Interview Pattern Cheat Sheet

Von Datawarehausen

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About This Guide

All examples were generated with the help of AI. All numbers, metrics, and scenarios presented in the examples are fictional and for illustrative purposes only.


Think in SHAPES, not in Rambles

1. Silently pick ONE shape (⋆first).
2. Fill the boxes left → right.
3. When you hit the last box, stop talking.

⋆PRIMARY PATTERNS

[⋆1] STAR - Success / "Tell me about a time..."

This is your default pattern for any behavioral question about past achievements, challenges, or experiences. It demonstrates your impact by connecting context to concrete actions and measurable results.[1]
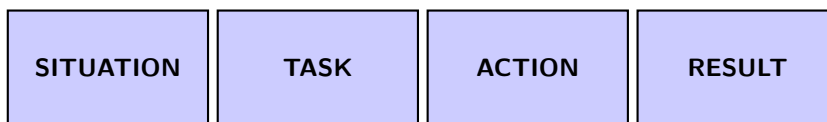
SITUATION	TASK	ACTION	RESULT
Context	Goal	What I did	Impact

Use: wins, impact, leadership, teamwork.[2]

Template: > "We faced [Situation]. My role was [Task]. I did [Action]. Result: [Result]."

[1] **Von Datawarehausen:** Always quantify results when possible. Instead of "improved performance," say "reduced latency by 60%" or "increased user satisfaction by 40%."

[2] **Von Datawarehausen:** The Action component should take 60-70% of your answer time. This is where you differentiate yourself - anyone can describe a problem, but YOUR specific approach is what matters.

Alternative phrasings:

- **Situation:**
  - "We faced..."
  - "The challenge was..."
  - "We encountered..."
  - "The problem arose when..."
  - "At [Company], we had..."
- **Task:**
  - "My role was..."
  - "I was responsible for..."
  - "My goal was to..."
  - "I needed to..."
  - "I took ownership of..."
- **Action:**
  - "I did..."
  - "I implemented..."
  - "My approach was..."
  - "The steps I took were..."
  - "I started by... then..."
- **Result:**
  - "Result:..."
  - "The outcome was..."
  - "This led to..."
  - "Ultimately..."
  - "The impact was..."

Example: Optimizing Agent Eagerness

Situation: Our GPT-5 agentic coding assistant was making excessive tool calls (15+ per task), increasing latency to 45+ seconds and frustrating users who needed quick code fixes.
Task: Reduce tool calls and latency while maintaining code quality and correctness for routine tasks.
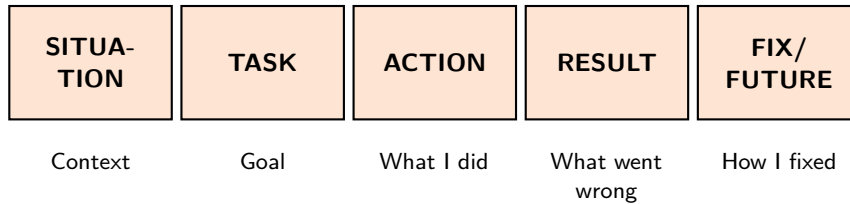**Action:** I implemented a two-tier eagerness strategy:
1. Added context gathering constraints with `reasoning_effort: medium` and a 2-tool-call budget for simple tasks
2. Provided explicit early-stop criteria (~70% signal convergence)
3. Added escape hatches allowing the agent to proceed under reasonable uncertainty for non-critical changes

Result: Average tool calls dropped from 15 to 3, latency improved to 12 seconds, and user satisfaction increased by 40%. Complex tasks could still escalate when needed, maintaining 95% code correctness.[a]

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[a]Based on OpenAI GPT-5 Prompting Guide

[⋆2] STAR-F - Failure / Mistake / Tough Moment

Use this when asked about failures, mistakes, or learning experiences - it shows vulnerability and growth. The key is the Fix/Future component: demonstrate that you learned from the experience and changed your behavior.[3]

SITUA-TION	TASK	ACTION	RESULT	FIX/ FUTURE
Context	Goal	What I did	What went wrong	How I fixed

Use: failures, "biggest mistake", conflict.

