Australian Government
Department of Home Affairs

CYBER AND
INFRASTRUCTURE SECURITY
CENTRE

The Strategic Decision Making Process:

A Guide for Crisis Management

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Foreword

Effective decision making is a positive element of organisational resilience. In crisis management, decisions have the potential to impact the organisation involved and the broader community.

A crisis can be associated with an abnormal or extraordinary event or situation that poses an existential threat and requires a strategic and timely response. Organisations may have different definitions of a crisis depending upon the context in which it occurs, but all organisations have a responsibility to make strategic decisions.

Modern society is reliant on the effective functioning of critical infrastructure to provide public services, maintain a quality of life, and encourage economic growth. Critical infrastructure owners and operators need to ensure that strategic decision making in crisis management contribute to maintaining a continuity of supply under all plausible circumstances.

The Strategic Decision Making Process: A Guide for Crisis Management (2025) complements the Organisational Resilience: Good Practice Guide (2024) and assists stakeholders to better understand and apply the process of strategic decision making in crisis management.

Introduction

The Strategic Decision Making Process: A Guide for Crisis Management (2025) provides a structured approach that can be used in crisis management.

Decision making is concerned with evaluating alternative courses of action and making a choice among them. It precedes and culminates human action. This differs to sense making, which is concerned with making things that have already happened meaningful to us. This guide focuses on the strategic decision making process for determining future courses of action.

Underpinning this process are seven elements that organisations can use in crisis management (see Figure 1, page 5). Enhancing decision making capabilities in crisis management will contribute to strengthening organisational resilience.

Background

The Australian Government's Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy and its accompanying Plan (2023) seeks to ensure continued operation of critical infrastructure in the face of all hazards.

The Resilience Expert Advisory Group (REAG) supports the Strategy through its resilience work with industry. This work includes developing practical user-friendly tools and guidance material to assist businesses to enhance resilience within their organisation and across sectors.

The Strategic Decision Making Process: A Guide for Crisis Management (2025) builds on the organisational resilience decision making indicator in the Organisational Resilience: Good Practice Guide (2024).

How This Guide is Structured

This guide identifies seven elements of the strategic decision making process for organisations to apply in crisis management (see Figure 1). Underpinning these elements are a combination of critical thinking, creative thinking, and futures thinking. The seven elements in the strategic decision making process should be repeated iteratively as required.

This guide will provide a brief explanation of each element and offer suggestions on how it can be used in practice. The guide also offers several cognitive aides that can be used in the strategic decision making process in crisis management.

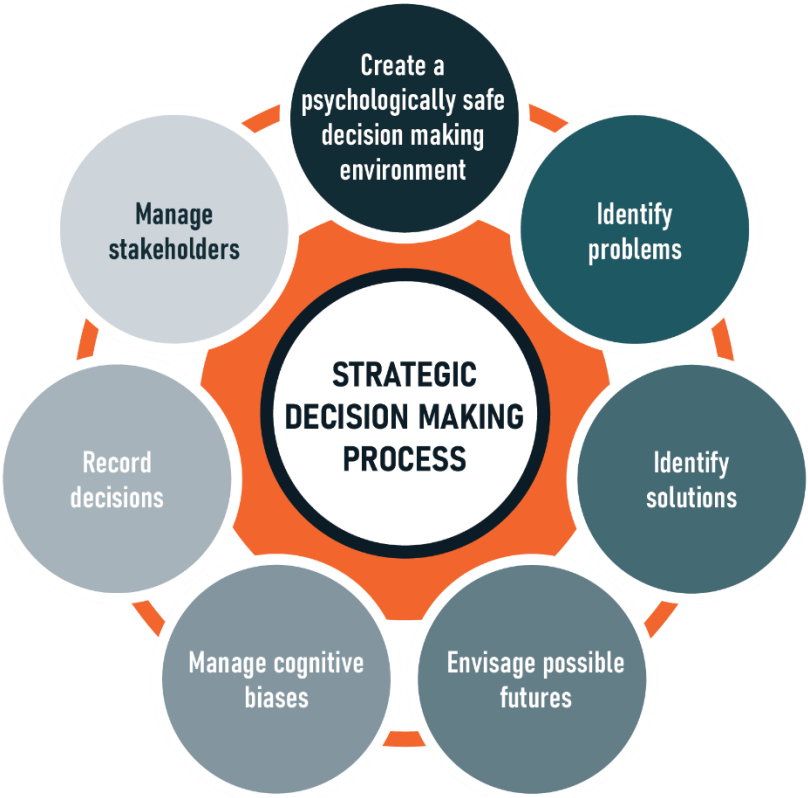

Figure 1. *Elements of the strategic decision making process for crisis management*

