

Appendix B

The DECODE Canvas (Annotated for Humans)

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The DECODE Canvas is not a report.

It is a thinking surface.

Its purpose is to slow commitment long enough for understanding to stabilize. If it ever feels like paperwork, it is being used incorrectly.

This appendix explains what each section of the DECODE Canvas is *for*, what belongs there, and what does not.

What the DECODE Canvas Is

The DECODE Canvas is a single-page working document that captures the reasoning behind a decision at the moment it is made.

It exists to:

- Make thinking visible
- Prevent premature commitment
- Preserve reasoning over time

It does not exist to:

- Generate solutions
- Document execution
- Prove compliance

If the Canvas is completed after the decision is already emotionally settled, it has failed.

How to Read the Canvas

Read the Canvas from top to bottom.

Each section constrains the next.

Skipping ahead weakens everything below it.

If a lower section feels forced, the problem is almost always above it.

D Define the Improvement Intent

Why are we even considering change?

This section anchors relevance.

What belongs here:

- The value, capability, or risk that makes change worth considering
- The reason the current state may no longer be acceptable

What does not belong here:

- Problems
- Causes
- Solutions
- Targets or KPIs

A good intent:

- Is directional, not prescriptive
- Creates space rather than narrowing it
- Feels slightly uncomfortable

If this reads like a problem statement, the decision has already collapsed.

E Explore the System as It Exists

What does the system actually look like right now?

This section anchors reality.

What belongs here:

- Description of elements, interfaces, and context
- Observations that multiple people can verify

What does not belong here:

- Explanations
- Judgments

- The word “because”

If this section contains causes, the next sections will be biased.

Disagreement here is expected.

It signals incomplete shared understanding.

C Clarify Embedded Decisions

Which past decisions shaped what we see?

This section restores agency.

What belongs here:

- Design choices
- Structural decisions
- Legacy constraints
- Inherited assumptions

What does not belong here:

- Defense of history
- Blame
- “That’s just how it is”

This section often feels political.

That discomfort means hidden decisions are becoming visible.

O Outline Change Boundaries

Where does change become unsafe or invalid?

This section protects realism.

What belongs here:

- Physical limits
- Regulatory or compliance limits
- Organizational or capability limits

What does not belong here:

- Preferences disguised as constraints
- Assumptions treated as facts

Boundaries should eliminate options.

If nothing is ruled out, this section is weak.

D Decide the Improvement Path

What do we commit to, given what we now understand?

This section creates commitment.

Only three outcomes are valid:

- Improve within existing boundaries
- Redesign beyond them
- Preserve and do not change

These are decision paths, not detailed solutions. The specific solution is developed after closure through the appropriate downstream method.

What does not belong here:

- Plans
- Milestones
- Owners
- “We’ll see” language

If this decision cannot be stated clearly in two sentences, it is not ready.

E Establish Closure

How do we protect this decision over time?

This section preserves memory.

What belongs here:

- Decision statement
- Supporting evidence and reasoning
- Key assumptions
- Boundaries and scope
- Accepted trade-offs
- Revisit triggers
- Review date or review condition

What does not belong here:

- Execution detail
- Success metrics
- Optimism

Closure does not predict outcomes.

It protects reasoning.

Common Failure Patterns

If the DECODE Canvas feels slow

You are probably doing it right.

If it feels obvious

The decision was likely made before the DECODE Canvas.

If it becomes a checklist

Stop using it.

If people argue about wording

You are probably too late in the process.

When to Use the DECODE Canvas

Use the DECODE Canvas when:

- Commitment is costly to reverse
- Understanding is incomplete
- Pressure to act is high

Do not use it:

- For low-risk, reversible actions
- For execution problems
- To justify decisions already made

Selective use is maturity.

Final Note

The DECODE Canvas is scaffolding.

As discipline matures, teams will rely on it less visibly. The logic remains even when the page disappears.

If the Canvas helps you decide less often but more deliberately, it is working.

That is all it is meant to do.

The DECODE Canvas may be laid out in an A3-style one-page format. A3 describes the format, not a separate DECODE tool; the canonical working document remains the DECODE Canvas. The exact layout is intentionally left undefined.

APPENDIX B

HOW TO READ THE DECODE CANVAS

An annotated guide to what belongs in each section