Template: > "I misjudged [X] → [Result]. I fixed it by [Fix]. Since then I always [Future habit]."[4]

Alternative phrasings:

- **Situation:**
  - "I misjudged..."
  - "I overlooked..."
  - "The mistake occurred when..."
  - "I failed to consider..."
  - "We encountered a setback..."
- **Result:**
  - "This led to..."
  - "The consequence was..."
  - "As a result..."
  - "Unfortunately..."
  - "Which caused..."

- **Fix:**
  - "I fixed it by..."
  - "I corrected this by..."
  - "To address this, I..."
  - "I remediated by..."
  - "The solution was to..."
- **Future:**
  - "Since then I always..."
  - "Now I make sure to..."
  - "Going forward, I..."
  - "This taught me to..."
  - "I now consistently..."

3 Von Datawarehausen: Choose a genuine failure that had real consequences, not a disguised brag like "I worked too hard." Interviewers can tell the difference.

4 Von Datawarehausen: The Fix/Future is what saves this answer. Spend equal time on what went wrong and what you did about it. Show you're reflective, not defensive.

Example: Missing Context Quality Evals

Situation: We built a RAG-based medical knowledge assistant with comprehensive tool-calling evaluations using DeepEval's ToolCorrectnessMetric. The agent passed all tests - correctly retrieving documents 98% of the time and executing queries flawlessly.

Task: Deploy a production-ready assistant that would help clinicians find relevant medical information from 50K+ research papers.

Action: I focused entirely on retrieval mechanics - testing document retrieval, embedding accuracy, and search execution. We deployed confident the agent "worked" since all tool calls were technically correct and documents were successfully retrieved.

Result: Within two weeks, clinician satisfaction dropped 40%. Users complained retrieved context was "tangentially related," "missing key details," or "mixed relevant and irrelevant info" - even when retrieval technically succeeded. We had zero evals for context relevancy, precision, or recall.

Fix/Future: I designed a custom GEval metric for "Context Precision" - measuring if retrieved chunks actually contained information needed to answer the query, not just keyword matches. Added ContextualRecallMetric to catch missing critical information. Implemented two-tier eval:
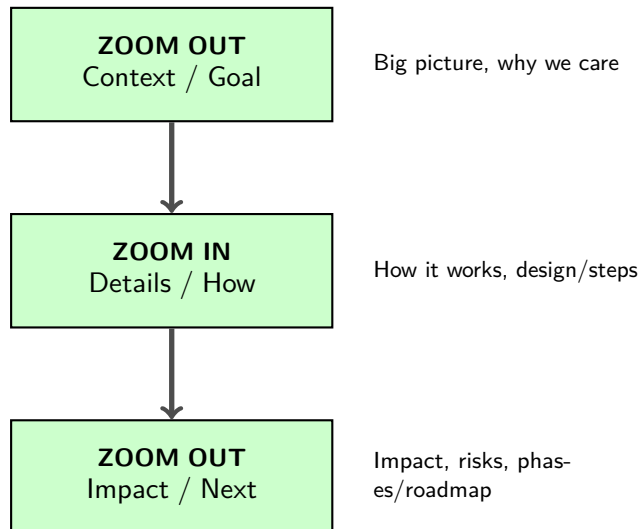
  1. Retrieval mechanics pass/fail
  2. Context quality scores (0-1)

Since then, I always evaluate both "did we retrieve something" AND "did we retrieve the RIGHT thing" before deployment.[a]

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[a]Based on Hamel Husain's Evals FAQ and DeepEval Documentation

[⋆3] ZOOM OUT → ZOOM IN → ZOOM OUT - Design / Walkthrough

Perfect for system design questions or technical deep dives where you need to explain architecture or implementation. Start with the big picture, dive into technical details, then zoom back out to discuss impact and future considerations.[5]

<table>
<tr><td>ZOOM OUT
Context / Goal</td><td>Big picture, why we care</td></tr>
<tr><td>↓</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>ZOOM IN
Details / How</td><td>How it works, design/steps</td></tr>
<tr><td>↓</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>ZOOM OUT
Impact / Next</td><td>Impact, risks, phases/roadmap</td></tr>
</table>

Use: system design, "How would you build…?", project deep dives.

