



Decision Altitude Model

At what level of the organization does this decision actually belong?

Category	Executive Decision-Making
Primary Audience	Executive Leaders
Companion Framework	Integrative Leadership, Organizational Intentionality, & Organizational Coherence
Edition	Launch Edition • v1.0



Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE QUESTION

Are we solving the problem at the level where it actually exists?

The Altitude of a Decision

Organizational problems rarely exist at only one level. An immediate issue may appear to concern a customer, employee, project, or operational decision while also reflecting patterns in process, governance, the operating model, or the broader organizational system.

Leaders therefore face two related challenges: determining what decision needs to be made and determining the appropriate altitude from which to understand it. Too little altitude can reduce systemic problems to isolated events. Leaders repeatedly resolve symptoms while leaving the conditions producing them unchanged. Too much altitude creates a different problem. Straightforward decisions become unnecessarily complex, analysis expands beyond what the situation requires, and action slows while leaders search for explanations that may not be necessary to make the decision before them.

Not every situation should immediately be reduced to a single problem statement. Sometimes leaders need to hold several observations, tensions, and possible explanations long enough to understand the broader situation before determining which question - or questions - actually require an answer.

Decision altitude is therefore not about always thinking at the highest possible level. It is about matching the level of analysis to the decision while remaining alert to what may exist above or below it.

CORE PROPOSITION

Effective executive judgment requires solving problems at the appropriate altitude: broad enough to understand what matters, but no broader than the decision requires.



Understanding Decision Altitude

Definition

Decision altitude is the level of an organizational situation at which a problem is framed, understood, and acted upon.

The same situation can often be examined at multiple altitudes. A missed deadline might be understood as an isolated execution issue, a recurring process problem, a weakness in the operating model, or evidence of a broader organizational constraint. Each perspective may reveal something useful, but each leads leaders toward different questions and potentially different interventions.

The appropriate altitude depends on the decision being made. Leaders do not need to understand every organizational interaction before acting, nor should every operational issue become a systemic investigation. The objective is to develop enough understanding at the relevant level to make the decision well while remaining alert to evidence that the problem may exist elsewhere in the system.

What Decision Altitude Is Not

Decision altitude is not organizational hierarchy. A senior executive can make a highly localized decision, while an individual contributor may recognize a pattern with implications across the organization. Authority affects who can act; it does not determine the altitude at which an issue exists.

Nor does greater altitude necessarily produce better decisions. Moving upward can reveal relationships and systemic causes that are invisible at lower levels, but it can also introduce unnecessary complexity when the situation requires a straightforward response.

Decision altitude is also not an argument for finding a single “root cause.” Complex organizational situations may involve several interacting causes across different levels. Sometimes the appropriate response is not to reduce the situation further, but to understand enough of the broader landscape to determine which decisions should be made, at which altitudes, and in what sequence.

