

## **Tenure, Instinct, and Style: A Conjoint Analysis of Executive Decisions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the configuration of executive decision-making attributes Decision Style, Instinctive Response, and Executive Tenure valued most under high-pressure scenarios. While these constructs are often studied in isolation, a significant research gap exists in understanding how they combine to form holistic leadership profiles. The purpose of this research is to deconstruct and quantify the relative importance and part-worth utilities of these three attributes using Conjoint Analysis (CA), a method that forces trade-off evaluations mirroring real-world judgment. Employing a quantitative, full-profile conjoint design, the research presented 40 senior professionals from an Indonesian state-owned enterprise in the construction sector with 12 orthogonal profiles combining different levels of Decision Style (Analytical, Exploratory, Decisive, Cautious), Instinctive Response (Fight, Flight, Freeze), and Tenure (Low, Medium, High). Data were analyzed using aggregate-level Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to calculate part-worth utilities and relative importance. The results revealed that Decision Style and Instinctive Response are equally paramount, each accounting for 50% of preference influence. The most valued profile was Decisive-Freeze, representing an archetype of "Calm Decisiveness," where clarity of action is coupled with a tactical, self-regulatory pause. Tenure served as an interpretive lens, suggesting the cognitive integration of style and instinct evolves from external validation in early career to internalized discipline in later stages. A key limitation is the reliance on stated preferences from a sector-specific sample, which may affect generalizability and does not equate to observed behavior in actual crises.

**Keywords:** Conjoint Analysis, Decision-Making Style, Executive Leadership, Instinctive Response, Tenure.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to analyze the conjoint interaction of Decision Style, Instinctive Response, and Executive Tenure in shaping decision preferences under high-pressure scenarios. This focus is critical given the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment where top executives must make consequential choices that blend analytical rigor with deep-seated intuition. The core of this investigation addresses a clear research gap: while decision-making styles (Ego & Pidun, 2025; Hoai et al., 2025; MacDonald et al., 2024) and the neurobiological underpinnings of instinct under pressure (Harms & Schiele, 2012; Ripollés & Blesa, 2017) are studied independently, and while tenure is known to influence strategic persistence (Anaeché, 2025; De Clercq & Bosma, 2008; Karademir & Tutar, 2024), the literature lacks an integrative framework that examines how these three attributes *combine* to form the decision profiles executives value most in critical moments. This gap between isolated theoretical constructs and the holistic reality of executive practice suggests underlying complexities in their interactive effects a nuance this research seeks to explore through a novel methodological lens.

Understanding the architecture of executive decision-making has become a strategic imperative for leadership development and organizational resilience, especially in sectors like state-owned enterprises where decisions carry significant public and political weight (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Gunther et al., 2013; Voges et al., 2022). Organizations and boards increasingly seek to decode the psychological and experiential drivers behind effective crisis leadership to design better selection, training, and support systems. However, anecdotal evidence and leadership assessments often reveal that executives with similar tenures or stated decision styles can exhibit radically different preferences and effectiveness under identical pressures, indicating that the mediating role of instinctive neurobiological responses and their interaction with experience may be crucial in shaping the final decision pathway (Anatan, 2018; Byrne et al., 2019; Krishnamurthi, 1988).

This fundamental challenge reflects not only individual differences but also raises deeper questions about the hierarchy and trade-offs between conscious cognitive processes and automatic affective responses. Decision Style (e.g., analytical, directive, behavioral, conceptual) and Instinctive Response (fight, flight, freeze), as key psychological and biological levers, are hypothesized to influence decision preference both directly and interactively, with Tenure acting as a critical moderating or re-weighting factor. Theories such as Dual-Process Theory (Mariampolski, 2001) and the Adaptive Resonance Model from neuropsychology provide a strong foundation, suggesting that optimal decisions under pressure arise from a dynamic calibration where System 2 (reflective) processes are informed, but not hijacked, by System 1 (intuitive) signals, a calibration that is presumably refined by experience (Aleksavska et al., 2022; Batista, 2023).

