

# The Problem of Compromise in Conservation and Exhibit Decision Making

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## Abstract

A key challenge in managing collections is optimizing the value to society they offer, both now and in the future. This challenge can be framed as an issue requiring compromise, or, it can be considered as an opportunity to optimize. The goal is to help heritage professionals engage in constructive decision-making. By focusing on high-level institutional gains and benefits, while avoiding picking battles over less significant issues, a compromise and win-lose mindset can be avoided. The multiple objectives involved in creating a safe and effective exhibit can lead to conflict and unhelpful digging in of positions among team members. Understanding factors that contribute to conflict and identifying some means of avoiding or minimizing those factors can lead to teamwork at a higher level. Collection management challenges are explored, in a practical way, to reveal how simple changes in thinking habits and perspective can improve decisions and outcomes. A range of heuristics that shape our instinctive decision-making are explained and illustrated to create the opportunity for insight into how these unconsciously create an unnecessarily conflict-based response. Strategies for shifting perspective are discussed and offered as a route to identifying mutually beneficial outcomes.

## Keywords

museum, subject focus, library, archives, access, activities, exhibition, collections, preservation, professional development, staff and volunteers, visitor engagement, profession

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## **Introduction**

Skillful and responsible collection management within museums, libraries, and archives involves developing, preserving, and using collections for the benefit of humanity. Staff in these institutions might expect a cooperative and collaborative teamwork approach to the delivery of these duties. Yet experience often defies such optimism, as staff find themselves competing for resources and status when seeking to deliver their part of the mandate. In this paper, we aim to shed light on the habits and perceptions that may unconsciously underpin the creation of conflict. Where conflict is perceived, parties may either try to overrule each other's needs or, perhaps more commonly, compromise to partly achieve their operational goals. Such compromise, in turn, leads to concessions and a sense that everyone has had to sacrifice part of their agenda to achieve institutional goals.

In this article, we select the conservation and access case study as a focus to examine the nature and value of compromise in a collection management context. These two aspects of museum practice, conservation and access, are often portrayed as being in conflict. Although the examples here are drawn from this apparent division, the lessons are broader and could be used to inform changes in practice across cultural heritage organizations. The goal is to shift understandings of apparent conflict to move toward mutual support between team members, with better understood and beneficial outcomes. To do this, we challenge the idea of compromise as a default or benign tool in conservation decision-making.

Many conservation problems are not solved by splitting the difference, leading us to ask whether there is an alternative default than compromise. We explore the habits, perceptions, and thinking tendencies we have that can lead us to compromise instead of optimizing toward a common goal. By becoming familiar with, and aware of, our perceptions and intuitive default thinking, we can improve the chances of taking a benefit-oriented optimization strategy instead of a deficit-oriented compromising strategy.

## **Deficit, Asset, and Balanced Thinking**

Deficit Based Thinking (DBT) refers to a tendency to think about improving systems in terms of identifying and rectifying deficiencies. In DBT, the decision-maker has a constant problem-seeking focus which is polarizing and demotivational. DBT is a blame-based system that focuses attention on what can be lost, and by implication, encourages us to allocate the blame for this to others or internalize it ourselves—the existence of blame means it is located somewhere. Extreme DBT thinking with externalized blame casts other parts of your institution or team as dysfunctional, which is a severe inhibitor to building a shared and positive change culture. Conservators have the mandate to manage risk to avoid unnecessary damage to collections, and this can

generate an unconscious DBT approach. It is normal conservation practice to imagine future risks and pre-emptively manage them. Combine this with a common (mis)perception that risks are associated with use creates the problematic mindset that conservation and access are in conflict. This fosters a mindset of focusing on problems, that is, adopting a deficit-based thinking approach.

In contrast, Asset Based Thinking (ABT) is a concept that encourages us to make small shifts in perception and thinking to focus on what is possible. This standpoint has roots in diverse academic fields, including sociology, economics, political science, education, social work, and community building (Green and Haines 2015). ABT encourages the decision maker to begin the problem-solving process by focusing on the people and/or resources that can generate desired outcomes, rather than starting by looking for problems. It is based on identifying strengths and seeking new creative ways to combine them with a focus on the possibility of what might be. When faced with problems, ABT encourages you not to ignore them but to set about searching for the opportunities associated with the situation that you can leverage from those problems. ABT encourages a positivity bias that moves from a concession mindset to an optimization one. An asset-based approach shifts focus from what might be characterized as wrong (such as adverse relative humidity, children touching collections) to what could also be positively valued (increase in visitor numbers on a rainy day or children enjoying collections).

