

The Decision Paper: A Tool to Facilitate Decision-Making

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Introduction

Karen, a project manager on an important construction project, was facing a dilemma. Two months earlier, she had informed her managers of a pending financial crisis in the program office that was funding her project, but she had received no response or guidance to date on how to proceed. She knew she was nearing a critical decision point in the project, beyond which failure to make a decision could jeopardize her ability to meet project budget and schedule constraints. She wondered why she hadn't received an answer from her managers, and she was desperately trying to find a way to expedite their decision process to avert disaster on her project.

Karen's situation is all too familiar to project managers and staff members: it's often difficult to get important decisions from management in a timely fashion. What could Karen do? Luckily, one of her colleagues introduced her to the concept of decision papers.

A decision paper is a methodology for presenting complex issues to a decision-making group in a crisp, easily-digested format. It is a tool that helps articulate the salient issues relevant to a particular problem and facilitates the decision-making process. It is especially helpful in cases like Karen's, where the timeliness of the decision is very important.

Format

Decision papers have several critical elements that define a recommended format, although the approach within each element can vary. In all instances, the decision paper must contain concise, crisp statements, and the overall length should be limited to one or two pages. Usually pressed for time and driven by hectic schedules, most managers can't or simply won't read a document longer than that. That doesn't mean you should use a small font to squeeze as much content as possible onto one page. The decision paper's graphic layout, as well as content, is important to get your message across. No matter how carefully you prepare your decision paper, if it's difficult to read due to small font size or cramped layout, the decision-makers won't read it. It is best to use a minimum of 12-point type and organize the information into bullets or columns with adequate white space for reading ease.

The decision paper begins with an **Issue or Problem Statement**. For optimum effect, this section should begin with the words, "The decision to be made is...", followed by a short statement of the issue to be resolved. To demonstrate, suppose you were trying to decide whether to buy your own ski equipment. The Problem Statement might simply

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Sample Decision Papers

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Table of Contents Sample Decision Papers

1. Understanding the eBook Sample Decision Papers
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Sample Decision Papers
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Sample Decision Papers
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Sample Decision Papers
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Sample Decision Papers
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Sample Decision Papers User Reviews and Ratings
 - Sample Decision Papers and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Sample Decision Papers Free and Paid eBooks

- Sample Decision Papers Public Domain eBooks
- Sample Decision Papers eBook Subscription Services
- Sample Decision Papers Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Sample Decision Papers eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Sample Decision Papers Compatibility with Devices
 - Sample Decision Papers Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Sample Decision Papers
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Sample Decision Papers
 - Interactive Elements Sample Decision Papers
- 8. Staying Engaged with Sample Decision Papers
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Sample Decision Papers
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Sample Decision Papers
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Sample Decision Papers
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Sample Decision Papers
 - Setting Reading Goals Sample Decision Papers
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Sample Decision Papers
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Sample Decision Papers
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development

- Exploring Educational eBooks

14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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