Create A Psychologically Safe Decision Making Environment

Psychological safety is a shared belief that the team environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, where people feel that they can speak up in the face of authority or power gradients, disagree with a preferred option, or identify and then talk about something that just doesn't feel quite right.

Creating an environment where people can trust each other can take a long time, which is not always available in time constrained environments like crisis management. To address this, teams must build and maintain trusting relationships quickly.

The Safe-to-Trust Checklist (see Figure 2) was developed for teams in crisis management that may not have a history of working together but need to collaborate quickly so they can create an optimal environment for strategic decision making.

This checklist was developed by combining two core concepts, psychological safety and swift trust.

This Safe-to-Trust Checklist can be used to establish, maintain, and in the worst situations, retrieve a psychologically safe environment. It acknowledges that there are simple strategies that can be used to quickly create a psychologically safe decision making environment.

Suggestions to consider

- Consider using the Safe-to-Trust checklist provided on page 20 of this guide.
- Consider whose role it is to create a psychologically safe decision making environment (we recommend that this is the leader of the team).
- Consider using the checklist when the team is first formed, when new members join the team, every time the team is convened, or times when psychological safety is significantly challenged.

Figure 2. *Steps in the Safe-to-Trust checklist*

Identify Problems

When making strategic decisions in crisis management there are always problems! These problems can also be framed as consequences.

Identifying consequences requires critical thinking. Critical thinking involves reasoning, analysis, testing assumptions, assessing likelihood, and prioritising options.

To help identify potential consequences in crisis management, it can be useful to use a structured framework to categorise the consequences.

Popular frameworks include the PESTLE framework, STEEPLE (gaining popularity due to the inclusion of ethical consequences), PSESIIE (used in the public sector), and PMESII-PT (used in the military). Regardless of which framework you use, you will also need to consider order effects. Figure 3 below provides a breakdown of the above frameworks for structuring and classifying consequences.

'Order effects' can be used to determine the interaction of consequences.

For example, if a crisis impacts the local community (first order effect is social) this may result in a class action law suit against the organisation (second order effect is legal) that could lead to a fall in the share price (third order effect is economic).

Suggestions to consider

- Consider using the STEEPLE framework provided on page 22 of this guide to identify and classify consequences.
- Consider when you will use a framework, it could be early in the emerging crisis when you are attempting to understand the scale and impact, and then periodically/subsequently when further intelligence improves your understanding of those impacts.
- Consider the potential interaction of the consequences and the first, second, or even third order effects.

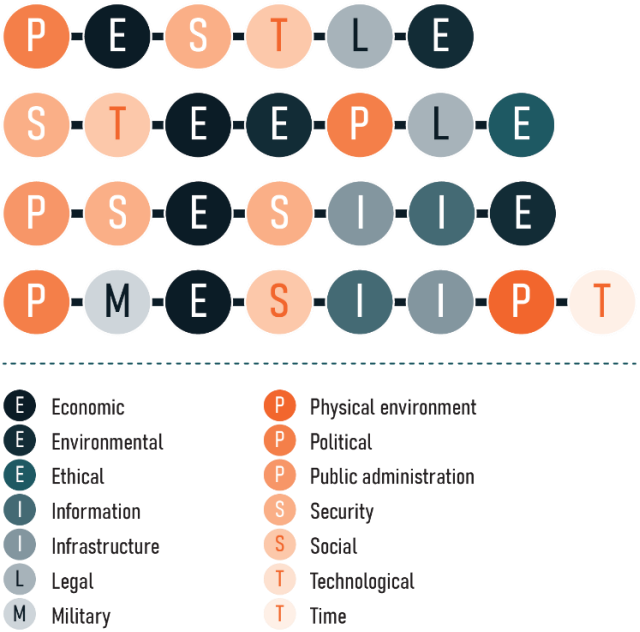

Figure 3. *Frameworks for structuring and classifying consequences*

Identify Solutions

In crisis management, there may be simple solutions to problems that you have identified. However, if the crisis is novel, it may require innovative solutions. This requires creative thinking.

