

PERSONAL OS / DECISION HEURISTICS

Classical Laws and **Decision Heuristics**

A working field guide to eleven classical laws, reframed as diagnostic tools for faster, cleaner judgment.

THE GOVERNING RULE

Use a law to improve judgment, not to avoid thinking.

Curated by Clayton Smith



**CLAYTON
SMITH**

claytonsmith.ca

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

These are compact models for recognizing recurring patterns in work, judgment, organizations, and human behaviour. They are not absolute laws of nature. They are diagnostic tools, and they earn their place only when they improve a decision.

Use them to surface hidden causes of delay and waste, challenge unrealistic plans, simplify decisions, protect systems worth keeping, separate honest error from malice, and stop metrics from quietly replacing their own purpose.

Each law below pairs a plain-language **meaning** with an **operating rule**, a **diagnostic question** you can ask in the moment, and a **guardrail**. The guardrail matters as much as the rule. It is what keeps a useful tool from turning into a convenient rationalization. The laws are strongest when combined, which is what the decision routine near the end is for.

TIME AND EFFORT

Parkinson's Law

C. Northcote Parkinson

"Work expands to fill the time available for its completion."

MEANING	Give a task open-ended time and it tends to grow more complicated than it needs to be. Extra time invites polishing, drift, and delay.
OPERATING	Set a defined time box before you start, the shortest period that still allows competent work.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"Am I improving the result, or just filling the time available?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	Compression is not an excuse for reckless haste. Some work genuinely needs care, testing, or recovery time.

Hofstadter's Law

Douglas Hofstadter

"It always takes longer than you expect, even when you account for Hofstadter's Law."

MEANING	People underestimate unfamiliar and interdependent work because they count the visible task and forget the setup, troubleshooting, revisions, and handoffs around it.
OPERATING	Separate the ideal execution estimate from the calendar commitment, then add setup, testing, revision, coordination, and delivery.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"What work surrounding this task have I failed to count?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	A buffer is not permission to delay. Pair a realistic project estimate with tight execution blocks inside it.

Pareto Principle

Vilfredo Pareto

"A minority of causes usually produces a majority of results."

MEANING	Inputs and outputs are rarely even. A small share of actions, clients, habits, or problems tends to drive most of the outcome. The 80/20 ratio is illustrative, not exact.
OPERATING	Find the vital few before optimizing the useful many.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"What few actions would make the rest easier, unnecessary, or more valuable?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	Do not use 80/20 to neglect maintenance, duty, or relationships just because their value is hard to measure.

Brooks's Law

Fred Brooks

"Adding people to a late project makes it later."

MEANING	New people do not add instant capacity. They add onboarding, explanation, and coordination before they add output, especially on tightly connected work.
OPERATING	Find the real constraint before adding anyone. It is often scope, sequencing, or a missing decision, not labour.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"Will another person remove the constraint, or just create another coordination obligation?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	This is not an argument against delegation. It is an argument for delegating early, clearly, and structurally.

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AND PERFORMANCE

Peter Principle

Laurence J. Peter

"In a hierarchy, people tend to rise to their level of incompetence."

MEANING	Strong performance in one role often leads to a promotion that requires entirely different abilities. Past success does not automatically predict success at the next level.
OPERATING	Treat every major role change as a change of profession, and check the fit before the move.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"Am I rewarding competence by moving someone away from the work they do well?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	Advancement does not have to mean management. Build paths through autonomy, specialist status, ownership, or higher pay.

Dunning-Kruger Effect

David Dunning and Justin Kruger

"Confidence and competence are not the same thing."

MEANING	With little knowledge in an area, a person may lack the knowledge needed to see the limits of their own competence. Experts, meanwhile, often underrate how unusual their knowledge is.
OPERATING	Calibrate confidence against evidence, mechanism, and prior results, not against how sure you feel.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"Is my confidence based on competence, familiarity, enthusiasm, or ignorance of the difficulty?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	Do not use this as a label for people who disagree with you. Apply it to yourself first.

DECISIONS AND OPTIONS

Hick's Law

William Edmund Hick

"Decision time grows as the number and complexity of choices grow."

MEANING	More options can mean slower decisions, higher comparison cost, fatigue, and weaker commitment afterward. Extra choice only helps when the differences change the outcome.
OPERATING	Reduce the set before you compare. Use defaults for routine choices and keep the final call to two or three serious options.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"Which options are genuinely different, and which just add noise?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	Do not strip out meaningful alternatives just to feel fast. High-consequence choices may need a wider search first.

MEASUREMENT AND INCENTIVES

Goodhart's Law

Charles Goodhart

"When a measure becomes a target, it stops being a good measure."

