



# If only I had more time - How to be more effective in what you do

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# A few introductory points ...

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- ❖ I am **not an expert in task management**, but I am a practising Academic with **way too much to do and too little time to do it**.
- ❖ I have been **using** task management **techniques and tools** for at least **10 years**, in particular David Allen's Getting Things Done (**GTD**) philosophy, which I will cite frequently.
- ❖ The main purpose of this presentation is to **raise awareness and give some initial tips** of what you can do to be more effective at work in a scientific environment.
- ❖ Like many things, task management is a skill and hence **takes time and effort to learn**.



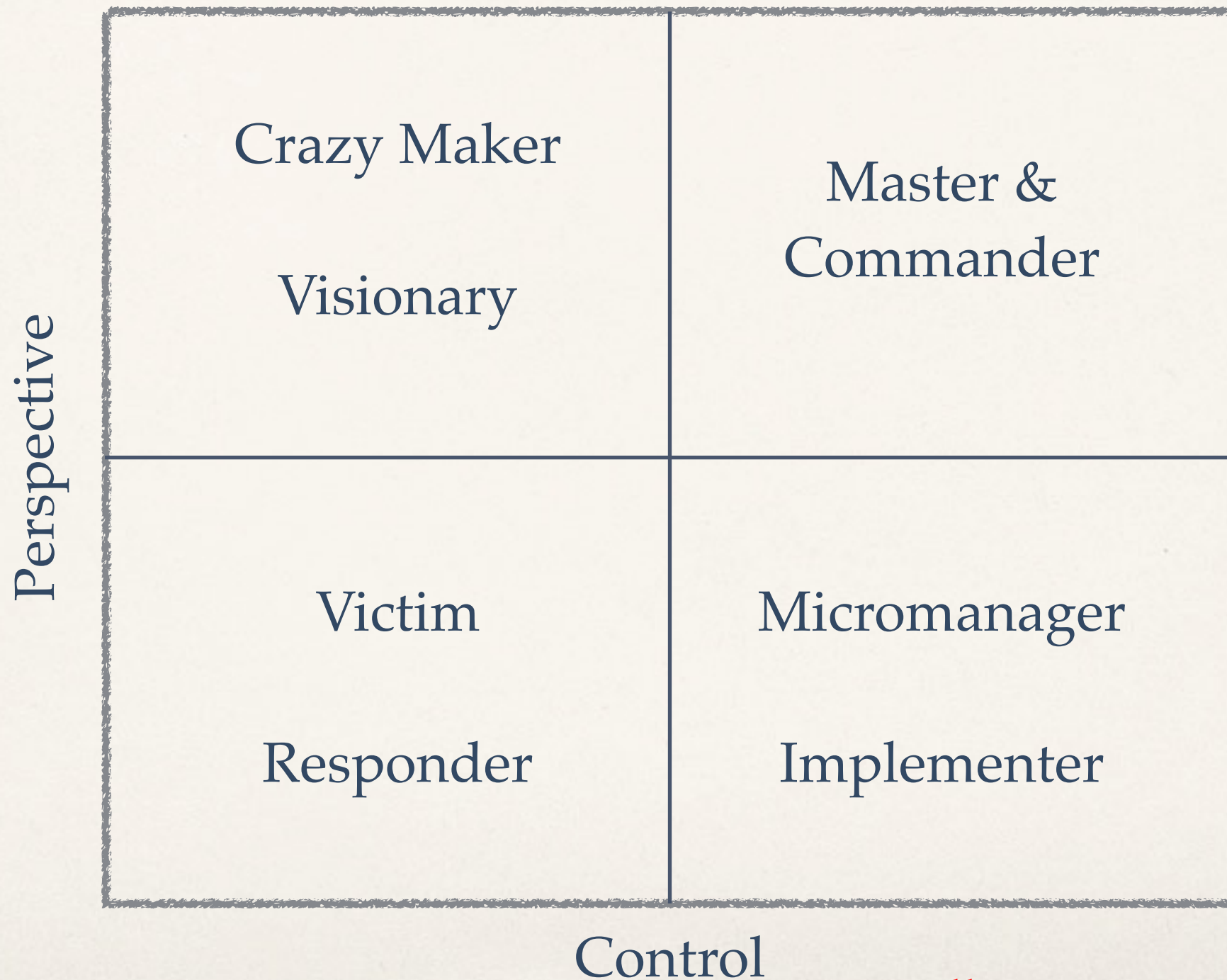
# Effective work is all about:

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## FOCUS

- ❖ That's all there is to it!
- ❖ To be able to FOCUS, you need to have **two things** in place:
  - ❖ You need to know what the next thing you should be doing is -  
**PLANNING**
  - ❖ You need to get yourself to actually doing it without distractions -  
**EXECUTION**
- ❖ Both components are important and you won't succeed if one of them is not working.