Creative thinking differs from critical thinking by encouraging decision makers to take new perspectives on problems, think more broadly, and pivot among different ideas, thus generating more divergent solutions.

There can be cultural barriers to supporting creative thinking in crisis management, which should be considered. In contradiction to this, the reality of crisis management is that decision makers will encounter situations that require innovation.

To help stimulate creativity, you may wish to use techniques that encourage divergent thinking, such as the SCAMPER technique (see Figure 4).

SCAMPER links to a set of directed, idea spurring questions to suggest some addition to, or modification of, something that already exists. These questions prompt specific thinking processes and can encourage the creation of unusual ideas, or solutions to novel problems.

Suggestions to consider

- Consider using the SCAMPER technique provided on page 24 of this guide.
- Consider that creative thinking requires a psychologically safe environment so people feel that they can share innovative ideas that may challenge the status quo.

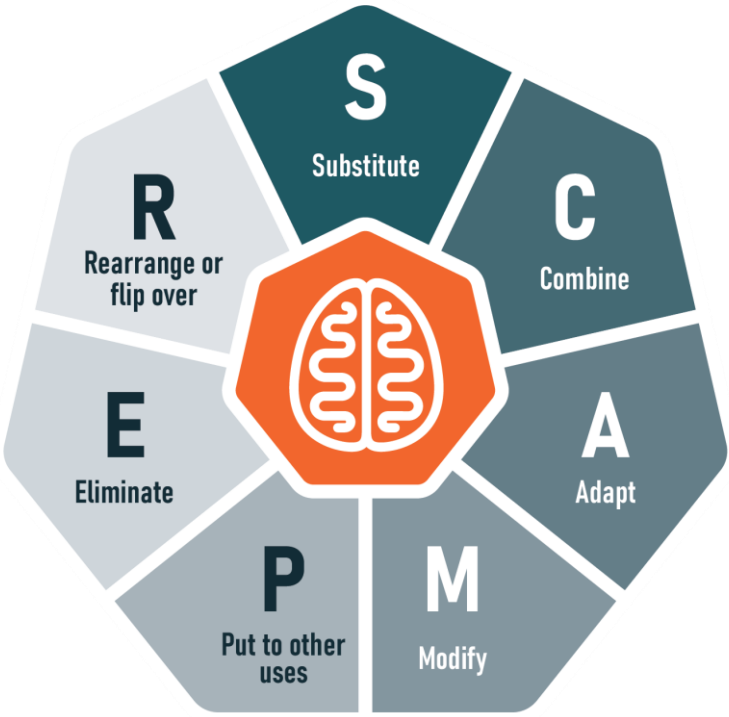

Figure 4. *SCAMPER technique*

Envisage Possible Futures

In crisis management, decisions can often be focused on the here and now. However, the strategic decision making process also needs to consider how decisions made in crisis management consider future uncertainty. This requires futures thinking.

The aim of futures thinking is to provide decision-makers with the capacity to proactively anticipate changes so they can enhance their agility for future uncertainty.

A simple question to ask in futures thinking is ***what if?***

We cannot predict what may happen in the future. However, we can imagine multiple plausible futures that could potentially occur.

It is not enough to think of the worst-case scenario in crisis management, we must also consider other plausible scenarios that may eventuate. The scenarios should consider different time horizons.

In crisis management, strategic decisions may need to be made for time horizons that are hours, days, weeks, or months into the future. Other decisions, such as the recovery from a crisis, may need to be considered for years into the future.

Suggestions to consider

- Consider asking the ***what if*** question to stimulate those involved in the strategic decision making process to start thinking about what could happen.
- Consider how far in to the future you need to think about.
- Consider using the futures cone below to identify future time horizons.