MEANING	Once people are rewarded for a number, they learn to move the number without improving the reality behind it. Page views rise while quality falls, output rises while errors rise.
OPERATING	Measure the purpose, not just the activity. Give every metric a balancing metric and a review date.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"If this number improved sharply, could the real situation still be getting worse?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	Metrics are instruments, not the mission.

ATTRIBUTION AND REASONING

Hanlon's Razor

attributed to Robert J. Hanlon

"Do not attribute to malice what error or neglect explains just as well."

MEANING	Most frustrating outcomes come from missing information, poor communication, unclear responsibility, or ordinary human error, not hostility. Assuming malice too quickly damages relationships and decisions.
OPERATING	Investigate ordinary failure before concluding hostile intent.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"What non-malicious explanation fits the facts I actually have?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	This is not a command to ignore repeated misconduct or deception. Patterns matter. Read charitably, observe accurately.

Occam's Razor

William of Ockham

"Prefer the explanation that fits the evidence with the fewest unsupported assumptions."

MEANING	When several explanations fit the facts, the simpler one is the better starting point. The point is not that reality is always simple, only that complexity should not be added without cause.
OPERATING	Start with the simplest sufficient model, then add complexity only when the evidence demands it.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"What am I assuming that the evidence does not require?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	A simple explanation that ignores inconvenient evidence is not the better one.

SYSTEMS AND TRADITIONS

Chesterton's Fence

G. K. Chesterton

"Do not remove a fence until you know why it was put up."

MEANING	Rules, processes, and traditions can look pointless once the problem they solved is forgotten. Removing them blindly can quietly recreate the original failure.
OPERATING	Understand the original purpose before eliminating anything, then retain, repair, simplify, replace, or retire it deliberately.
DIAGNOSTIC	<i>"What problem was this built to solve, and what happens if that problem returns?"</i>
GUARDRAIL	This is not an argument against reform. It is an argument against ignorant reform.

THE OPERATOR'S DECISION ROUTINE

A single pass that combines the laws. Run it before a real commitment, a hire, a system change, or any decision large enough to be worth slowing down for.

01 Name the vital few

Before optimizing anything, identify the small set of actions, clients, or problems driving most of the result (Pareto).

02 Estimate honestly, then box the work

Separate the realistic delivery commitment (Hofstadter) from the tight execution block you actually work inside (Parkinson).

03 Find the constraint before adding people

Diagnose whether the bottleneck is labour, scope, sequencing, a missing decision, or an unrealistic deadline before you add anyone (Brooks).

04 Narrow, then compare on assumptions

Reduce to two or three genuinely different options (Hick), then prefer the explanation or path with the fewest unsupported assumptions (Occam).

05 Calibrate your confidence

Demand evidence, mechanism, and prior results before trusting a strong opinion, and apply the test to yourself first (Dunning-Kruger).

06 Read others charitably but accurately

Assume error before malice while still tracking the patterns that would change the read (Hanlon).

07 Guard your metrics

Give every metric a purpose, a balancing metric, and a review date so the number cannot drift from the outcome it stands for (Goodhart).

08 Understand the fence before moving it

Learn why a rule, process, or expense exists before removing it, then retain, repair, simplify, replace, or retire it on purpose (Chesterton).

09 Match the role to the person

Treat each role change as a new profession, and build advancement paths that do not force everyone into management (Peter).

10 Project the compounding

Ask what happens if this decision or habit repeats for three years. Small consistent choices accumulate into large results, for better or worse.

PERSONAL OS REVIEW CHECKLIST

Twelve questions to run before a major commitment, decision, or system change. Most take seconds. Together they catch the failures each law is built to prevent.

- 01 **Impact:** Which few actions produce most of the result?
- 02 **Time:** Am I giving this too much time, or too little?
- 03 **Estimate:** What hidden work have I failed to include?
- 04 **Options:** Can I reduce the decision to two or three meaningful choices?
- 05 **Evidence:** Is my confidence supported by competence and facts?
- 06 **Attribution:** Am I assuming intent where error is more likely?
- 07 **Simplicity:** What is the simplest explanation that fits all known evidence?
- 08 **Metrics:** Could the number improve while the real outcome deteriorates?
- 09 **People:** Does the role fit the person's actual abilities?
- 10 **Systems:** Do I understand why the existing rule or process was created?
- 11 **Coordination:** Will adding people reduce the bottleneck, or increase it?
- 12 **Compounding:** What happens if this decision is repeated for three years?

THE STANDING PRINCIPLE

"Respect inherited wisdom, test it against present reality, and improve it without discarding what has already survived experience."

Preserve what works, remove what no longer serves its purpose, and adopt new methods only when they add clarity, resilience, or meaningful output.

THE FULL INTERACTIVE VERSION

Read this reference online, with the AI prompt, source material, and the rest of the repository.

Read it at

claytonsmith.ca/pages/classical-laws-decision-heuristics.html