



by Joel P. Gleason

Author’s Note: GEN Richard Clarke, SOCOM CG, taught me the concept of the “Life Cycle of a Decision” during my tour as a Logistics Planner for the 82nd Airborne Division. His mentorship closed some gaps in my understanding of the commander’s role in the operations process. His example was military force deployment, but as I lead different groups I find that an object lesson is comprehensible to more audiences, including GS Civilians, staff NCOs, and even young Boy Scouts.

As Soon As Possible!

Why does it seem so hard to get your commander to make a decision? Understanding that there is more to making a decision than simply making a selection from a list of options will

enable a staff officer to better support the commander. An expectation for an immediate decision might be evidence of an untrained staff, poor analysis, or a self-inflicted emergency.

Most staff officers have been in a meeting where the decision maker (DM) asks a briefer to identify the timelines and deadlines involved in the courses of action in front of them. Often the interchange goes like this, “Great brief, when do you need a decision?” [Uncomfortable pause] “As soon as possible, sir.”

“As soon as possible,” is rarely the right answer when requesting a decision. It is usually wrong because it fails to enable the DM to actually breathe for a moment while they analyze the options. When “as soon as possible” is actually true, the staff has failed to bring up the decision until the DM is on the brink of a no-decision-is-a-decision moment. That is a self-inflicted emergency. When “as soon as possible” is a guess, any DM who has considered the nature of their decision making authority, is likely to see that answer as evidence of an incomplete product or an immature staff.

Requests for urgent decisions arise in part from a misunderstanding of the importance of the [decision making process](#) to the greater organization. Staff officers, especially planners, can get the sense that their job is to generate options and seek guidance while the DM’s job is to make decisions and give guidance. In the mind of an untrained staff officer, nothing is more important than generating options quickly and seeking decisions.

Reducing staff and DMs to [decision-cycle](#) engines is a recipe for bad recommendations urgently acted upon. Yes, a good staff should be [generating options](#) for their DM and seeking guidance along the way. However, that does not mean that a DM is obligated to select one of those options the moment it is placed before them.

That DM is a director, manager, or commander charged with getting optimal results out of

their organization. Sometimes executing the commander’s role in the operations process means the best decision is a decision to wait.

Avocados anyone?

One way for staff officers to see decisions through their commander’s eyes is to consider that delicious and ever popular fruit, the avocado. There are many ways to eat an avocado, but for now consider three simple recipes that require one avocado each. The first is a [salsa recipe](#) that calls for a nearly ripe avocado to cool off the spice while adding a little bite with its near-firm texture. Next is the simple [sandwich](#) that calls for an avocado sliced at the perfect point of ripeness so it is smooth and creamy but not so soft it mingles with the tomato. Finally, every chef keeps a recipe for [hand mixed guacamole](#) that calls for that just-over-ripe avocado soft enough to blend easily with a fork.

Imagine every decision is an avocado laid on the kitchen counter and paired with the question, “what would you like to do with this avocado?” If the DM wishes to keep their options open, cutting the avocado up the day it comes home from the store is probably a bad idea.

Any chef also knows that avocados are fickle. If left unwatched, all that remains on the counter at the end of the week is a greenish-black ball of mold. That [rotten avocado](#) is like the decision that “makes itself” if no one takes any action. However, there are a few days between grocer and garbage where there are decisions to be made. Decision makers need their staff to understand the shelf life of their decisions.

A Better Decision Timeline

Planning is most successful if the staff and DM have a shared understanding of necessary [conditions or triggers](#), the correct ones, for decision points. Even more impactful is the idea of seeing each option as having an individual shelf life. That analysis leads to a complete

decision timeline that allows the DM to maintain the potential use of resources until the point at which the best decision needs to be made and moved upon.

Going back to the three recipes as an example, a mature decision timeline could lay out options for the DM like menu planning for the week. The exchange might go something like this:

[DM] “When do you need a decision?” [Briefer confidently points to a decision matrix or other graphic] “Sir, if you want the salsa we need a decision by Friday evening but we can execute as early as Wednesday. After that we will only have sandwiches or guac’ for quality options. By next Tuesday, we will no longer be able to add avocado to our sandwiches and no decision by Thursday is a decision not to eat the avocado.”