Template: > "Overall, [big picture]. Concretely, [how it works]. So in practice, we'd [impact/next steps]."

Alternative phrasings:

- **Zoom Out (Context):**
    - "Overall…"
    - "At a high level…"
    - "The big picture is…"
    - "Stepping back…"
    - "From 10,000 feet…"
- **Zoom In (Details):**
    - "Concretely…"
    - "Diving into details…"
    - "Under the hood…"
    - "Technically speaking…"
    - "The implementation works by…"
- **Zoom Out (Impact):**
    - "So in practice…"
    - "This means…"
    - "The impact is…"
    - "Looking forward…"
    - "At scale, this…"

> **Example: GraphRAG System Design**
>
> ```
> ZOOM OUT (Context): Our traditional RAG system struggled with
> complex, multi-hop queries like "Which movies did Steven Spiel-
> berg direct between 2000-2010 that won Oscars?" Users had to
> break queries into multiple steps, and vector search couldn't
> capture entity relationships effectively.
> ZOOM IN (Details): I designed a GraphRAG architecture using
> Neo4j with three layers:
>     1. Knowledge Graph as the core - entities (Directors, Movies,
>        Awards) as nodes with typed relationships (DIRECTED, WON)
>     2. Cypher Templates for common queries with an LLM classifier
>        to match user questions to templates and extract parame-
>        ters
>     3. Dynamic Cypher Generation for novel queries - the LLM com-
>        bines template snippets based on detected filters. For
>        example, combining director + year range + award filters
>        into a single parameterized query. Each chunk node stored
>   both text and embedding properties for hybrid retrieval
> ZOOM OUT (Impact): The GraphRAG system reduced query latency
> by 60% (single graph traversal vs multiple vector searches),
> improved accuracy on multi-hop questions from 45% to 87%, and
> handled 10x more query variations without manual template cre-
> ation. Next phase: add community detection for global summa-
> rization and implement metadata filtering for user personaliza-
> tion.[a]
> ```
> _____
> [a]Based on GraphRAG documentation

⋆SECONDARY PATTERNS

[⋆4] SITUATION → STAKE → STANCE → SOLUTION - Conflict / Pushback

Use this when asked about conflicts, disagreements, or times you pushed back on decisions. It shows you can stand firm on principles while finding pragmatic solutions that address underlying concerns.[6]

SITUA-TION	STAKE	STANCE	SOLU-TION
What was happening	What was at risk	What I stood for	The path / compromise
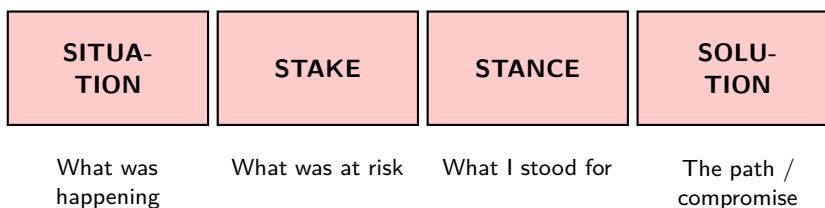
Use: saying no, safety/quality lines, disagreeing.[7]

Template: > "We were [Situation]. The risk was [Stake]. I made it clear [Stance]. I proposed [Solution]."

6 Von Datawarehausen: The Stake component is critical - without clearly articulating what's at risk, your pushback looks like stubbornness. Explain the business/technical/ethical consequences first.

7 Von Datawarehausen: Always end with a Solution that worked. Never leave the story at "I said no and they were mad." Show you found a path forward that addressed concerns on both sides.

