decision-making process suitable for archiving. The reasoning behind the decision can be revisited quickly and easily in the future, avoiding the need to reconsider the same issues and saving time and effort.

3 Glossary

3.1 Some Map Item Types



Challenge

A Challenge indicates doubt that a proposition or contention is true, and demands clarification.



Con

A negative feature or aspect of an Option – or one that is perceived to be negative.



Consequence

Describes the necessary or likely result of a contention or position.



Contention

A proposition put forward for discussion and evaluation.

Decision



Decision

The course of action eventually settled on. Generally, an Option icon is converted to a Decision icon at the end of the decision-making process. In a complex decision-making process, decisions can be made in progressive stages.



Elaboration

An Elaboration provides a place for the addition of extra material or clarifying details for an Argument or position.



Evidence

Detailed information in the form of facts or data that supports an argument.



Example

A particular instance that illustrates a contention or argument.



Explanation

Information that purports to explain how or why something is true, rather than proving that it is true.



Fact

A generally accepted or incontestable assertion or piece of information.



Idea

A flexible map item representing any kind of response to a question arising during the process of identifying and assessing Options. While mapping, new suggestions or 'brainwaves' can be quickly captured as Ideas. These Ideas may offer directions for further investigation, and may sometimes be developed further into new Options.



Information Required

Flags that further information is needed in relation to a contention, argument, idea or option.



Objection

A statement opposing some consideration (pro or con) or contention.

An Objection provides a high-level argument intended to establish that some position is false. Standardly, an Objection would be used to counter a Pro or a Con. However, they can be used in many other ways.

Cons and Objections are quite similar. However, the former are negative *features*, generally features of Options or Ideas. Objections are not features but statements to the effect that something is false.



Option

The Option is a core element in a decision map. It represents a possible choice or course of action towards resolving the challenge or problem being addressed.

Typically, the second level of a decision map – directly below the Question – will consist of two or more Options. Sometimes, the consideration of the pros and cons of an Option, it becomes clear that it can be broken down into two or more sub-options, each with its own positive and negative features.



Pro

A positive feature or aspect of an Option – or one that is perceived to be positive.



Question

The Question is a core element in a decision map. The decision task – the challenge or problem to be addressed – is best expressed as a question, usually in the form 'What shall we do about X?'.

In lower levels of the map, the Question icon can be used to question information or assertions.



Reason

A statement supporting some consideration (pro or con) or contention.

A Reason provides a high-level argument intended to establish the truth of some position. Standardly, a Reason would be used to buttress a Pro or a Con. However, they can be used in many other ways.

Pros and Reasons are quite similar. However, the former are positive *features*, generally features of Options or Ideas. Reasons are not features but statements to the effect that something is true.



Rebuttal

A statement providing a basis for rejecting a Pro or a Con and removing it from consideration.



Situation

The topic, context, background or frame for the decision task. A Situation can be used as the initial node on a decision map, outlining the situation giving rise to the Question to be addressed.



Task

Used to identify tasks arising from the decision-making process or from the decision itself.



Warning

Flags a potential conflict or problem that may arise if a particular action is taken or decision made.