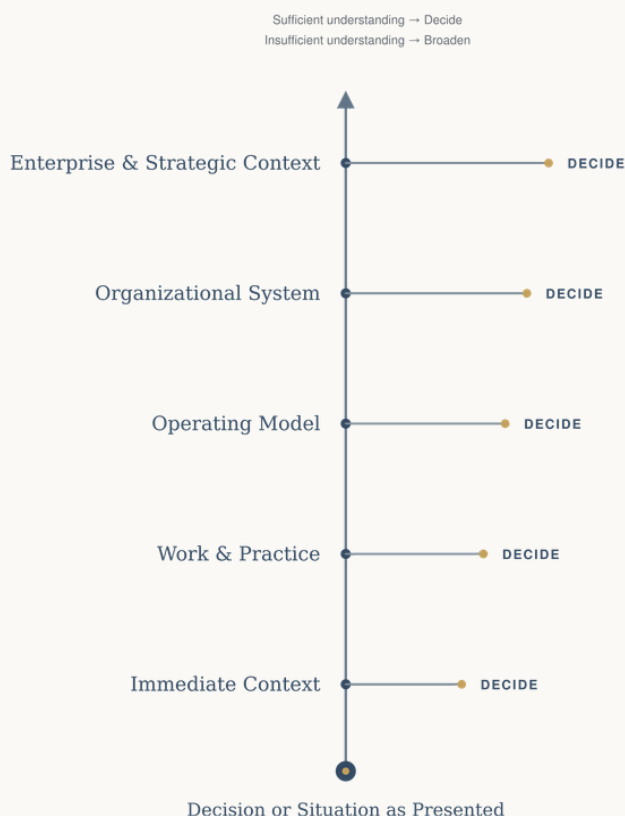
CORE PROPOSITION

Good executive judgment is not demonstrated by always thinking at a higher altitude. It is demonstrated by recognizing the altitude the decision requires.



Finding the Appropriate Altitude

The Decision Altitude Model begins with the situation as it is presented. Leaders broaden the frame only when the current altitude does not provide sufficient understanding for the decision before them. The objective is not to reach the highest altitude, but to find the narrowest frame from which the decision can be made intelligently.



Moving upward is not inherently better. Each increase in altitude introduces additional relationships, information, and complexity. The purpose is therefore not to reach the highest altitude, but to stop at the narrowest altitude that provides sufficient understanding for the decision being made.

Nor are the boundaries between altitudes absolute. Organizational situations frequently span several levels at once. The model is intended as a diagnostic aid: a way of asking whether the frame currently being used is broad enough - or unnecessarily broad - for the decision at hand.

CORE PROPOSITION

The appropriate altitude is the narrowest frame that provides sufficient understanding for the decision.



At What Altitude Are We Deciding?

Each altitude brings different aspects of the organization into view. The questions below are not fixed decision criteria, but prompts to help leaders consider whether the current frame provides sufficient understanding - or whether the situation should be examined more broadly.

Altitude	Consider this altitude when...	Question for Reflection
Immediate Context	The issue may be specific to an event, person, customer, decision, or circumstance.	Can this situation be understood and resolved within its immediate context?
Work & Practice	The issue may reflect how work is actually performed, coordinated, or experienced.	Is what we are seeing part of a recurring pattern in how work gets done?
Operating Model	Roles, processes, decision rights, capabilities, structures, or interfaces may be shaping the situation.	Is the operating model creating or reinforcing the conditions behind this issue?
Organizational System	Multiple organizational elements or dynamics may be interacting to produce the situation.	What relationships among leadership, governance, incentives, culture, information, or behaviour might explain what we are seeing?
Enterprise & Strategic Context	The issue may reflect enterprise priorities, strategic choices, external conditions, or longer-term direction.	Does understanding this decision require us to reconsider the broader strategic or enterprise context?

What is the narrowest altitude at which we have sufficient understanding to make the decision before us?

CORE PROPOSITION

The same situation can look different at different altitudes.
The appropriate question is not where the problem belongs,
but what must be understood to make the decision well.



Closing Reflection

Executive judgment requires more than seeing the broader system. It requires knowing when the broader system matters to the decision before you.

Leaders operate within a constant tension. Too narrow a frame can oversimplify a situation, producing decisions that address the visible issue while leaving its underlying conditions untouched. Too broad a frame can introduce complexity that the immediate decision does not require, turning thoughtful analysis into overengineering or paralysis.

The challenge is therefore not to understand everything before acting. It is to understand enough of the right things.

This requires two related judgments. The first is *sequence*: what decision actually requires attention now? The second is *depth*: how broadly must the situation be understood to make that decision well?

Neither judgment can be made perfectly. New information will emerge. Conditions will change. Some decisions will reveal problems that require subsequent decisions at different altitudes. Executive judgment therefore depends not on eliminating uncertainty, but on matching the depth of analysis to the decision currently before the organization while preserving the ability to revisit the broader system when necessary.

The goal is neither speed nor comprehensiveness. It is proportionate understanding in service of timely action.

A QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

Are we still broadening our understanding because the decision requires it - or because we are reluctant to decide?

A CLOSING REFLECTION

Good executive judgment requires navigating between oversimplification and overengineering: understanding the situation deeply enough to make the decision that needs to be made now.