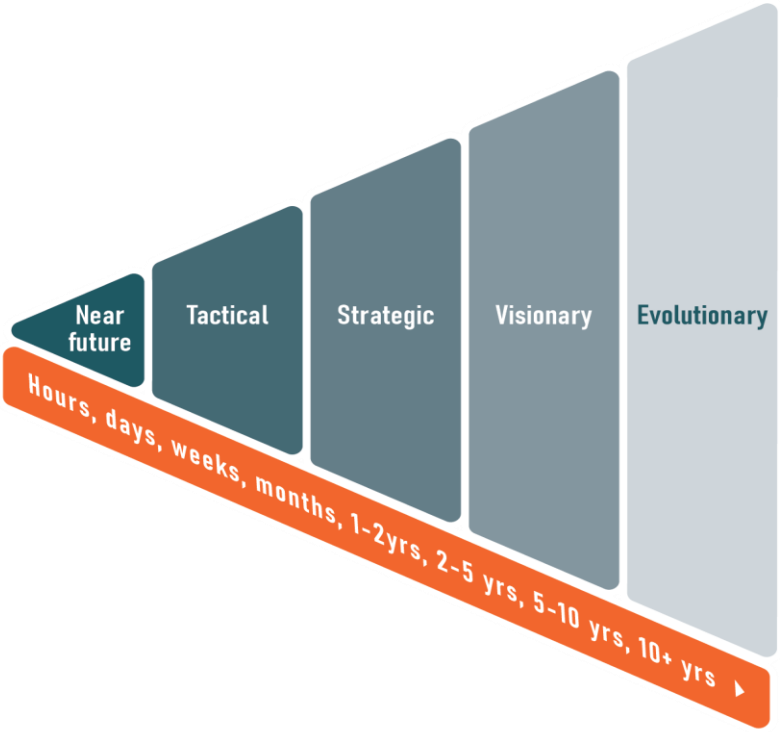

Figure 5. *Futures cone for crisis conditions*

Manage Cognitive Biases

A cognitive bias is a mistake in reasoning, evaluating, or remembering that often occurs because we hold onto our preferences and beliefs, regardless of contrary information.

The extent to which we hold onto our biases can be influenced by factors such as stress, fatigue, or time pressures. We cannot eliminate all cognitive biases in crisis management, but we can adopt strategies to manage their effects.

One strategy is to use tools that could improve the quality of decision making in crisis management with respect to managing our cognitive biases.

Regardless of the tool used to manage cognitive biases, it is important to have people who are familiar with the tool. These people can act as the ‘devil’s advocate’ so they can read out the biases to the team and challenge them to identify if they have made any effort to mitigate the effect of these biases throughout the strategic decision making process.

Suggestions to consider

- Consider using the Cognitive Bias Aide Memoire provided on pages 28-29 of this guide.
- Consider when you will use the aide memoire, it could be used once you've developed an overall understanding of the situation, and again, when significant new intelligence is integrated into that understanding.
- Consider how you can build into the strategic decision making process mechanisms to reflect on cognitive biases.