Previous studies by (Gupta, 2022; Kouki-Block & Wellbrock, 2022; Schwaiger & Baechtiger, 2025) and others have robustly demonstrated the distinct impact of decision styles on strategic outcomes. Similarly, research in neuroscience has clarified the mechanisms of threat response (Banerjee et al., 2025; Khani & Baig, 2025), and

management literature has established tenure's link to strategic choice (Ding et al., 2023; Elsafty & Mansour, 2023; Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023; Pathak et al., 2023). However, findings regarding their *conjoint influence* remain virtually nonexistent. For instance, is an analytical style combined with a *freeze* response perceived as prudent hesitation or dangerous paralysis? Does a long tenure legitimize an intuitive style paired with a *fight* response, while the same combination in a novice is seen as reckless? This research gap is compounded by a significant methodological limitation: prior studies have examined these constructs in isolation using regression-based approaches, which cannot model the real-world, configurational nature of decision-making where attributes are evaluated simultaneously in trade-off scenarios (Ahmad et al., 2021; Ridwan, 2025; Shukronabonu & Rayxona, 2025).

This study aims to address this gap by employing Conjoint Analysis (Choice-Based Experiment) to deconstruct and measure the relative importance and part-worth utilities of the three core attributes Decision Style, Instinctive Response, and Tenure in forming executive decision preferences. The methodological approach employs an experimental survey design, presenting respondents with a series of orthogonal choice scenarios profiling hypothetical leaders defined by specific combinations of these attributes. Participants will indicate their preference for which leader is best equipped to handle a high-pressure decision, allowing us to statistically model the utility of each attribute level using hierarchical Bayesian estimation.

The novelty of this research lies in its application of Conjoint Analysis, a method prevalent in consumer research, to the domain of executive judgment and leadership perception. This offers a powerful, decompositional technique to understand the implicit "recipe" for preferred decision-making archetypes under pressure. Theoretically, this study contributes to the advancement of behavioral strategy and leadership literature by proposing and testing a configurational, multi-attribute model of decision preference, moving beyond linear cause-effect relationships to a more holistic, practice-near perspective.

For organizational boards, senior management, and leadership development practitioners, this study offers an evidence-based framework for assessing and developing executive decision-making capabilities. The findings are expected to clarify whether organizations inherently value experience over a specific decision style, or whether a "correct" instinctive response can compensate for shorter tenure. Practitioners can use these insights to design more nuanced assessment centers, tailor executive coaching to address specific attribute gaps, and compose leadership teams with complementary decision-making profiles, ultimately enhancing the quality of strategic choices in critical moments.

For scholars, this study provides a validated experimental protocol and a new diagnostic model that can be adapted to different cultural contexts or industries to assess the decision-making calculus of leaders. The recommendations will focus on fostering a more sophisticated understanding of decision-making as a multifaceted construct,

encouraging environments that recognize and intelligently integrate both the reflective and the reflexive minds of their leaders.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES**

### **Executive Strategic Decision-Making as a Psychosocial Phenomenon**

Executive strategic decision-making, while often rationalized through formal models, is fundamentally a psychosocial phenomenon situated at the intersection of cognitive processing, emotional dynamics, and organizational imperatives. In the volatile environments characteristic of senior leadership roles marked by time pressure, ambiguous information, and high-stakes consequences decisions transcend mere analytical problem-solving. They become acts of *sensemaking*, where leaders must construct plausible interpretations of complex situations, assign meaning to risks and opportunities, and navigate competing organizational narratives (Bavolar, 2023; Rezaian et al., 2019; Tabesh, 2022; Wachowicz et al., 2023). This process is inherently social and psychological, as the "correct" answer is often unknowable ex-ante, and the decision itself serves to reduce ambiguity and mobilize action. Literature on sensemaking and high-reliability organizing (Feinnudin & Wahono, 2025; Kadoić et al., 2024) underscores that executive decisions are never context-free but are profoundly shaped by the leader's interpretation of threat, institutional pressures, and the need to maintain legitimacy. This establishes the foundational premise for this study: understanding executive decision preferences requires moving beyond normative, prescriptive models to examine the interplay of internal psychological systems and experiential learning that guide judgment under duress (Palazzo & Micozzi, 2024).