Alternative phrasings:

- **Situation:**
  - "We were..."
  - "The situation was..."
  - "We faced pressure to..."
  - "The team wanted to..."
  - "There was conflict when..."
- **Stake:**
  - "The risk was..."
  - "What was at stake..."
  - "This threatened..."
  - "The consequences could be..."
  - "We risked..."
- **Stance:**
  - "I made it clear..."
  - "I stood firm that..."
  - "My position was..."
  - "I insisted that..."
  - "I advocated for..."
- **Solution:**
  - "I proposed..."
  - "The compromise was..."
  - "We agreed to..."
  - "The path forward was..."
  - "I suggested..."

Example: End-to-End Encryption Stance

Situation: Product wanted to launch our AI chatbot assistant for healthcare queries without end-to-end encryption to enable "quality monitoring" and faster LLM fine-tuning on real conversations. They argued E2EE would delay launch by 2 months and increase costs.

Stake: User trust and HIPAA compliance were at risk. Healthcare conversations contain PHI (Protected Health Information) - diagnoses, medications, symptoms. A breach or subpoena could expose thousands of patients. We'd face $50K+ fines per violation and lose provider partnerships.

Stance: I made it clear this was non-negotiable. Healthcare data encryption isn't a feature - it's a legal and ethical requirement. I would not ship a product where we could read patient conversations, regardless of "good intentions" or business pressure.

Solution: I proposed a compromise:
1. Implement E2EE using client-side encryption (Signal Protocol)
2. Build an opt-in monitoring system where users consent to share anonymized data for quality checks
3. Use synthetic data generation for fine-tuning instead of real conversations

Launch delayed 6 weeks, but we shipped HIPAA-compliant and gained trust from 3 major hospital networks who specifically chose us over competitors for our encryption-first approach.[a]

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[a]Fictional example based on common healthcare AI security requirements and HIPAA compliance considerations

[⋆5] FACTS → OPTIONS → RECOMMENDATION - Decisions / Trade-offs

Perfect for questions about decision-making, architecture choices, or evaluating trade-offs. It demonstrates analytical thinking by showing you consider multiple options before making reasoned recommendations.[8]
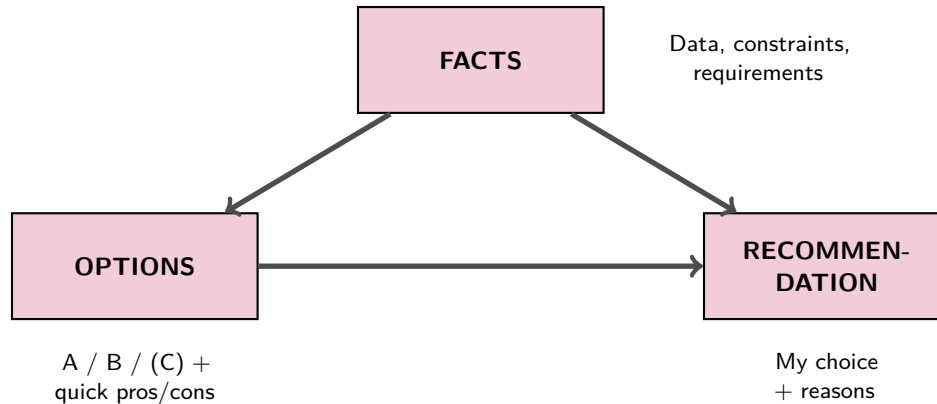
[8] **Von Datawarehausen:** Present 2-3 realistic options with honest pros/cons. Don't set up straw men just to knock them down - interviewers want to see you genuinely grapple with trade-offs.

Use: "How would you decide…?", architecture/approach choices.

Template: > "Given [Facts], we could do [Option A/B/…]. I'd choose [Recommendation] because [Reasons]."