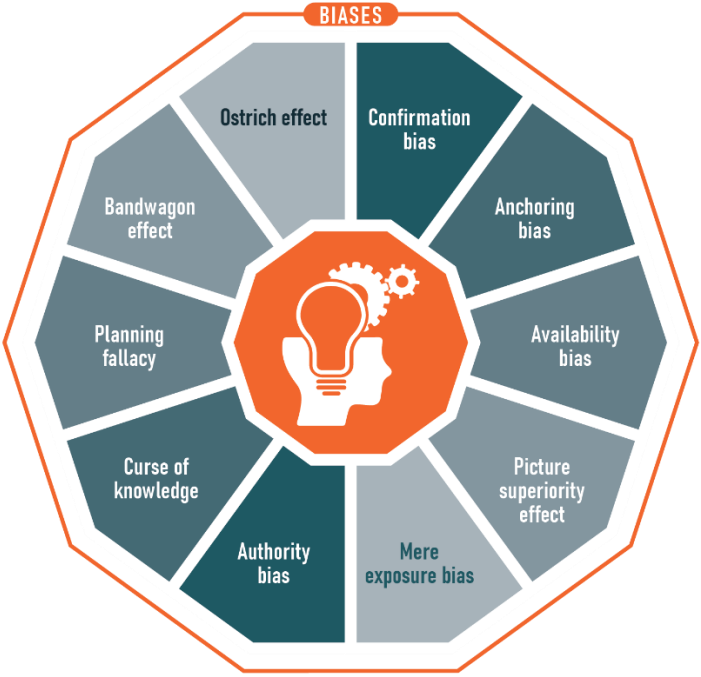

Figure 6. *Cognitive biases in the aide memoire*

Record Decisions

Decisions made in crisis management for critical infrastructure organisations will not only potentially affect the organisation, but may have catastrophic impacts on the Australian community. Crisis driven decisions must be accurately documented.

In the aftermath of a crisis, an organisation may have to publicly defend their decisions made during the crisis (such as to the board, media, or in a legal courtroom), so it is important to record and provide justification for decisions throughout the crisis.

The use of designated information technology platforms can assist in making the recording and retrieval of decisions more visible.

Visualisation of the decision making process can act as a frame of reference for those central to the crisis, and others on the periphery of the crisis who may still require the information. It can also be used as a check point for managing cognitive biases.

Visualising decisions and decision options can also augment the team's memory to provide a larger working set for thinking and analysis.

Suggestions to consider

- Consider how the organisation will actually display their decisions and the decision making options for future eventualities.
- Consider not just recording the outcome of the decision (i.e., a decision was made to…) but the process used to make the decision (key information, consultation and reasoning).
- Consider when recording decisions, the identification of information or events that might change that decision in the future, and the recording of alternative options.

Manage Expectations

Expectation management is important, as positive and negative expectations influence attitudes. When expectations are unmet or misunderstood, this may lead to disappointment, frustration and occasionally anger and hostility.

In crisis management, stakeholders tend to demand action very quickly and by doing so create an ‘obligation to act’ for the decision makers.

Internal expectations include upholding the organisation’s values, complying with internal governance structures, and recognising the board and shareholders position.

External expectations can involve assumptions made by the public, the media, and other organisations currently involved in or impacted by a crisis. It can also include partners who are pivotal to existing and future joint ventures outside this crisis.

Techniques are available for managing expectations, including good interpersonal skills and various modes of communication such as relaying updates in-person or using social media.

Importantly, it is crucial to have a well prepared crisis communications strategy and dedicated team responsible for managing communication to your customers, your workforce, and your stakeholders.

Suggestions to consider

- Consider the potential interaction between the underlying values of your organisation and the tensions associated with the crisis.
- Do not underestimate the use of ‘regular’ dialogue to help determine stakeholder expectations. Through such communication the organisation can learn what expectations stakeholders have about the organisation while informing stakeholders how you are ‘meeting’ those expectations, or if not, why not.
- Consider the organisation’s level of social capital, so their trust, knowledge, reciprocity and shared norms that are required for social connectedness and play a critical role in making individuals and organisations more resilient.

Additional Information

Safe-to-Trust Checklist

It is recommended that the team leader uses the Safe-to-Trust checklist and follows the steps in sequence. However, it is important for the person using the checklist to personalise the checklist so that it is authentic to their own style of leadership.

What follows are the six foundational steps that can be modified into questions or statements by the leader.

No.	Step	Ideas
1	Ensure that everyone has introduced themselves	When talking to other team members, use their names as much as possible because, as Dale Carnegie wrote in his 1936 book, *How to win friends and influence people*, one of the sweetest sounds anyone can hear is their own name!
2	Clarify roles and make them visible	Confirm that everyone not only understands their own role, but they understand everyone else's role.
3	Confirm future interaction	Ensure that people's availability, meeting times, and methods of communication are all clarified.

No.	Step	Ideas
4	Encourage the team to speak up if they have any concerns or doubts	One simple way to encourage this is to institute a “no-interruptions” rule by encouraging the interrupter to “hold on” so the team can fully understand what one member was saying before moving on.
5	Acknowledge your own fallibility	Acknowledging fallibility nurtures curiosity, humility, and continuous learning. Depending on the situation it may be appropriate to identify that you may make mistakes and can sometimes be wrong.
6	Ask the team if anyone has any questions	Always offer the team the opportunity to ask questions so any matters that have not been addressed or are unclear can be attended to or clarified.