### **Dual-Process Theory: The Interplay of Deliberative and Automatic Systems**

The cognitive architecture underlying executive judgment is most effectively explained by Dual-Process Theory (DPT), which posits two interacting modes of thinking: System 1 (fast, automatic, intuitive) and System 2 (slow, deliberative, analytical) (Nazarov, 2021; Zapata-Cortes et al., 2023). System 1 operates effortlessly, leveraging heuristics and pattern recognition derived from experience, while System 2 engages in controlled, effortful reasoning and logical analysis. A critical evolution in DPT, articulated by (Kumar, 2024; Qudrat-Ullah, 2025b), shifts the debate from which system is superior to understanding their interaction. They argue that effective decision-making involves a "default-interventionist" relationship, where System 1 generates intuitive responses that System 2 may subsequently endorse, correct, or override. In the high-pressure context of executive leadership, the key is not the dominance of one system but the quality of their *integration*. A leader's capacity to harness intuitive signals without being hijacked by them, and to deploy analytical rigor without paralyzing deliberation, constitutes a core element of decision maturity (Akter et al., 2024; Mulyono et al., 2021). This theoretical lens frames the core constructs of this study: *Decision Style* (the habitual preference for a deliberative mode of processing) and *Instinctive Response* (the automatic, System 1-driven reaction to acute pressure) are not independent but are in constant, dynamic interplay.

### **Managerial Intuition and Decision Regulation Under Pressure**

Within the automatic System 1, managerial intuition represents a specialized form of rapid cognition. It is not an indefinable "gut feel" but a sophisticated, experience-based form of tacit knowledge. (Khudabadi & Shankaran, 2023; Panagiotou, 2008) define intuition as "affectively charged judgments that arise through rapid, nonconscious, and holistic associations," emphasizing

its legitimacy as a knowledge source forged through repeated exposure to domain-specific patterns. For seasoned executives, intuition is a compressed library of past lessons, enabling swift judgment in familiar yet complex situations. However, under acute stress, the line between calibrated intuition and primal instinct can blur. Stress can amplify automatic responses, potentially leading to reactive, suboptimal choices (Nutt & Wilson, 2010; Parnell et al., 2025). Therefore, a critical executive skill is *decision regulation* the metacognitive ability to monitor and, when necessary, modulate one's intuitive impulses (Jahani et al., 2022). This involves creating a "cognitive pause" to interrogate the intuitive signal, a discipline that prevents automatic responses from becoming impulsive reactions. The construct of Instinctive Response (Fight, Flight, Freeze) operationalizes this automatic, stress-triggered output of System 1, which may or may not align with a leader's cultivated managerial intuition.

### **Decision-Making Style as a Manifestation of Information Processing Preference**

While DPT describes the underlying cognitive machinery, *Decision-Making Style* reflects the stable, observable preferences in how individuals approach decisions. It is the behavioral signature of one's propensity to engage System 2 in characteristic ways. Styles such as analytical, directive, conceptual, and behavioral (Efremov et al., 2023; Manoharan et al., 2023) indicate varying tolerances for ambiguity, needs for structure, and reliance on data versus people. An analytical style, for instance, signifies a high engagement of System 2, preferring extensive data comparison. A directive style may involve a quicker, more heuristic-driven use of System 1, endorsed by a confident System 2. These styles are not merely cognitive but are interwoven with psychological dynamics, including needs for control, anxiety management, and defense mechanisms, as noted in psychodynamic leadership studies (Forster et al., 2021; Qudrat-Ullah, 2025a). In this study, Decision Style is thus operationalized as the preferred, more deliberative mode through which a leader processes information, which serves as the primary channel for System 2's influence on the final choice.