To illustrate an ABT approach in conservation, consider how the COVID-19 pandemic and recent cost of living crisis has caused many organizations to rethink their priorities and opportunities. This can feel like the closing of opportunities to do conservation work, but an asset-based approach encourages you to seek the positive. Perhaps this is a good time to work on the combined conservation and sustainability policy and to revisit and tailor specific collection care targets rather than follow a more generic approach. Such discussions may both reduce energy consumption and reframe how conservators are viewed, becoming positive team players in the institutional mission.

Stuart (2018) argued for the development of a best-of-both-worlds approach that seeks to combine the perspectives of both routes. Stuart leans on the grounded-in-reality opportunities from DBT and combines this with the positive focus of ABT, calling the combined perspectives an asset-balanced approach. An illustration of each perspective is offered in Table 1. This asset-balanced approach recognizes that there are sometimes critical deficits that need to be addressed directly. The asset-balanced approach from Stuart encourages innovative, positive solution-seeking and enables the identification and treatment of problems with surgical precision. It is about conservators conceiving their professional mandate as playing a part in a shared endeavor with their colleagues to deliver value to society and exercising control only in targeted ways as necessary. While a balanced approach is possibly the ideal ultimate target, we

**Table 1.** Characteristics of deficit, asset, and asset-balanced thinking.

Deficit thinking	Asset-balanced thinking	Asset thinking
Starts from gaps in skills, knowledge, and abilities.	Balanced assessment of skills, knowledge, and abilities.	Starts from available skills, knowledge, and abilities.
Goals set from on high.	Team goals emerge from joint consideration of mission and capabilities.	People set own goals, possibly myopic.
Specifications set by upper echelons and/or consultants.	Specifications arrived at through negotiation for best application of capabilities to advance mission.	Specifications set by individuals' professional associations.
All are required to give in, abandon to some extent their standards.	Out of the box approaches are developed.	Everyone does what they can without total capitulation.
People are labeled as issues (structure view).	People seen as having priorities linked to their professional background (structure and agency view).	Circumstances are blamed for people's issues (agency view).
Enabling people to conform to their prescribed roles.	People supported to be flexible within the norms of the organization.	Supporting people to be who they want to be.

believe the existing default to deficit-based thinking warrants a shift to asset-based thinking which will result in a balanced situation. To effect change, some degree of oversteering may be necessary.

## Use It, Eventually We Lose It All

Conservation has often been described as having an aspirational goal to strive to preserve collections for all time. In a non-infinite world, decisions must be made about the allocation of resources. A "for-ever" perspective has significant limitations. The first limitation is that restitution may necessitate the current accelerated consumption of resources in recognition of past exclusion (Henderson 2020). This approach may require conservators to reconfigure the urge to keep items off exhibit by considering wider benefits of social equity.

Another limitation stems from social discounting (Eftec 2005; Staniforth 2014), a theory that suggests that the value we place on the existence and use of a collection through the next year must be greater than the value we place on the existence and use of that same collection 100 years from now. The sudden destruction of heritage reminds us that the things we have attempted to cherish for the future at the expense of the now can suddenly be lost and the hoarded value is squandered. A catastrophic fire consumes all the present and future value of heritage and serves as a reminder that it is prudent to

extract some benefit in the present. Although current use may reduce some possible future value, it precludes the possibility of zero value being delivered to society.

## **Heuristics and Biases Affecting Strategy Choice**

Evolution has molded our brains for the default use of heuristics—simple rules of thumb for thinking (De Neys 2021; Kahneman 2011; West, Toplak, and Stanovich 2008). These heuristics have created many tendencies in our thinking that, while good for survival in general, sometimes have specific and significant disadvantages. All human minds default to using heuristics. Analyses of heuristics remind us that our decisions—even the ones we feel confident about—can be skewed by biases that stem from our own natural response to environments. Whatever decision-making strategy we use creates a lens through which we look. The lens of asset-based thinking supports conservators to avoid casually following sub-optimal decision-making strategies by boosting meta-awareness of the thinking process. We can examine a selection of these default decision-making strategies and offer examples of how they play out in conservation decisions to identify opportunities to move from compromising to optimizing.

### *Affect Heuristic*

Our sense of the importance of something can often depend on the emotional impact associated with it, and this is called the affect heuristic. Emotion is an accepted feature of the cultural heritage discourse (Smith 2021; Smith, Wetherell, and Campbell 2018), but its place in conservation decision-making is often relegated to below the more apparently rational concepts stemming from normative scientific practice. Yet emotion plays a huge, if often unacknowledged, part in decision-making, including in conservation. The affect heuristic (Finucane et al. 2000) captures how our feelings can work automatically and impact our judgment. The emotion that we feel is drawn from context and experiences and will shape our judgments even where numerical data and calculated expressions of value are offered.