STEEPLE Framework

The STEEPLE framework is not a theory that is formulated to predict, explain, and understand phenomena, but rather a taxonomy that can be used to structure, systemise, and classify factors.

The STEEPLE framework was designed to provide organisations with an analytical tool to identify various macro-environmental factors.

It is a useful framework in the strategic decision making process to ensure all major factors are considered when identifying problems.

The following table provides a description for each of the factors in STEEPLE that may be considered in crisis management.

	Factor	Description
S	**Social**	Consider both internal and external social factors. Internally, this could be the welfare of your workforce. Externally, it could be the impacts on your customers and society more broadly.
T	**Technological**	Consider the technological factors that can influence industry and society, e.g., rate of technology change, automation, research, and design, etc.
E	**Economic**	Consider both the macroeconomic factors of an economy and the potential economic implications this crisis may have on your business.

	Factor	Description
E	**Environmental**	Consider possible environmental factors impacting the organisation and the environment more broadly. This may include climate change, attitudes toward and support for renewable energy, etc.
P	**Political**	Consider the influence and risk an organisation faces from the political sphere and its effects on the organisation, market, or industry e.g., government intervention, trade and tax policies, environmental regulations, labour unions, political stability etc.
L	**Legal**	Consider the legal factors that can influence the situation, e.g., consumer law, antitrust laws, privacy laws, etc.
E	**Ethical**	Consider ethical principles and moral or ethical problems that can arise such as fair trade, principles that guide behaviour with the community, acts of slavery, or child labour.

SCAMPER Technique

The aim of the SCAMPER technique is to enhance an individual or team's ability to think divergently by asking questions that prompt specific thinking processes and create unusual ideas.

It is perfectly suited to crisis management where teams can be required to formulate multiple novel solutions to complex problems.

The following table provides a question for each of the words in the SCAMPER technique followed by an example for additional context.

The amount of time available will dictate how many of the questions are asked. If time is limited, we suggest that teams can ask the question associated with the word 'Rearrange' to quickly generate alternate ideas.

Word	Question	Example
Substitute	Can any of the problems be substituted by something else to provide a solution?	In 2018, Sweden was attempting to extinguish one of the most complex forest fires that was around a shooting range full of ammunition. The agencies were using water to extinguish the fires, but due to a lack of progress, decided to test something new and "unconventional". They **substituted** using water with a bomb dropped by a Swedish Air Force fighter jet. The bomb generated a huge pressure wave that interrupted the oxygen supply to the fire, thus providing an opportunity to successfully extinguish the fire.

Combine	Can any of the problems be combined to provide a solution?	In the 2018 Thai cave rescue, a constraint was that the children and their adult coach couldn't SCUBA dive, let alone cave dive. Even if removal by diving was attempted, there was a high risk that the children would panic, with obvious consequences. Sedating the children, fitting them with SCUBA, and then getting experienced cave divers to remove the children, was one possible solution. **Combining** cave diving with medical sedation, presented an unusual opportunity to rescue the children and their coach.
Adapt	Can any of the problems offer a parallel with the past, or be adapted or copied to create a solution?	The inception of the airbag dates to the 1950s, but a constraint of the early prototypes was that the compressed air induced inflation was not fast enough to release the airbags in time during a collision. In 1967, an American engineer **adapted** the original prototype by using an electromagnetic sensor along with a small explosion of sodium azide to inflate the airbags, instead of using compressed air. This technology provided the opportunity for an inflatable occupant restraint system that was viable for mass fitment.

Modify	Can any of the problems be changed, modified, or distorted in an unusual way, to offer a solution?	In 1982, an unknown number of Tylenol capsules were contaminated with cyanide. A consequence of this action was that 7 people died. Tylenol used this crisis as an opportunity to **modify** the way medication was packaged by introducing tamper-proof packaging with foil seals and childproof caps. These modified safety measures provided an opportunity to reset the industry standard for over-the-counter medications.
Put to Other Uses	Can any of the problems be put to another use or reused somewhere else to create a solution?	Digital Aerolus use drones to conduct visual inspections in high-risk environments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, disinfection in acute healthcare facilities was often carried out by specially trained and experienced cleaning technicians using approved equipment, but a constraint was that they were in short supply. Digital Aerolus put their inspection drones **to another use** by installing UVC LED emitters, a tool that reduces the escalation of pathogens, thus putting the drones to work disinfecting healthcare facilities and mitigating the risk of cleaning technicians getting infected.