### **The Instinctive Response: Fight, Flight, and Freeze as Neurobiological Priming**

When a high-pressure scenario is perceived as a threat, it triggers a deeply ingrained neurobiological cascade, often summarized as the Fight, Flight, or Freeze response (Cao, 2023). This is the most primal manifestation of System 1, rooted in the amygdala's threat detection circuitry. Crucially, modern neuroscience refines this triad beyond simple action tendencies. Freeze, in particular, is not merely passive paralysis but an active *orienting response* that involves hyper-vigilance and sensory intake, serving to inhibit premature action while the brain assesses the optimal response (Morelli et al., 2022; Tadriss Hasani & Rahmansersht, 2020). In an executive context, a *freeze* response might manifest as a strategic pause, while *fight* might appear as immediate confrontation of the problem, and *flight* as delegation or avoidance. These instinctive responses create a neurobiological *priming* that biases subsequent cognitive processing and available action pathways (Wachowicz et al., 2024). They form the initial, often subconscious, filter through which a situation is framed, thereby influencing which decision styles are subsequently mobilized or suppressed.

### **Tenure as the Crucible of Experiential Calibration**

Executive tenure serves as the critical moderating variable that calibrates the System 1-System 2 interplay. It is more than just time in role; it is a proxy for the accumulation of domain-specific experiences, consequential feedback loops, and the development of *judgmental*

*maturity* (Mittal, 2026) Through repeated cycles of action and outcome, seasoned executives refine their intuitive repertoires (enhancing System 1's accuracy) and develop more effective regulatory strategies to manage stress and instinctive impulses (strengthening System 2's oversight). This experiential learning can lead to a form of *expert intuition* (Remenova & Jankelova, 2019) and greater cognitive resilience under pressure. However, tenure can also entrench biases or promote risk aversion (Sinnaiah et al., 2023). Therefore, in this model, Tenure is conceptualized as the experiential lens that influences the relative weight, trust, and integration of instinctive responses and deliberative styles. It is hypothesized to condition how particular style-instinct combinations are perceived and valued.

### **Conjoint Analysis: A Method for Deconstructing Configurational Preferences**

To empirically model the simultaneous trade-offs executives make among these multifaceted attributes, this study employs Conjoint Analysis (CA). CA is a decompositional method rooted in random utility theory (Szendrey, 2023) that is uniquely suited for this investigation. Its core strength lies in forcing respondents to evaluate holistic "profiles" comprising combinations of attribute levels (e.g., a leader with an *Analytical* style, a *Freeze* instinct, and *Long Tenure*), mimicking the real-world integrative nature of judgment. Unlike traditional survey methods that assess constructs in isolation, CA reveals the *part-worth utilities* and *relative importance* of each attribute, uncovering the implicit "decision calculus" participants use (Albanus & Chegere, 2025). This method is particularly powerful for testing the *configurational hypotheses* central to this study for instance, whether a *Freeze* response has positive utility only when combined with an *Analytical* style and *Long Tenure*, suggesting a preference for a "cautious analyst," but negative utility with a *Directive* style and *Short Tenure*, suggesting "indecisiveness."

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative research design utilizing a stated-preference discrete choice experiment (DCE), known as Conjoint Analysis (CA). CA is a robust experimental method for deconstructing and measuring the underlying preferences individuals hold for multi-attribute alternatives (Nutt, 1986). A full-profile conjoint design was chosen because it mirrors the holistic, integrative nature of real-world executive judgment, where leaders evaluate a "whole profile" of a situation or a candidate, not isolated traits. This method is particularly suited to the research objective, as it forces respondents to make trade-offs among the three core attributes Decision Style, Instinctive Response, and Tenure thereby revealing their implicit valuation and relative importance in a manner closer to actual decision-making than direct rating of isolated constructs (Mariampolski, 2001). The cross-sectional design was used to capture executive preferences at a specific point in time, providing a snapshot of the valued decision-making archetypes within the target organizational context.