Alternative phrasings:

- **Facts:**
  - "Given [Facts]…"
  - "The constraints were…"
  - "We had to consider…"
  - "The situation involved…"
  - "The key factors were…"
- **Options:**
  - "We could do…"
  - "The options included…"
  - "We evaluated…"
  - "The alternatives were…"
  - "We considered…"

- **Recommendation:**
  - "I'd choose…"
  - "I recommended…"
  - "My decision was…"
  - "I went with…"
  - "The best path was…"
- **Reasons:**
  - "because…"
  - "since…"
  - "given that…"
  - "due to…"
  - "considering…"

Example: Hybrid Search Decision for Legal RAG

Facts: Our legal document RAG system served 200+ attorneys. Vector search (embeddings) achieved 72% retrieval accuracy but struggled with exact term matching - missing specific case citations like "Smith v. Jones 1995" or statute numbers like "USC §1983." Pure BM25 keyword search found exact terms but missed semantically similar precedents (e.g., "negligence" vs "breach of duty"). Latency budget: <500ms. Must support 1000+ concurrent queries.

Options:

A) Pure Vector Search: Pros: semantic understanding, handles paraphrasing. Cons: misses exact citations (deal-breaker for legal).

B) Pure BM25: Pros: exact term matching, fast. Cons: no semantic understanding, misses 40% of relevant precedents.

C) Hybrid Search (BM25 + Vector): Pros: combines precision and context, Reciprocal Rank Fusion (RRF) for deduplication. Cons: 2x retrieval cost, requires alpha tuning (weighted combination: $H = (1-\alpha)K + \alpha V$).

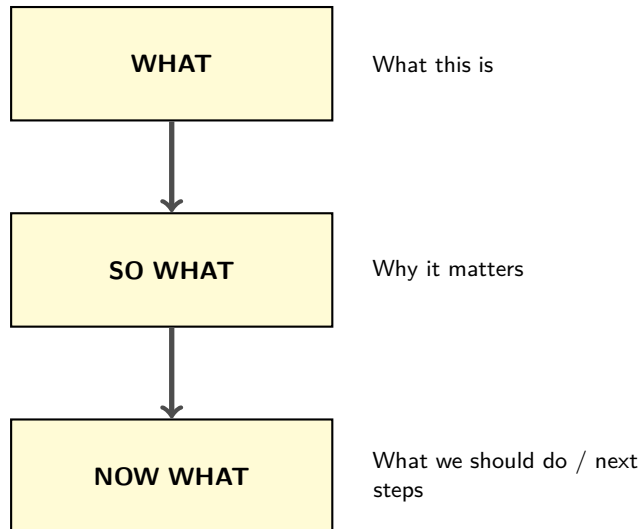**Recommendation:** I chose Hybrid Search with `alpha=0.6` (60% vector, 40% BM25) because:

1. Legal work demands both exact citation matching AND semantic case finding - neither alone suffices
2. RRF eliminated duplicate results efficiently
3. Parallel retrieval kept latency at 380ms
4. Accuracy jumped to 91% (67% failure reduction), matching Anthropic's contextual retrieval benchmarks

Worth the complexity given our domain's dual precision+context requirement.[a]

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[a]Fictional example based on common hybrid search implementations combining BM25 and vector search, inspired by Anthropic's contextual retrieval approaches

[⋆6] WHAT → SO WHAT → NOW WHAT - Vision / Strategy / Big Picture

Use this for vision, strategy, or philosophical questions about industry trends or future directions. It shows strategic thinking by defining concepts, articulating their significance, and proposing actionable next steps.[9]

WHAT — What this is

SO WHAT — Why it matters

NOW WHAT — What we should do / next steps

Use: vision, strategy, "Where is AI going…?", philosophy.[10]

Template: > "What this really is, is [What]. This matters because [So What]. So I'd [Now What – steps/strategy]."