That answer is perhaps a bit more complicated than, “as soon as possible,” but now the full power of the decision is in the DM’s hands and the staff has not made a decision for him.

Better analysis comes into play allowing the DM to see the earliest point at which a decision can be executed and the last point at which the decision can be made. However, handing over this more mature decision timeline to some DMs may place too much of the [staff work](#) on their shoulders unless there is a good set of tools and graphics to support the decision.

Avocado Decision Template

TASK TITLE	WEEK 1					WEEK 2				
	M	T	W	R	F	M	T	W	R	F
Purchase Avocados										
Place on Kitchen Counter										
COA1- Make Salsa with Avocado										
COA2- Make Sandwiches with Avocado										
COA3- Make Guacamole										
Use Avocados "As Soon As Possible"										
Throw Avocados Away										

The Avocado Decision Template featured here (a simplified [Gantt](#) chart) better illustrates the actual decisions available over time. For example, now the DM can see that there is overlap in the timeline of some options. The DM can see that Thursday and Friday are days where all recipes are available. The DM can see that the earliest point at which a decision can be executed is not the earliest point at which it can be decided. The DM could hypothetically plan the menu well in advance of any action, but directing the chef to cut the avocado early may remove the flexibility inherent in the other options.

When adapting shelf-life concepts to real-world planning, time is not the only way that decisions can ripen, change, or expire. Depending on how a staff uses this avocado example, the shelf life of each option can be laid across phases, resources, or other triggers. Tools to illustrate it could also be anything from a full Gantt chart to a whiteboard or sketch pad. The important work is to link factors that make each option possible and factors that remove an option from the DM.

Changing Conditions

What would happen if a dinner guest turned out to be allergic to avocado? The allergic guest is a great example of why the DM hopes to preserve the decision until it is necessary to execute. If serving salsa becomes an obstacle to a pleasant dinner, the [“pre-crastinating”](#) chef who cut it up and prepared it as soon as it was available pays the opportunity cost of having no avocado for sandwiches later in the week. Defining the shelf life of the options enables the DM to weigh the costs of an early decision in light of changing conditions.

With a more mature decision timeline, the DM and the staff begin to understand each decision in terms of the shelf life of that decision. Instead of the terrible “as soon as possible” or even the more doctrinal practice of identifying when a [decision point](#) occurs, the shelf life concept allows for a window in which a decision is possible, best, and no longer available.

A DM might not select a course of action but instead allow one option to expire in favor of continuing to leave other options open until a later time. The DM might also decide to initiate actions on more than one option and essentially [“horse race”](#) them until the best option is more readily evident.

Caution: Avocados are a Lot of Work

A shelf-life-based decision timeline is only valuable if it makes the organization better at the execution of its mission. The value of analyzing and presenting the shelf life of a decision is in the conservation of resources and avoidance of opportunity costs. [Edward Luttwak](#), the Cold-War International Relations theorist, famously identified that the potential use of force is far more useful than the actual use of force because when the [deterrence action](#) is over, the [potential to use force](#) still remains. If understanding shelf life allows the DM to maintain the potential to use resources until it is necessary to make the decision, that can increase the resources that are available.

There is a parallel consideration before analyzing every option for the exact shelf life within the decision. Staff and DM brainpower are another limited resource. This proposed method, like preparing the fickle avocado for consumption, takes a bit of work. It is possible to gain no additional value in the execution while burning through the [resources required](#) to make the next decision. In that instance, a staff could determine it is best to present options with little or no shelf-life analysis.

Dinner is Served

Staff teams that have a multifaceted approach to presenting decisions are more likely to enable a DM to make the right decision at the right time. Decision makers, despite the title throughout this article, usually exist to do much more than make decisions. Where an advanced understanding of the shelf-life of an individual decision saves resources, it should be considered. The [tried and true method](#) of establishing points at which a decision should

be made will also allow an organization to succeed. However, if you are presenting decisions without any requisite analysis, that method should be changed “as soon as possible.”

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