Emotional responses are generally well understood, even if they are side-lined in official conservation discussions. A current example is where climate activists attempted to engage the affect heuristic by targeting art by throwing soup onto Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" on display at the National Gallery in London in October 2022 (Gayle 2022). With minimal damage to the frame, the art was cleaned and returned to display quickly while a discussion about the protest continued for considerably longer, with more than a million views of the video of the incident within a week. Whatever message was discussed because of the action, there is no doubting the power of the strong visual statement to promote dialog on a larger issue.



**Figure 1.** Librarian Jessica Liddy shows one of the old Timaru Herald editions that has had a section clipped out.

Source. Holden (2019); Photo: John Bisset/Stuff; ©The Timaru Herald: Stuff.

How might the affect heuristic materialize in collection care? Consider Figure 1, which shows an article clipped from a newspaper without permission and the librarian sadly examining the hole. The library communication team knew that the visual rendition of the damage was upsetting, which is why it was used in the newspaper story to communicate to the public why the archive room had been closed to visitors (Holden 2019). This one clipped out article represents a loss of probably less than 0.001 percent of the library holdings and as such the library understands that the technical account of loss would be less influential than the emotional one.

The affect heuristic can also work against logical decision making. For example, the power of imagining the damage caused by a sprinkler going off in a store room is so substantial that the value of a well-maintained sprinkler system in preventing fires and the statistics on accidental use (Roche and Lima 2019) do not offset this visualization sufficiently in people's consciousness. When fire damage occurs, it is also emotive, but it is not as easily attributed to the failure to install a sprinkler system as sprinkler leaks are to their installation. Such affect-led decisions are less available for calm evaluation and are therefore more likely to lead to defensive positions and heightened arguments should disagreements arise about their installation. Where there is considerable emotion in a situation people may struggle to look beyond their own battle lines and so the possibility to reframe problems for common gain is reduced.

## *Numerator Bias*

When presented with numerical data, humans are shown to have biases of perception. This can be illustrated by the way that people select a best option. Imagine trying to pick a red ball from a glass container full of red and blue balls with your eyes shut. People are more optimistic of their ability to pick a red ball from the container if there is a larger number of red balls in total rather than a larger percentage of red balls (Reyna and Brainerd 2008). Our decisions are impacted by the frequency of something happening rather than the probability of it happening. Generally, people are not sufficiently considerate of sample size (Tversky and Kahneman 1971).

To set this problem in a museum context, imagine a discussion on allowing objects on exhibition to be touched and consider the perspectives of two members of staff. The exhibition designer has planned installations of thousands of objects in their career and rarely seen any damage from touch. Even if they are made aware of any such damage, it was likely seen in a report long after their interest in the exhibition has passed, hence, lacking emotional impact (affect). In contrast, the conservator is always called out when an object is damaged. They see the damage and will probably have an intimate relationship with the response, with a full sensory connection to the damage they repair. The conservator's affect heuristic is operating, and their numerator bias is off the scale as their experience of the frequency is the highest in the staff team. Attempts by these two parties to "compromise" on an open display are set up to be fraught. The conservator and exhibition designer experience the same objective probability but different subjective frequencies, so they experience the impact of touch damage differently.

## *Zero Risk Bias*

Most people strive to avoid uncertainty by seeking to increase their sense of certainty. If we believe that the level of risk is very low, we will think and act as though there is zero risk (Baron, Gowda, and Kunreuther 1993). That in part explains why we can feel so shocked when low, but not zero, probability events, such as the 2018 fire at the National Museum of Brazil and the 2019 Notre-Dame Cathedral fire, occur. In our default decision-making, this leads to an imbalance in the way we think about risks to items on exhibit, in comparison to items in storage. The risk to any item in a reserve collection (Figure 2a) can easily be thought to be so small as to "feel" that it is zero. In contrast, the risks to an item on exhibit (Figure 2b), from light damage or theft, will be perceived as greater than zero. Thus, zero-risk bias can influence our thinking about the relative benefit-to-risk ratio of an item placed on exhibit or held in reserve and negates the social acceptance of a degree of social discounting. This skewed and potentially emotionally charged misperception of risk may lead to colleagues being unnecessarily drawn into conflict.