Alternative phrasings:

- **What:**
  - "What this really is…"
  - "At its core…"
  - "Fundamentally…"
  - "The essence is…"
  - "The paradigm shift is…"
- **So What:**
  - "This matters because…"
  - "The significance is…"
  - "Why this is important…"
  - "The impact will be…"
  - "This changes everything because…"
- **Now What:**
  - "So I'd…"
  - "The strategy is…"
  - "Going forward, we should…"
  - "The roadmap involves…"
  - "My recommendation is…"

[9] Von Datawarehausen: The So What is where many candidates fail - they describe trends but don't explain impact. Connect the dots: "This matters because [specific business/technical consequence]."

[10] Von Datawarehausen: The Now What should be concrete and actionable, not vague aspirations. Give 3-5 specific steps with clear owners or outcomes. This shows you can translate vision into execution.

Example: The Deep Agents Paradigm Shift

WHAT: The industry is shifting from "Shallow Agents" (Agent 1.0) to "Deep Agents" (Agent 2.0). Shallow agents are simple while loops--prompt → LLM → tool call → repeat. They're state-less, relying entirely on context windows. Deep agents decouple planning from execution using four pillars:

1. **Explicit Planning** (todo tools, not just chain-of-thought)
2. **Hierarchical Delegation** (Orchestrator → Sub-Agent pattern)
3. **Persistent Memory** (filesystem/vector DB as external state)
4. **Extreme Context Engineering** (1000+ token prompts with pro-tocols, file naming standards, human-in-the-loop formats)

SO WHAT: This is an architectural revolution, not just "more tools." Shallow agents excel at 5--15 step tasks ("What's the weather in Tokyo?") but fail catastrophically at 500--step tasks over days--they lose context, hallucinate, enter infi-nite loops. Deep agents unlock complex, multi--day workflows: "Research 10 competitors, analyze pricing, build comparison spreadsheet, write strategic summary." Examples like Claude Code, Manus, and Deep Research prove this works. The limiting factor isn't model intelligence--it's context management. By externalizing memory and planning, we control complexity. This transforms AI from task executor to project manager.

NOW WHAT: We should adopt a "Deep Agent First" strategy:

1. Audit current agents--identify those requiring >20 steps or multi--hour tasks
2. Implement planning tools (even no-op todo lists work)
3. Design sub-agent hierarchies for specialized domains (Re-searcher, Coder, Analyst)
4. Add persistent memory layers (filesystem for structured work, vector DB for unstructured)
5. Invest in context engineering - detailed prompts with ex-amples, tool protocols, and failure recovery strategies

Start with one high-value vertical (e.g., research or coding), prove ROI, then scale horizontally.[a]

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[a]Based on Philipp Schmid's blog and LangChain's blog

Appendix: Pattern Phrasings in German

[⋆1] STAR - Erfolg / "Erzählen Sie von einer Zeit…"

Alternative Formulierungen:

- **Situation:**
  - "Wir standen vor…"
  - "Die Herausforderung war…"
  - "Wir begegneten…"
  - "Das Problem entstand als…"
  - "Bei [Firma] hatten wir…"
- **Aufgabe:**
  - "Meine Rolle war…"
  - "Ich war verantwortlich für…"
  - "Mein Ziel war es…"
  - "Ich musste…"
  - "Ich übernahm…"

- **Handlung:**
  - "Ich habe…"
  - "Ich implementierte…"
  - "Mein Ansatz war…"
  - "Die Schritte waren…"
  - "Ich begann mit… dann…"
- **Ergebnis:**
  - "Das Ergebnis war…"
  - "Das Resultat…"
  - "Dies führte zu…"
  - "Letztendlich…"
  - "Die Auswirkung war…"

[⋆2] STAR-F - Fehler / Misserfolg / Schwieriger Moment

Alternative Formulierungen:

- **Situation:**
  - "Ich unterschätzte…"
  - "Ich übersah…"
  - "Der Fehler trat auf als…"
  - "Ich berücksichtigte nicht…"
  - "Wir erlebten einen Rückschlag…"
- **Ergebnis:**
  - "Dies führte zu…"
  - "Die Konsequenz war…"
  - "Als Resultat…"
  - "Leider…"
  - "Was verursachte…"