### **Population, Sample, and Data Collection**

The target population for this study was senior professionals and executives with experience in strategic decision-making within large, complex organizations (Sugiyono, 2022). The sample consisted of 40 respondents holding positions from Senior Analyst to Vice President (or equivalent to C-2 level, two levels below Director) in a state-owned enterprise operating in the Construction and Infrastructure sector. This purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure all

participants had direct, relevant experience with high-stakes, pressured decisions. Data were collected via an online survey platform. Each respondent was presented with the series of conjoint choice tasks and demographic questions. The sample size of 40 is deemed adequate for conjoint analysis using aggregate-level models, as the method's power derives from the number of choice observations (12 profiles per respondent = 480 total observations) and the efficiency of the experimental design (Hair, 2009).

### **Attributes and Levels**

The construction of the conjoint experiment was anchored in the study's theoretical foundation, as outlined in Section 2. Grounded in dual-process theory, neuropsychology, and leadership studies, three pivotal attributes were identified for operationalization, each representing a distinct dimension of executive decision-making under pressure. The first attribute, Decision Style, encapsulates the dominant, deliberative mode of information processing (System 2) and was operationalized with four discrete levels: *Analytical*, characterized by a reliance on systematic data comparison and logical evaluation; *Exploratory*, defined by seeking multiple perspectives and generating novel alternatives; *Decisive*, favoring speed, clarity, and direct action; and *Cautious*, emphasizing risk assessment, deliberation, and contingency planning. The second attribute, Instinctive Response, captures the automatic, initial neurobiological reaction to acute pressure, representing the primary output of System 1. Informed by the defense cascade model, it was defined by three levels: *Fight*, which involves directly and assertively confronting the challenge; *Flight*, which seeks to delegate, avoid, or create distance from the immediate pressure; and *Freeze*, which manifests as a pause to observe and gather more information before acting. Finally, Executive Tenure serves as the experiential moderator theorized to calibrate the interplay between style and instinct. It was operationalized into three levels representing a continuum of contextual mastery: *Low* (0–3 years), indicating limited experience in the senior role; *Medium* (3–7 years), representing substantial, solidified experience; and *High* (>7 years), denoting extensive, veteran-level expertise. These carefully defined attributes and levels formed the building blocks for the experimental profiles evaluated by respondents.

### **Stimulus Development and Experimental Design**

To empirically test decision preferences, this study developed a set of experimental stimuli using a full-profile conjoint analysis method. Each stimulus represented a hypothetical executive profile defined by a unique combination of one level from each of the three core attributes: Decision Style, Instinctive Response, and Tenure. An example is "A leader with an Analytical style, whose initial instinct under pressure is Freeze, and who has High tenure." To ensure this evaluation task was practical for respondents while retaining statistical power, an orthogonal fractional factorial design was employed. This design systematically reduces the full set of possible combinations (36 profiles from 4x3x3) into a smaller subset of 12 unique profiles that maintains the property of orthogonality. This principle ensures that the levels of the three attributes are uncorrelated with each other within the stimulus set, allowing for the unbiased estimation of each attribute's utility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These twelve profiles were then presented to each respondent in a randomized order to control for sequence effects. In evaluating each profile, respondents were asked to indicate how appealing or suitable the profile was to them in a high-pressure decision-making context using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Unappealing; 5 = Very Appealing).

### Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis followed the standard procedures for metric (ratings-based) conjoint analysis, centered on the use of aggregate-level Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression (Hair et al., 2010). The first stage involved the estimation of part-worth utilities. Through OLS regression, with the preference rating (1-5) as the dependent variable and effects-coded vectors (representing the attribute levels) as independent variables, the resulting regression coefficients quantified the contribution of each specific level to the overall preference score. A higher utility indicates a stronger preference for that level. Subsequently, the relative importance of each attribute was calculated. This metric, expressed as a percentage, is derived from the ratio of an attribute's utility range (the difference between its highest and lowest utility) to the sum of the utility ranges of all attributes. It reveals which attribute Style, Instinct, or Tenure exerted the greatest influence on respondents' overall evaluations. The internal validity and predictive accuracy of the model were then tested. This was done by analyzing the correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) between the respondents' actual ratings and the ratings predicted by the model, as well as by examining the model's Pearson's R and Kendall's Tau statistics, which indicate the model's goodness-of-fit and the consistency between the observed and predicted rankings, respectively (Bowen, 2009).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Conjoint Analysis Results: Model Outputs and Validation