**Figure 2.** (a) Items in a reserve collection ©[https://www.123rf.com/profile\\_jvdwolf](https://www.123rf.com/profile_jvdwolf) and (b) an item on exhibit. Photo by Natasha Herman, courtesy of [www.stiltbookcradles.com](http://www.stiltbookcradles.com).





**Figure 3.** The Ardabil Carpet at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Note. Photograph by Peter Kelleher ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-ardabil-carpet>.

### *Myside Bias*

Myside bias describes the tendency to only seek information that conforms to our current opinions and to refuse to attend to evidence that refutes them. Myside bias is a comforting bias in that it allows us to feel confident about our own worldview and justifies us being frustrated, angry, or belittling about other people's views. Throughout the world we have seen much of this in political life with polarized and angry debates. The power of myside bias corresponds with the strength with which a belief is held—the firmer a belief is held, the stronger the resistance to alternative perspectives (Stanovich 2021). This is not a measure of intelligence, so the bias is largely immune to classic “rational” data-driven appeals. Myside bias is compounded by confirmation bias (Mercier 2017), whereby people only seek out or attend to information which supports their already established opinions. To attempt to compromise without recognizing myside bias ensures that both parties remain convinced of their own positions. The greater conviction that either side has, the less open they will be to accepting alternative visions. This consolidates the sense of compromise and loss that every concession is a bad thing and must be matched by the other party losing something of equivalent value.

## *The Challenge of Bias in Conservation Decision Making*

These biases are important because they create a perfect storm of unhelpful perceptions. Consider the world as perceived by the conservator: they have the most frequent and emotive exposure to damaged objects and the responsibility of responding to object damage falls to them. The perception of risk for a temporary exhibition is in stark contrast to keeping something in a box in storage. The consequences of decades of storage are spread over several generations and are not readily apparent. Any damage noted on a stored item (perhaps in a condition audit) is framed as a clearly defined proportion of the whole collection. In contrast, any damage to a displayed item is specific and urgent. This bundle of biases pushes a conservator into thinking that an exhibition is a very dangerous occasion. Whenever an exhibition is proposed, there is a danger that the conservation team finds itself immediately in adversarial mode—how little can I concede—how can I negotiate down all these alarming risks? A deficit-based thinking approach may kick in instinctively. Where conservators find themselves in unnecessarily adversarial mode there are strategies available to shift perspectives and improve team harmony.

## **Perspectives of Thinking**

### *System Thinking Perspective*

Cultural property managers should recognize that focusing all their priorities on any one aspect of management, be it public outreach or preservation, may redirect their energy from their highest-level goal of serving society. Maintaining a focus “on the whole” is a feature of “Systems thinking.” This is a methodology for making sense of complexity by considering the whole of a system and the relationships of parts within it rather than attempting to understand a system through a tight focus on its parts. This holistic approach reminds us that optimizing (attending to) high-level objectives requires sub-optimizing (reducing attention to) all lower-level systems (Beenhakker 1964; Meadows 2009). Therefore, we must ensure our focus is continually orientated to the high-level goals of our organization rather than what may feel more pressing but are our own more localized, lower-level ones. On a day-to-day basis our goals rightly attract our attention, but conceiving of these as lower-level within our organization may help us to resolve what appears to be conflict. A return to the larger mission should help us to orientate on our priorities.

### *Broad Framing*

A recognition of our biases and perspectives may help conservators to reframe and ask what intellectual exercise can be used to help rethink their approach yet still

offer wise counsel. To counter negativity, conservators can stand back—literally and intellectually—and ask themselves, “am I seeing the whole picture and what picture do other people see?” This is known as broad framing (Barberisa and Huang 2009; Tversky and Kahneman 1981). For example, taking a broader frame than an individual item at risk on display and thinking about all the risks across all the collection over a significant duration should help create a shift toward harmonious teamworking.

### *Technical Versus Strategic Thinking*

From resolving humidity levels to specifying storage systems, many of the objectives of conservation are technical in nature. For technical problems, drilling into the details is necessary for a successful project—after all, a few centimeters wrong in a mobile density storage system could spell disaster. In contrast, the core goals of heritage institutions are sociocultural and strategic in service of society. If not carefully integrated into the wider picture, applying finely honed technical and analytical skills to an institution’s strategic objectives could be counterproductive. Analysis based on a description of the smallest technical detail will rarely illuminate a strategic pathway to a better society. In such discussions, conservators are in danger of operating in a technocratic comfort zone. Other tendencies in conservation approaches—such as the desire for perfection or an ill-defined commitment to an abstract future—may also encourage defensiveness and a competitive default of needs and priorities leading to compromise and attrition.

