THE EXECUTIVE LEARNING PROJECT

GOVERNANCE AND BOARDS

Board paper and director review pack

Make the decision, the reasons and the uncertainty easy to find.

Use this pack to prepare a paper for a board or executive committee, or to challenge one before the meeting. It helps make a proposal inspectable without disguising the trade-offs or compressing away material detail.

What to use

Pages 2 and 3 are the editable template. Page 2 carries the decision brief; page 3 supports it with evidence, alternatives and follow-through. Pages 4 and 5 show a fictional completed example. Page 6 is a director and author review checklist.

How to use it

1. Start with the decision. Confirm who has authority to make it and whether the paper seeks approval, discussion or noting. Do not use “noting” to obscure a request for authority or money.

2. Copy the two template pages into your organisation’s format. Replace the square-bracket prompts, then expand the sections the decision needs. A first-page summary is useful; a one-page limit is not compulsory.

3. Show the strongest real alternative, including delay or doing less where credible. Put material uncertainty and the main downside beside the recommendation, not only in an appendix.

4. Give the opening page to a colleague unfamiliar with the proposal. Ask what decision is sought, why, and what could go wrong. Use any mismatch to improve the paper.

5. After the meeting, record the actual resolution, conditions, owner and review date in the organisation’s normal minutes and action process. The proposed wording is not a record of approval.

Scope and limits

This is an ELP practice tool, not a validated method or a substitute for judgement, due diligence, legal advice, your constitution, delegations or board procedures. A clear paper can still be wrong. Adapt the depth to the stakes and keep confidential information in approved systems.

The worked example is wholly fictional. Its figures, evidence and thresholds are teaching assumptions, not benchmarks or investment advice. Do not reuse them as a business case.

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Prepared with AI assistance for human review. Related learning: The Communication Mistake That Makes Smart Leaders Hard to Follow.

Decision brief template

Paper title [specific decision] | Meeting [date] | Paper version [date and version]

Purpose [approval / discussion / noting] | Sponsor [role] | Author [role]

Decision authority [board or delegated authority and basis] | Handling [classification]

Decision requested

[Write the proposed decision in terms that identify scope, financial or other limits, conditions and any delegation. State what this decision does not authorise.]

Recommendation and reason

[State the preferred option and the two or three reasons that matter most. Link the choice to the organisation's objective. Explain why the decision is needed now and the consequence of waiting.]

Real alternatives

[Summarise the strongest alternative and a credible defer or do-less option. Compare them using the same criteria. State the main disadvantage of the preferred option. Reference the supporting comparison if needed.]

Exposure and uncertainty

[Show the total commitment and ongoing cost, capacity required, principal downside, residual risk and key unknown. Distinguish observed evidence from assumptions. State what evidence would change the recommendation.]

[Use a defensible range if available and explain its basis. If probability cannot be estimated responsibly, say so and state how the uncertainty will be reduced. Do not invent a percentage.]

Action and return point

[Name the accountable owner, next action, due date and when the decision returns for review. Specify stop, escalate or reconsider triggers and who acts on them.]

Before submission

Colleague restatement [decision / reason / main risk understood or revised]

Consultation and unresolved objections [who reviewed and what remains contested]

Attachments [title, version, date and where the supporting evidence can be found]

Supporting analysis template

Use the sections that are material. Expand the evidence rather than shrinking the font. Carry any issue that could change the decision into the opening brief.

Compare the choices fairly

Choice	Outcome and timing	Commitment and capacity	Main trade-off
[Preferred]	[Benefit and delivery timing]	[Total, recurring and internal resources]	[Most important cost or risk]
[Strong alternative]	[Same basis of comparison]	[Same cost horizon and inclusions]	[Why it may be better]
[Delay or do less]	[What continues or is lost]	[Cost to maintain current position]	[Risk or opportunity cost of waiting]

Test the claims that could change the choice

Claim or assumption	Evidence and limits	Next test and owner
[Decision-critical claim]	[Source, date, coverage and what it does not establish]	[Test, due date and decision consequence]
[Key assumption]	[Basis, range and confidence; state unknowns]	[What would make us change course]

Consequences and safeguards

[Explain financial, operational, people, customer, legal, regulatory, security and reputation effects where relevant. Distinguish mitigation from residual exposure. Show downside cash needs and commitments that are difficult to reverse.]

Delivery and oversight

[Identify the accountable executive, resource dependencies, approval conditions, milestones and reporting. Define what success means, the review date, and the evidence needed before further commitment.]

Record after the meeting

[Actual decision and date; conditions; actions and owners; due dates; dissent or conflicts handled under the organisation’s procedures. Link to the official minutes. Do not overwrite the submitted paper.]

Data platform pilot decision

Paper for approval • Board meeting 30 November 2026 • Sponsor Chief Information Officer

Illustration only. All entities, figures, evidence and thresholds below are invented for learning.

Decision requested

Approve a six-month data-platform pilot in one business unit, with cash expenditure capped at A$240,000, including A$40,000 contingency. Authorise the Chief Executive to enter pilot-only contracts within that cap after the Chief Financial Officer verifies funding and the security lead clears the agreed controls. Any wider rollout requires a separate board decision.