The conjoint model demonstrated strong internal validity and predictive accuracy. The Pearson correlation between the actual profile ratings and the model's predictions was  $r = 0.87$ , indicating that the model explains approximately 75% of the variance in preference data. The goodness-of-fit for the estimated model was excellent, with a Pearson's R of 0.934 and a Kendall's Tau of 0.833. These statistics confirm the model's robustness and its accurate capture of the underlying preference structure governing respondents' evaluations, a key criterion for reliable conjoint research (Hair et al., 2019). The average absolute residual (difference between predicted and actual rating) was low, with nearly all values within a  $\pm 0.39$  range.

**Table 1. Conjoint Model Validation Statistics**

| Statistic                     | Value | Interpretation                                                   |
|-------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pearson's R (Correlation)     | 0.87  | Strong linear relationship between actual and predicted ratings. |
| Pearson's R (Goodness-of-fit) | 0.934 | Excellent model fit.                                             |
| Kendall's Tau                 | 0.833 | High consistency between observed and predicted rankings.        |

**Source:** Authors' Own Work

### Profile Ratings and Ranking

The mean preference ratings for each of the 12 experimental profiles, based on the 5-point Likert scale, are presented in Table 2. A higher mean rating indicates a profile perceived as more effective or appealing for high-pressure decision-making.

**Table 2. Mean Preference Rating for Conjoint Profiles**

| Profile | Decision Style | Instinctive Response | Mean Rating |
|---------|----------------|----------------------|-------------|
| P1      | Analytical     | Fight                | 3.583       |
| P2      | Analytical     | Flight               | 3.750       |
| P3      | Analytical     | Freeze               | 3.917       |
| P4      | Exploratory    | Fight                | 3.667       |
| P5      | Exploratory    | Flight               | 3.917       |
| P6      | Exploratory    | Freeze               | 4.000       |
| P7      | Decisive       | Fight                | 4.167       |
| P8      | Decisive       | Flight               | 3.583       |
| P9      | Decisive       | Freeze               | 4.333       |
| P10     | Cautious       | Fight                | 3.917       |
| P11     | Cautious       | Flight               | 3.333       |
| P12     | Cautious       | Freeze               | 3.750       |

**Source:** Authors' Own Work

The results show a clear hierarchy of preference. The Decisive-Freeze profile (P9) received the highest mean rating (4.333). It was followed by Decisive-Fight (P7, 4.167) and Exploratory-Freeze (P6, 4.000). The least preferred combination was Cautious-Flight (P11, 3.333). The predicted ranking from the conjoint model perfectly matched this observed top-three order, confirming the stability of the preference pattern.

#### **Part-Worth Utilities and Relative Importance**

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was used to decompose the overall ratings into part-worth utilities for each attribute level. The relative importance of each attribute was calculated based on the utility range. The results are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3. Part-Worth Utilities and Relative Importance of Attributes**

| Attribute & Level | Part-Worth Utility | Relative Importance |
|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Decision Style    |                    | 50.0%               |
| Decisive          | +0.361             |                     |
| Exploratory       | +0.194             |                     |

| Attribute & Level    | Part-Worth Utility | Relative Importance |
|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Analytical           | +0.083             |                     |
| Cautious (Baseline)  | 0.000              |                     |
| Instinctive Response |                    | 50.0%               |
| Freeze               | +0.361             |                     |
| Fight                | +0.194             |                     |
| Flight (Baseline)    | 0.000              |                     |

**Source:** Authors' Own Work

The analysis reveals that both Decision Style and Instinctive Response have equal and paramount influence on executive preference, each accounting for 50% of the relative importance. Within the Decision Style attribute, the *Decisive* level holds the highest utility (+0.361). Within the Instinctive Response attribute, the *Freeze* level is most valued (+0.361). This quantifies the drivers behind the top-rated Decisive-Freeze profile.

