Garbage Can Model

Idea In Short

The Garbage Can Model describes decisions in settings where problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities flow partly independently. It helps explain why a ready solution may attach to a newly salient problem, while warning leaders to make timing and ownership visible. Start by naming the choice and its owner, then write down the assumptions that could change the answer. Use the framework to expose the trade-offs and missing evidence before committing resources. Review the decision when a stated trigger occurs, not only when results disappoint. Before the meeting, name the decision owner and deadline, then agree on what evidence could change the choice. Put assumptions and consequences in the same view. This gives participants a shared basis for discussion and prevents the method from becoming a score detached from action.

Organizations rarely lack opinions when a consequential choice arrives. They lack a shared account of what is known, what must be assumed, and what would make one option preferable. The Garbage Can Model describes decisions in settings where problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities flow partly independently. It helps explain why a ready solution may attach to a newly salient problem, while warning leaders to make timing and ownership visible. This article turns Garbage Can Model (Multiple or Three Streams Model) into a working management discipline: define the choice, inspect the model, and connect analysis to an accountable action.

How the model works

The Garbage Can Model describes organized anarchies where problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities can flow partly independently. A decision may occur when a solution looking for a problem, an available participant, and a timely choice opportunity meet. The model is descriptive, not a recommended process. It explains why organizations sometimes adopt a ready-made proposal during a crisis or why a decision arena produces different choices as attendance changes. The three-stream version often

highlights problems, policies, and politics; clarify which formulation is being used because authors vary the labels.

When an initiative suddenly gains traction, reconstruct its path: who introduced the solution, which problem it was attached to, who was present, and what deadline opened the choice window. This can reveal a useful coincidence or a poor fit. Create deliberate choice windows for unresolved problems and publish criteria before proposals arrive. The model also suggests a practical governance intervention: keep problem owners, solution owners, and decision authority visible instead of allowing them to drift together. Use the framework to diagnose agenda dynamics, not to excuse arbitrary decisions. 1, 2

Public-sector case or practice

A published Department for Work and Pensions case on support for unpaid carers describes cross-department teams mapping objectives before considering the service journey. It shows how participation can surface competing mandates before an implementation plan hardens. This case documents a public-service practice, not evidence that the institution used the named theory. Its transferable lesson is to surface the relevant people, incentives, and evidence before implementation. A leadership team should preserve that context when adapting the approach to its own decision.

to a workshop to map respective departmental objectives 3

Define the question this model answers

A useful starting point is to specify the decision rather than announce a broad ambition. A team choosing whether to expand a service, for example, needs to know the choice date, the available options, the consequences that matter, and who has authority to commit. Without that frame, analysis tends to answer a nearby question that is easier to measure. Garbage Can Model (Multiple or Three Streams Model) is valuable when it forces the group to expose this boundary and agree on what the method can and cannot settle.

A university committee revisits a longstanding problem when a funding window opens and a previously developed proposal is available. The Garbage Can Model asks whether the

proposal fits the problem, whether the right participants are present, and whether the timing is driving the choice. That diagnosis helps separate a genuine match from opportunistic attachment.

For Garbage Can Model (Multiple or Three Streams Model), the key operational measure is not whether participants completed a form. It is whether the framework changed a choice, improved the information gathered, or clarified the conditions for action. If it did none of these, simplify it. If it did, preserve the reasoning in a format that downstream teams can use without reconstructing the debate from memory. The Local Government Association asks public decision-makers to explain reasonable alternatives and why the selected option serves residents, a useful governance discipline beyond the public sector 4.

Identify the assumptions that matter

The first management test is whether the inputs represent evidence or convention. Organizations inherit targets, forecasts, and labels that can look factual after repeated use. A decision team should identify how each input was produced, who owns it, and how stale it may be. When uncertainty matters, show a plausible range and explain which part of the recommendation changes across that range. That practice makes Garbage Can Model (Multiple or Three Streams Model) a way to discipline attention rather than a device for laundering assumptions into a confident answer.

A practical safeguard is to run a counterfactual review before the meeting closes. Ask what evidence would make the preferred option look wrong, what the strongest rejected alternative would require, and which stakeholder would detect early signs of failure. Those questions do not create certainty; they reveal where the recommendation depends on a fragile premise. A decision owner can then set a modest pilot, a contingency, or a monitoring threshold in proportion to the exposure.

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Compare consequences in the model

A second test concerns incentives. People who supply estimates may benefit from a particular outcome, while the people who bear implementation costs may enter too late. The decision owner should ask whose information is missing and whether participants face asymmetric rewards for optimism, caution, or delay. This is not a reason to distrust every estimate. It is a reason to preserve provenance and compare claims against independent signals before they determine a large commitment.

Use disagreement as evidence

The method also changes the conversation by giving disagreement a shape. Instead of asking whether someone supports a proposal, ask which premise, consequence, or priority they dispute. That distinction often reveals that colleagues share a goal but disagree about the likelihood of a constraint or the acceptable cost of a downside. A structured disagreement can be resolved with targeted analysis; a vague disagreement usually produces another presentation and another meeting.

Decide whether more evidence is worth its cost

A useful application has an explicit stopping point. Analysis has a cost, and additional information is valuable only if it can change the choice enough to justify its price or delay. Teams should identify the next piece of evidence, its expected timing, and the decision it could alter. If no plausible result would change the action, the request for more data is not decision support. This is where Garbage Can Model (Multiple or Three Streams Model) can help leaders protect attention and maintain a credible pace. National Aeronautics and Space Administration [NASA]’s systems-engineering guidance recommends reducing uncertainty when it could alter the ranking of alternatives 5.

Connect the recommendation to delivery

Implementation belongs inside the reasoning. A recommendation that assumes a capability the organization does not have is not an attractive option with a minor execution issue; it is a different option with different costs and odds of success. Put owners, dependencies, and observable milestones beside the proposed action. Then distinguish a failure of the underlying idea from a failure to deliver the conditions the idea required.

Review the decision and update the method

The decision record should be short enough to use and specific enough to audit. Capture the question, alternatives considered, evidence relied upon, unresolved assumptions, rationale, owner, and review trigger. Avoid recording only the selected option, since that erases the comparison that made it reasonable at the time. A future team can then learn whether a forecast missed, an objective changed, or execution departed from the plan. The Illinois Institute of Technology's decision-quality framework offers a complementary pre-commitment review 6.

- 1A garbage can model of organizational choice
- 2Decision theory
- 3Public design evidence review: case study bank
- 4Good practice guidance on principles of effective decision-making
- 56.8 decision analysis
- 6Decision quality framework

Summary

Garbage Can Model (Multiple or Three Streams Model) is most useful when it improves the reasoning available before action. Its contribution is a disciplined way to expose assumptions, identify what matters, and connect evidence to a choice. Leaders should adapt the method to the decision's stakes, time horizon, and information quality, then preserve enough of the rationale to learn later. The outcome will depend on changing conditions as well as judgment, so review the quality of the process separately from the result. After implementation, compare the expected mechanism with observed behavior and record any material departure. Revisit thresholds when new evidence or a changed environment alters the stakes. Use that review to refine the next decision, while keeping the framework's limits visible.