Recommendation and reason

Choose the staged pilot. It tests whether the platform can improve reporting quality on our own data before a larger commitment. Two reporting teams currently reconcile data manually. A six-month delay is manageable, but it prolongs that work and the risk of inconsistent reports. There is no external deadline that forces immediate approval.

Real alternatives

A full rollout may deliver benefits sooner and avoid duplicated migration effort, but commits more cash before integration is proven. Repairing the current system is cheaper initially and preserves flexibility, but does not test whether a new platform solves the broader data problem. Staging may raise the eventual total cost and delay benefits; those are genuine disadvantages.

Exposure and uncertainty

The A$240,000 pilot cap is additional to 0.5 full-time-equivalent internal capacity for six months, reassigned from other projects. A wider rollout could cost A$1.05–1.25 million in total, including the pilot; it is not approved by this paper. Recurring costs require validation before any rollout decision.

Migration effort and the ability to reproduce reliable reporting remain uncertain. There is not enough evidence to assign a defensible probability of success. A failed pilot could consume the full cap and six months of internal time. Supplier exit terms and a tested recovery route are conditions before work begins.

Action and return point

The Chief Information Officer owns delivery and reports monthly. Pause new commitments and escalate to the Chief Executive if forecast pilot spend exceeds the cap, an unresolved critical security issue arises, or the agreed reporting tests fail. Return to the board at month six, or earlier if the decision needs to change, with evidence and a separate stop, revise or rollout recommendation.

Data platform supporting analysis

These are illustrative implementation cash costs, not lifetime costs. Recurring operating costs are unvalidated and excluded for every option, as is internal staff time. Full economics cannot be compared until those costs are validated. These figures are not supplier quotes or verified savings.

Options considered

Choice	Implementation cash cost	Timing and trade-off
Full rollout	A$950,000–1.15 million implementation	About 9 months. Earlier broad coverage; greater initial commitment and delivery exposure.
Staged pilot	A$240,000 pilot cap; A$1.05–1.25 million total including pilot, for the same rollout scope	Pilot 6 months; wider rollout timing unconfirmed. Tests fit first; possible repeated migration work.
Repair and defer	A$100,000 immediate repair budget	About 3 months. Preserves choice; manual reconciliation and some underlying data issues remain.

Evidence that is still incomplete

The case assumes a review of 20 recent reports found reconciliation problems in five. That small review establishes neither an organisation-wide error rate nor the value of a new platform. An initial vendor demonstration used prepared data, not a complete production cycle.

Before contracting, the Chief Information Officer and Finance lead will agree the pilot baseline, representative test set and required accuracy. A controlled trial must reproduce two consecutive reporting cycles, with discrepancies reconciled and no unresolved critical security findings. These are proposed acceptance conditions, not industry benchmarks.

Budget and capacity

Pilot cash allowance: implementation A$130,000; test environment and licences A$40,000; independent testing and training A$30,000; contingency A$40,000. Total A$240,000. No savings are assumed to fund the pilot. The Chief Financial Officer must verify available funding before contracts are signed.

The 0.5 full-time-equivalent allocation displaces planned reporting improvements. The Chief Executive must agree that priority trade-off before mobilisation. If suitable staff cannot be released, the proposal returns for revision rather than silently relying on overtime.

What could change the recommendation

Choose repair and defer if critical controls cannot be cleared, funding or staffing is unavailable, or the pilot cannot be isolated from production risk. Consider full rollout only through a new paper showing validated recurring cost, delivery capacity and evidence that the benefits justify the additional commitment.

At month six, the board receives actual spend, test results, unresolved failures, revised alternatives and a benefit-realisation plan. Passing technical tests alone does not authorise rollout.

Director challenge checklist

Mark each item clear, query or material gap. A tick confirms that the issue has been addressed, not that the recommendation is correct. Pursue material gaps before deciding.

The decision is identifiable

Can I state exactly what is being approved, by whom, within what limits and subject to which conditions? Is any wider commitment being implied? [Clear / Query / Material gap]

The reason for acting now is credible

What changes if we wait? Is the urgency external, commercial or self-imposed? Does the proposal serve the agreed objective? [Clear / Query / Material gap]

The alternatives are real

Is the best competing option presented fairly? What is the preferred option's strongest disadvantage? What would a thoughtful dissenter choose? [Clear / Query / Material gap]

The evidence bears the weight

Which claims are facts, estimates or assumptions? Are the sources current and relevant? What important evidence is missing or contrary? [Clear / Query / Material gap]

The downside is visible

What can we lose in cash, capacity, trust or optionality? Which commitments are difficult to unwind? What residual risk remains after mitigation? [Clear / Query / Material gap]

Uncertainty has not been polished away

Are ranges explained rather than decorative? If no defensible number exists, is that said clearly? What evidence would change the recommendation? [Clear / Query / Material gap]

Delivery and return points are explicit

Who owns the outcome? Are resources genuinely available? What stops or escalates the work, and when will the board see results? [Clear / Query / Material gap]

Close the loop

Before the meeting closes, confirm the actual decision, conditions, owner and review point. Ask for unresolved questions and actions to be recorded through the normal governance process.

For the writer: run the colleague restatement check before circulation. If the colleague can identify only the topic, revise the opening. If they find the main risk missing, restore it even if the paper becomes longer.