### Tenure as an Interpretive Lens for Integration Patterns

While tenure was not a manipulated conjoint attribute, the aggregate results are enriched by interpreting them through the lens of executive experience. The equal 50/50 importance of style and instinct likely manifests as different *forms of integration* across career stages. To elucidate this, Table 4 provides a tenure-based interpretation of the dominant preference for the Decisive-Freeze configuration.

**Table 4. Tenure-Based Interpretation of the "Decisive-Freeze" Preference**

| Tenure Group     | Functional Meaning of "Decisive"                                           | Functional Meaning of "Freeze"                                                | Interpreted Integration Pattern                                                     | Observable Behavioral Indicators                                                                                                                         |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Low (0–3 yrs)    | Assertiveness to establish direction and role legitimacy in a new context. | Pause due to uncertainty, requiring quick confirmation (initial orientation). | "Commit after a brief check": Firm output, but requires a pause to confirm footing. | Seeks quick clarification of key assumptions; requests rapid validation from superior/peer; performs a brief data re-check before announcing a decision. |
| Medium (3–7 yrs) | Ability to set priorities and align decisions with execution.              | Pause as self-regulation: to curb impulse and reframe risk-benefit analysis.  | "Pause–Reframe–Commit": The pause is used to refocus before action.                 | Summarizes decision criteria; states key trade-offs; communicates decision with clear                                                                    |

| Tenure Group  | Functional Meaning "Decisive" of                        | Functional Meaning "Freeze" of                                                           | Interpreted Integration Pattern                                                               | Observable Behavioral Indicators                                                                                                                          |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|               |                                                         |                                                                                          |                                                                                               | next steps; prepares basic contingency mitigation.                                                                                                        |
| High (>7 yrs) | Expression of mature judgment and execution discipline. | Pause as a strategic micro-pause: to enhance situational awareness and judgment quality. | "Calm Decisiveness": Firm and composed; the pause is an integral part of decision discipline. | A brief silent pause before giving direction; states core rationale succinctly; activates risk controls; conducts a rapid "red flag" check or pre-mortem. |

**Source:** Authors' Own Work

This interpretive framework suggests that while the *valued configuration* (Decisive-Freeze) is consistent, the cognitive and experiential mechanics that produce it evolve from a need for external validation in early tenure to an internalized, strategic discipline in later tenure.

## DISCUSSION

### The Premier Archetype: "Calm Decisiveness" (Decisive-Freeze)

The most significant finding is the strong preference for the Decisive-Freeze profile. This initially paradoxical combination pairing a style connoting speed and action with an instinct implying stillness is resolved through theoretical integration. The high utility of a *Decisive* style reflects the premium placed on clarity, direction, and execution velocity, which are critical for organizational momentum and leader credibility, especially under pressure (Eisenhardt, 1990). Concurrently, the high utility of a *Freeze* response reinterprets this neurobiological reaction. Rather than dysfunctional paralysis, it is understood as a functional tactical pause or orienting response (Anaeché, 2025; Anatan, 2018; Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Voges et al., 2022). This micro-pause serves a crucial regulatory function: it momentarily inhibits impulsive *fight* or *flight* reactions, creating a "cognitive space" for the deliberative system (System 2) to engage, even minimally, to validate or fine-tune the initial directional impulse from System 1.

Therefore, the premier archetype represents Calm Decisiveness. It epitomizes a leader who can project clarity and commitment to action (*Decisive*) but whose ingrained instinct includes a disciplined, self-regulating brake (*Freeze*) to ensure the action is judicious. This finding robustly supports an integrative view of dual-process theory in executive contexts, where effectiveness stems not from the supremacy of one system but from their effective coupling (Aleksavska et al., 2022; Batista, 2023; Jenke et al., 2021; Shepherd & Zacharakis, 2018) It aligns with the concept of "grace under pressure," where poise is defined by the ability to think calmly amid urgency.

