

Decisions Under Uncertainty: Make the Trade-Offs Visible

Todd Jerome Jenkins | v1.0 | Reviewed October 9, 2026 | Discussion + field checks

Why this matters

A decision becomes difficult when information is incomplete and time is short. Making uncertainty visible helps responsible people compare options without hiding their limits. Aim for a defensible choice within required safety boundaries, with clear reasons to reconsider it.

Objective: Compare options, record missing information and identify the authority and conditions governing a consequential decision.

Key hazards or failure points

First option accepted too quickly; contradictory evidence ignored; production pressure; uncertain authority; one benefit hiding another exposure; no trigger to reconsider a choice.

Practical controls

- State the decision and intended outcome before choosing an option. Identify applicable safety requirements and limits. Include waiting for information or maintaining the safe condition where relevant; do not frame exposure as the only way to keep progress.
- Compare credible options with affected workers and the appropriate technical roles. Record evidence, assumptions and consequences for each, including later work. Seek information that could disprove the preferred choice rather than collecting agreement only.
- Name the decision authority, implementation owner and required checks. Record the selected option's basis, restrictions and reconsideration triggers. Cost or schedule preferences cannot waive a required protection or technical acceptance criterion.

Verify It in the Field

Use a safe planning scenario. Ask two people to state the decision being made and the information still missing. Compare their answers with the decision record; correct a different understanding before anyone relies on the choice.

Trace one important reason for the preferred option to its current source and scope. Have the required reviewer examine contrary evidence. Record the actual finding, person and time; confidence is not a substitute for the prescribed assessment.

Follow the chosen option into the work instructions and control checks. Ask the receiving crew what change would make it stop and seek review. Mark future checks pending until completed and hold dependent exposure when required evidence remains unresolved.

Stop and reassess

Pause the dependent decision or work for an unknown required limit, contradictory findings, missing authority or a change outside the documented basis. Maintain the task's defined safe condition. Obtain authorized reassessment, complete required checks and communicate the outcome before proceeding.

Ask the crew

1. What choice are we actually making?
2. What evidence could change our preferred option?
3. What condition requires this decision to be reconsidered?

Use the task plan and required specialist decisions before exposure.

Sources: DOE-HDBK-1028-2009, Vol. 2, pp. 63, 64, 65; OSHA — Hazard Prevention and Control.

Free next step: [JHA/JSA planning & field-verification worksheet](#)

Expanded guidance and separate forms: toddjeromejenkins.com/toolbox-talks/decisions-under-uncertainty-visible-basis

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