Eliminate	Can any of the problems be eliminated to create a solution?	In the late 1990's the founders of Netflix were frustrated with the high fees they were charged for late returns of DVD's. Their first business model was to let people rent videos by selecting it online and having it delivered to their door. By **eliminating** the requirement for people to remember to return the DVD to the store, Netflix created an opportunity in the home movie rental market. This led to a monthly subscription model for renting DVDs to the streaming subscription model we all know today.
Rearrange or Flip Over	Can any of the problems be flipped from a negative to a positive, thus offering a solution?	In February 2018, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) closed more than half of its stores in the United Kingdom because of a shortage of chicken. The social and mainstream media enjoyed the irony of a chicken shop without any chicken and went to town on the story. While struggling to get their restaurants re-opened, KFC made a strategic decision to **flip** the narrative entirely. KFC quickly acknowledged they were at fault and ran an apology advertisement with the title, 'FCK - we're sorry'. This borderline obscene response provided the opportunity to demonstrate it deeply understood their audience (young, hip, and irreverent). This led to a swift abatement of the criticism for the closed stores amongst its customers and the media.

Cognitive Bias Aide Memoire

The cognitive bias aide memoire is a simple tool that can be used to manage cognitive biases. The aide memoire has ten questions that have been developed to stimulate discussion about how a team has considered managing their cognitive biases during the strategic decision making process.

An aide memoire differs to a checklist where actions are to be completed in sequence, and instead, is simply an aide to memory. Depending on the time available, any number of the ten questions can be asked to the team.

No.	Cognitive Bias	Question
1	**Confirmation bias**	Are we favouring intelligence that confirms our understanding or preferred options, or dismissing or downplaying evidence that doesn't?
2	**Anchoring bias**	Our decisions can be anchored by early intelligence. Have we assessed the credibility of the intelligence to the same standard over time?
3	**Availability bias**	Are we making decisions based on our previous experience of similar incidents and if so, are these incidents really the same?
4	**Picture superiority effect**	Have our options/decisions been biased by pictures, maps or other visual media? Has this effect discounted other information and/or intelligence?

No.	Cognitive Bias	Question
5	Mere exposure bias	Are we committing to a decision or option because we are familiar with it, instead of committing because it is the best option or decision?
6	Authority bias	Have we deferred to or given greater weight to the opinions of people in authority without assessing those opinions rigorously?
7	Curse of knowledge	Have we made efforts to make sure everyone truly understands the decision and reasons for it?
8	Planning fallacy	We typically underestimate the time needed to perform our own tasks. What are the implications if this is true for these decisions/options?
9	Bandwagon effect	Are we just agreeing because others agree? Have we properly considered alternatives or intelligence that does not support the dominant opinion/option?
10	Ostrich effect	Are we avoiding information to shield ourselves from possible situations by pretending that they do not eventuate?

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About Us

The Resilience Expert Advisory Group (REAG) promotes organisational resilience in support of Australian critical infrastructure owners and operators by providing strategic advice, guidance and tools to mature security and resilience approaches.

The REAG's mission is to uplift the security and resilience of Australia's critical infrastructure in the face of all hazards. This is achieved by guiding the critical infrastructure community to adopt and mature their security and resilience approaches.

The REAG forms part of the Australian Government's Trusted Information Sharing Network (TISN). The TISN builds partnerships with industry to enhance critical infrastructure protection to uplift our resilience in the face of all-hazards.

The TISN is the primary forum connecting owners and operators of Australian critical infrastructure with all levels of government, who work together to enhance the security and resilience of critical infrastructure.

Through the TISN, members of the critical infrastructure community voluntarily collaborate to strengthen the resilience of their organisations and sectors in the face of all hazards.

By sharing information on current and medium-to-long-term threats and vulnerabilities, industry and government can collaborate on appropriate measures to mitigate risk and enhance the resilience of Australia's critical infrastructure.

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