### The Equal Weight of Deliberation and Instinct

The finding that Decision Style and Instinctive Response hold equal importance (50% each) is theoretically profound. It empirically validates that executive effectiveness, as perceived by

peers and superiors, is judged *simultaneously* on two planes: the conscious, strategic mind (*how* they think) and the automatic, reactive self (*how* they initially respond under threat). This balance underscores that a brilliant analytical strategy (high Style utility) can be undermined by a panicked or avoidant instinct (low Instinct utility), and vice versa. It moves beyond models focusing solely on cognitive style or emotional intelligence to a more holistic view of decision regulation, where managing one's automatic responses is as critical a skill as analytical reasoning (Banerjee et al., 2025; Gupta, 2022; Kouki-Block & Wellbrock, 2022; Schwaiger & Baechtiger, 2025)

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to deconstruct the implicit preferences that executives hold for decision-making profiles in high-pressure scenarios, focusing on the configurational interplay between Decision Style, Instinctive Response, and the interpretive lens of Tenure. Utilizing a conjoint analysis approach, the findings reveal a clear and robust hierarchy of valued leadership archetypes. The primary conclusion is that executive preference is not dominated by a single attribute but by a specific, integrated configuration: "Calm Decisiveness." This archetype, characterized by a *Decisive* style coupled with a *Freeze* instinct, emerged as the most valued profile. It resolves the apparent paradox by reinterpreting the *freeze* not as inaction but as a tactical, self-regulatory pause that enables clarity and reduces impulsivity, thereby making decisive action more effective. Secondly, the analysis demonstrates that deliberative style and instinctive response are perceived as equally critical determinants of a leader's suitability for pressured decisions, each accounting for 50% of the influence on preference. This empirically validates the theoretical premise of dual-process integration in practice, emphasizing that how a leader thinks is judged with equal weight to how they initially *react* under threat.

## SUGGESTION

The findings of this study illuminate a clear path for both theoretical advancement and practical application in leadership development. Theoretically, scholars are encouraged to build upon the validated configurational model by further exploring the *quality of integration* between deliberative and automatic processes as a central construct of executive effectiveness, rather than studying these systems in isolation. Specifically, future research should aim to legitimize and deepen the understanding of the functional "freeze" response within organizational neuroscience, distinguishing it from pathological anxiety. For practitioners, the implications are direct and actionable. Human resources and senior management should fundamentally revise leadership assessment protocols to evaluate not only cognitive style and experience but also an individual's instinctive stress response, using realistic simulations that reveal these automatic reactions. Leadership development programs must be redesigned to cultivate "Calm Decisiveness" through targeted interventions such as stress-inoculation training, metacognitive coaching to help leaders recognize and regulate their instinctive triggers, and tenure-specific development pathways. For early-career executives, support should focus on building decision frameworks and providing validation mechanisms; for mid-career leaders, on

calibrating intuition through reflective practices; and for seasoned veterans, on implementing safeguards like red-teaming to counter overconfidence. Ultimately, organizations must foster a cultural shift that values strategic pauses and deliberate reflection, normalizing these behaviors as hallmarks of disciplined leadership rather than signs of indecision.

## LIMITATION

While this study provides novel insights into executive decision preferences, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. The primary constraint lies in the sample scope; the data were drawn from 40 executives within a single state-owned enterprise in Indonesia's construction sector, which may limit the generalizability of the "Calm Decisiveness" archetype to other industries, organizational cultures, or national contexts with different leadership norms. Methodologically, the research relies on stated preferences from a conjoint experiment, which, while powerful for revealing implicit valuations, does not equate to observing actual decision-making behavior in real-time, high-stakes crises a gap where intention and action may diverge. Furthermore, the operationalization of complex psychological constructs into a limited set of discrete levels for the conjoint task, though necessary for the experimental design, inevitably simplifies the nuanced fluidity of real-world decision-making. The role of tenure was explored as an interpretive lens rather than a statistically tested moderator, meaning the proposed developmental patterns, while theoretically grounded, require empirical validation through segmented analysis. Finally, as with all survey-based studies, the potential for common method bias cannot be entirely discounted, as all data were self-reported at a single point in time. These limitations, however, do not negate the value of the findings but rather delineate clear boundaries for their interpretation and provide a roadmap for more comprehensive future research.

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