### **Beyond Compromise**

Compromise is often framed in terms of negotiation—I give a little, you give a little, and we meet in the middle. All too often within heritage organizations the goals of conservation are presented as a negotiation where preservation goals compromise other activities in the organization. This is an unhelpful formulation arising from understandable biases and perspectives. For example, if a conservator is struggling to deliver on their own goals and perceives a threat to collection care, they should reframe their needs in light of high-level goals and identification of positive outcomes such as the societal benefits of an activity. Is it a compromise to illuminate an exhibition if it means visitors can enjoy it? Is it a compromise to relax environmental control requirements if it reduces the climate impact of an exhibition? By describing preservation goals as part of a larger system and recognizing those objectives that may be at a higher level than our habitual priorities, we can reconceive our conservation strategies. This avoids a more confrontational approach of compromise that always suggests winners and losers. Instead of considering such shifts as *compromises*, we should recognize them as *choices* that speak to higher-level objectives.

Compromise may feel like a virtuous route out of disagreement, but this may not always be the case. Compromise is often mentally associated with monetary negotiations: neither side starts at their limit recognizing that a move to the middle creates acceptable outcomes for all. This approach is debatable if the status quo is being challenged. For example, in a restitution claim, a “compromise” may seem more like a win for the more powerful party with underlying problems left unresolved. If negotiating cool storage conditions for fluid-preserved specimens, achieving a result of being nearly below the flash point temperature provides little reassurance. If compromise sacrifices an absolute requirement on the altar of agreement, then higher-level goals may be lost.

Exhibition conditions for the Ardabil Carpet (Figure 3) at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) (Hillyer and Pretzel 2005; Pretzel 2008) provides an example of how conservators and exhibit designers can successfully engage in creative strategies to enhance the overall benefit to visitors. The team at the V&A attained a more powerful visual and emotional experience for visitors while managing light damage risk to a tolerable level. The exhibit hall schedules low light levels (~10 lux) for twenty minutes every half hour, which offers just enough visibility to detect the presence of the carpet. Light levels are then raised to 50 lux for ten minutes every half hour to provide an opportunity to appreciate the intricate details of the object. This strategy not only showcases the carpet’s preciousness, but also demonstrates the institution’s commitment to preserving it. Thus, a possible lose-lose compromise situation of too much light for preservation and too little light for good visibility has been transformed into a win-win strategy of delivering an overall enhanced experience to visitors.

Recognition that our problem is a lower order problem in an organization need not make us feel small. Instead, by aspiring to a loftier vision, we can revisit a problem in a way that is not possible to address at the level we previously considered it.

## **Conclusions**

Defensive positions that we adopt, often unconsciously, can prevent us from working well with others. Understanding these mental traps helps us to develop strategies to avoid them and seek creative solutions to what had previously been cast as a problem.

When we recognize the emotional aspects of our decisions, we can choose to make time and space to pause in an emotional encounter to reflect on our responses. We can ask if the emotion is helpful and where it originated, we can also compare this with the emotional response of others and, by identifying and respecting each other’s perspective, find a constructive way to explore options more broadly. Recognizing the multifaceted aspects of people’s choices should help us to develop more flexible options for engaging with them. This is especially important if we have become accustomed to

technocratic, data-heavy approaches. When we reflect on our own practice, we should note the areas where we have the most conviction, as it is likely that these are areas we need to be on guard against over confidence and reluctance to consider alternatives. Remember that our judgments based on heuristics can be excellent in some situations and suboptimal in others.

When you find yourself in disagreement with others, ask if it is possible that you are holding close focus on a problem that is being too narrowly conceived? Take a moment to think about stakeholders and their values that might be missing from the equation. If we are responsible for a single item or instance, should we be thinking about the whole collection, a series of events, or a longer time period? We can reframe risk from focusing on a single potential occurrence to contemplating risk from a continual stream of choices. We should check whether our focus has been drawn to immediate and tangible risks—such as the danger of tearing a page in a book whilst ignoring a steadily accruing risk such as failing to demonstrate the relevance of the collection.

Compromise is not necessarily a benign strategy. When approaching a difference of opinion, the best solution is to seek opportunities for, and means of, optimization, which may enhance the perception of conservators as being positive team workers delivering on institutional goals. Changing approaches and beliefs, especially those held as convictions, is not easy and is not achieved without open-minded self-reflection. To invite readers to engage in this, we end with these questions. Although each of us in an organization is mandated to act on our own specific areas of responsibility, have we lost touch with how these connect to the bigger picture? Could it be helpful to circle back to the organizational mission and attempt to define where this situation sits and how solutions that we propose contribute to these higher-level goals?

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