Legal Career Studio

Decision Framework

A practical guide for making faster, clearer, and more consistent decisions in legal work

Legal teams make dozens or even hundreds of decisions every week, often under pressure, with incomplete information, and across multiple matters. This framework helps teams cut through ambiguity, clarify risk thresholds, and move work forward without endless cycles of debate.

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1. IDENTIFY THE DECISION TYPE

Not all decisions are the same. Labeling the Decision Type upfront reduces confusion and sets the right process.

Common types:

- **Advisory:** Legal recommends, business decides
- **Gatekeeping:** Legal decides based on risk or compliance
- **Collaborative:** Legal + business decide together
- **Escalation:** Legal elevates a decision to leadership.

Ask: *"Who truly owns this?"*

2. CLARIFY DECISION CRITERIA (BEFORE DISCUSSION OPTIONS)

Teams get stuck when the Criteria aren't aligned.

Define the Criteria upfront:

- Legal risk tolerance
- Business priorities/timelines
- Regulatory requirements
- Precedent (internal + external)
- Stakeholder expectations
- Opportunity cost (speed vs. thoroughness)

Ask: *"What makes an option acceptable or unacceptable?"*

3. GATHER THE MINIMUM VIABLE FACTS (MVF)

Legal teams often over-research. Identify the essential facts needed to decide.

MVF examples:

- Applicable laws/obligations
- Data needed for risk assessment
- Contract terms that directly affect the outcome
- Business context (timeline, revenue impact, customer commitments)

Ask: *"What information do we actually need, and what is noise?"*

4. GENERATE AND COMPARE OPTIONS (NOT OPINIONS)

Frame choices explicitly. This reduces circular discussion.

For each Option, define:

- The proposed course of action
- The key tradeoffs
- The risk profile
- Dependencies/required approvals
- Impact on business timelines

Ask: *"If we had to pick today, which two options are the most viable?"*

5. MAKE THE CALL (OWNER + RATIONALE)

Every decision needs an owner and a timestamp.

Document:

- Owner (who decides)
- Decision(s) made
- Rationale (short, clear)
- Any conditions (e.g., "If X happens, we revisit")

Ask: *"Are we aligned? Does anyone disagree for the record?"*

6. COMMUNICATE DECISION CLEARLY

A Decision is only as good as its rollout. (Hint: Don't bury your Decision in a long memo.)

Include:

- The decision (avoid vague language like "we should consider" or "we may")
- Why it was made (avoid legalese or jargon)
- What changes for whom
- Next steps + owners
- When it takes effect

Ask: *"Could someone outside of Legal understand this in 20 seconds?"*

If your team could benefit from a workshop on making clearer, more thoughtful decisions, book time for a free, initial 30-minute consultation.

About the Author

Ryan Black is an executive coach with extensive experience in BigLaw and in-house legal departments. He works with lawyers, legal ops professionals, and paralegals to build strong career narratives and represent themselves confidently. His approach is grounded in behavior-change science and proven, practical frameworks that make an impact.