- **Lösung:**
  - "Ich behob es durch…"
  - "Ich korrigierte dies durch…"
  - "Um dies anzugehen…"
  - "Ich behob durch…"
  - "Die Lösung war…"
- **Zukunft:**
  - "Seitdem achte ich immer…"
  - "Jetzt stelle ich sicher…"
  - "In Zukunft…"
  - "Dies lehrte mich…"
  - "Ich mache jetzt konsequent…"

[⋆3] ZOOM OUT → ZOOM IN → ZOOM OUT - Design / Durchgang

Alternative Formulierungen:

- **Zoom Out (Kontext):**
  - "Insgesamt…"
  - "Auf hoher Ebene…"
  - "Das große Ganze ist…"
  - "Zurücktretend…"
  - "Aus 10.000 Fuß…"
- **Zoom In (Details):**
  - "Konkret…"

  - "In die Details gehend…"
  - "Unter der Haube…"
  - "Technisch gesehen…"
  - "Die Implementierung funktioniert durch…"
- **Zoom Out (Auswirkung):**
  - "In der Praxis…"
  - "Das bedeutet…"

- "Die Auswirkung ist..."
- "Mit Blick nach vorn..."

- "Im Maßstab, dies..."

[⋆4] SITUATION → RISIKO → POSITION → LÖSUNG - Konflikt / Widerstand

Alternative Formulierungen:

- **Situation:**
    - "Wir waren..."
    - "Die Situation war..."
    - "Wir standen unter Druck..."
    - "Das Team wollte..."
    - "Es gab Konflikt als..."
- **Risiko:**
    - "Das Risiko war..."
    - "Was auf dem Spiel stand..."
    - "Dies bedrohte..."
    - "Die Konsequenzen könnten sein..."
    - "Wir riskierten..."

- **Position:**
    - "Ich machte deutlich..."
    - "Ich blieb fest dabei..."
    - "Meine Position war..."
    - "Ich bestand darauf..."
    - "Ich setzte mich ein für..."
- **Lösung:**
    - "Ich schlug vor..."
    - "Der Kompromiss war..."
    - "Wir einigten uns auf..."
    - "Der Weg nach vorn war..."
    - "Ich empfahl..."

[⋆5] FAKTEN → OPTIONEN → EMPFEHLUNG - Entscheidungen / Abwägungen

Alternative Formulierungen:

- **Fakten:**
    - "Gegeben [Fakten]..."
    - "Die Einschränkungen waren..."
    - "Wir mussten berücksichtigen..."
    - "Die Situation umfasste..."
    - "Die Schlüsselfaktoren waren..."
- **Optionen:**
    - "Wir könnten..."
    - "Die Optionen umfassten..."
    - "Wir evaluierten..."
    - "Die Alternativen waren..."

- "Wir erwogen..."
- **Empfehlung:**
    - "Ich würde wählen..."
    - "Ich empfahl..."
    - "Meine Entscheidung war..."
    - "Ich entschied mich für..."
    - "Der beste Weg war..."
- **Gründe:**
    - "weil..."
    - "da..."
    - "angesichts dessen..."
    - "aufgrund..."
    - "in Anbetracht..."

[⋆6] WAS → WARUM → WIE - Vision / Strategie / Überblick

Alternative Formulierungen:

- **Was:**
    - "Was dies wirklich ist..."
    - "Im Kern..."
    - "Grundsätzlich..."

- "Die Essenz ist..."
- "Der Paradigmenwechsel ist..."
- **Warum:**
    - "Dies ist wichtig weil..."

- – "Die Bedeutung ist..."
- – "Warum dies wichtig ist..."
- – "Die Auswirkung wird sein..."
- – "Dies verändert alles weil..."
- **Wie:**

- – "Also würde ich..."
- – "Die Strategie ist..."
- – "In Zukunft sollten wir..."
- – "Der Fahrplan umfasst..."
- – "Meine Empfehlung ist..."