# Planning and Execution require Perspective and Control



# Planning

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- ❖ I use **mostly GTD** ideas for this
- ❖ A **key issue** for our type of work:
  - ❖ Most of the time, the **task is not given** and it is part of our job to actually determine what the task is!
- ❖ What can you actually manage?
  - ❖ Time? - Hardly - it just goes by; Priorities? - Hardly, you just have them.
  - ❖ What you can manage is actually your actions - the stuff you do!

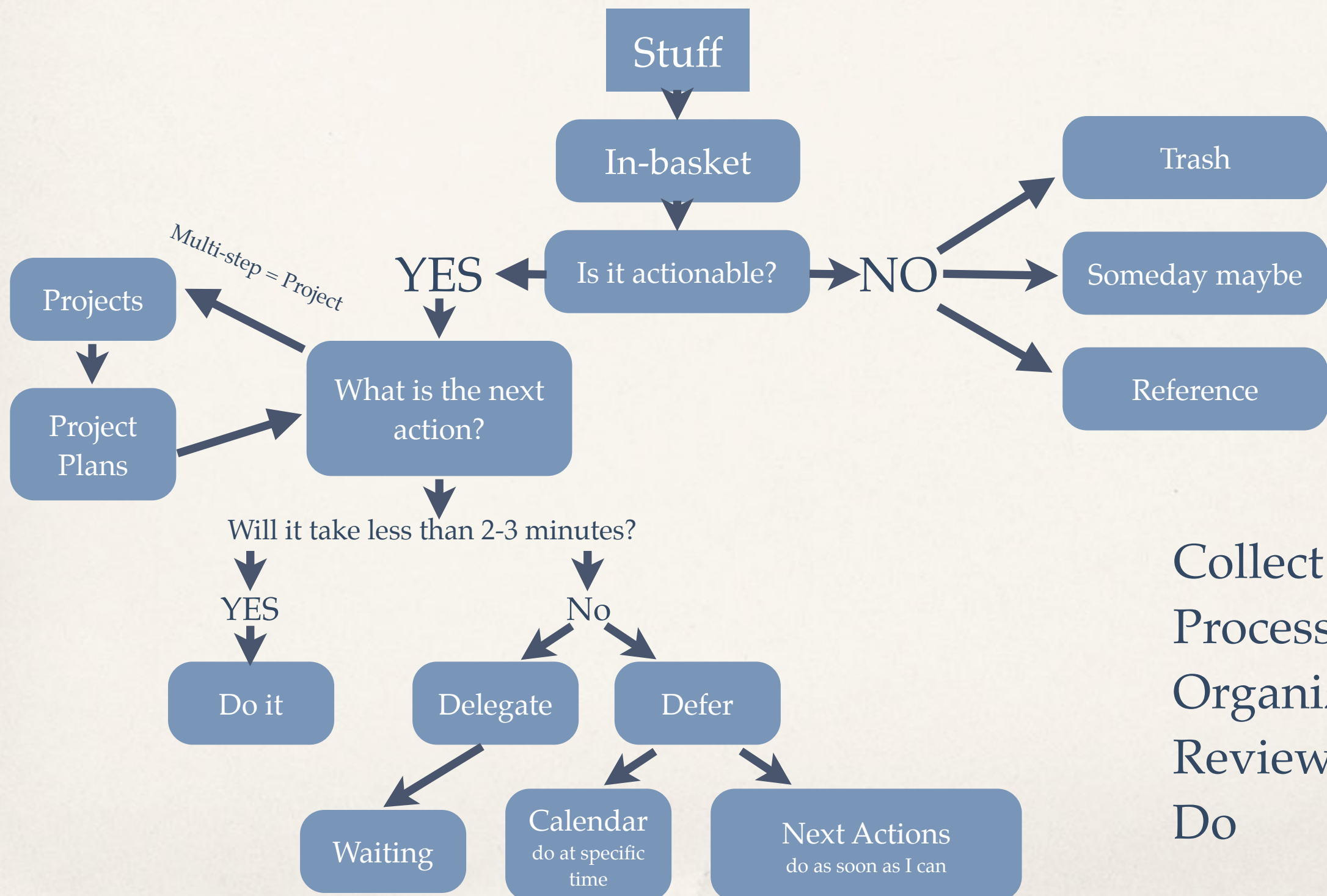


# Planning

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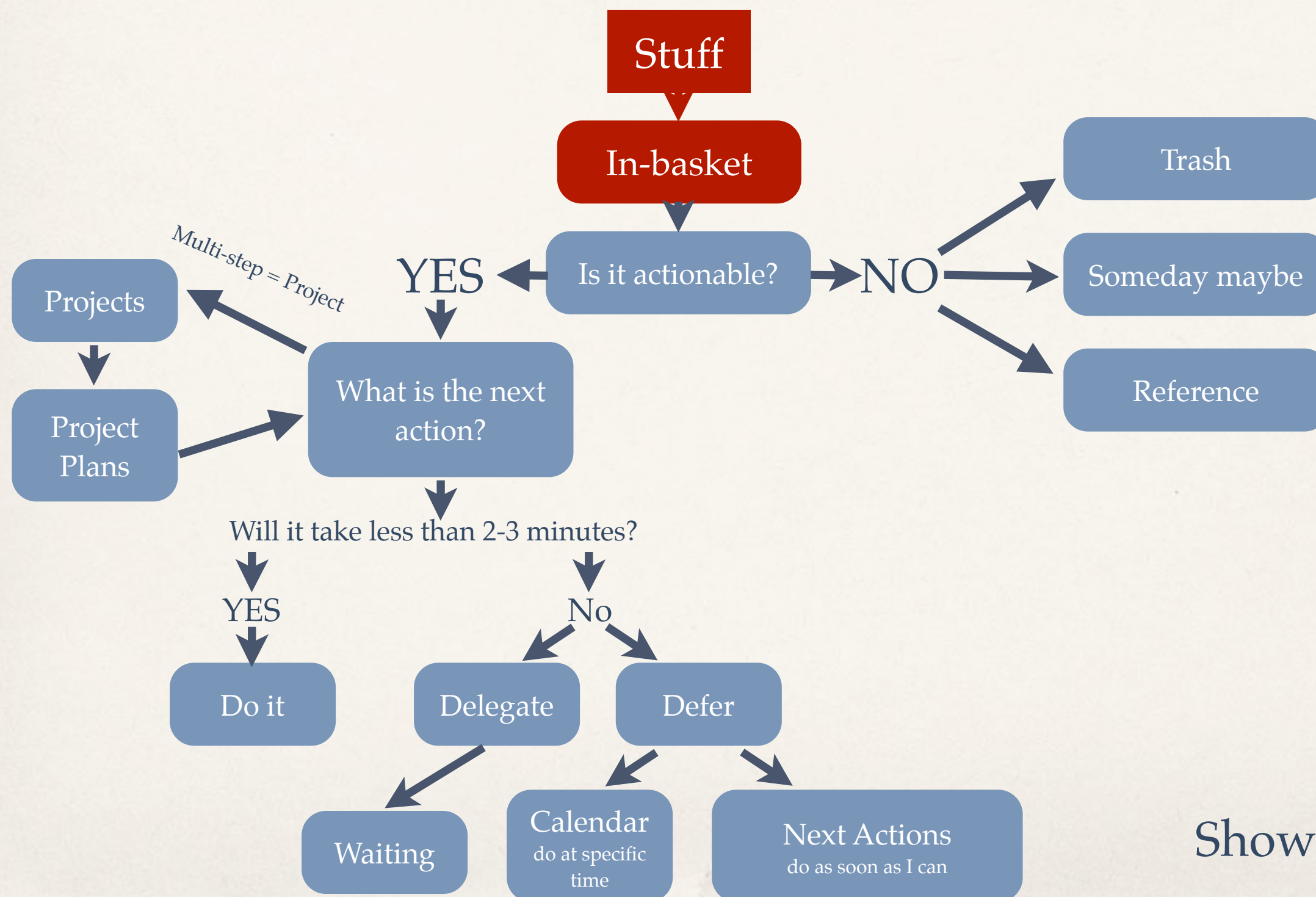
- ❖ Some **basic principles** of planning:
  - ❖ get **EVERYTHING** out of your head - requires a trusted system of information storage - often some piece of software
  - ❖ Break down **ALL YOU DO** in **Projects** and **Actions**.
    - ❖ **Projects** are simply things that require more than one action (like “write a paper on ...”).
    - ❖ **Actions** are the smallest granule of what you need to do (like “download this piece of data to make Figure 1 ...”)
  - ❖ **Only assign deadlines to things that really have them!** Don’t make up personal ones. It makes you inflexible!
- ❖ All you need to worry about for each project is what the **NEXT ACTION** is - you can ignore the others for now!
- ❖ The choice of what to do next is now a much reduced choice from all the **NEXT ACTIONS** you have identified

# The workflow chart of GTD



Collect  
Process  
Organize  
Review  
Do

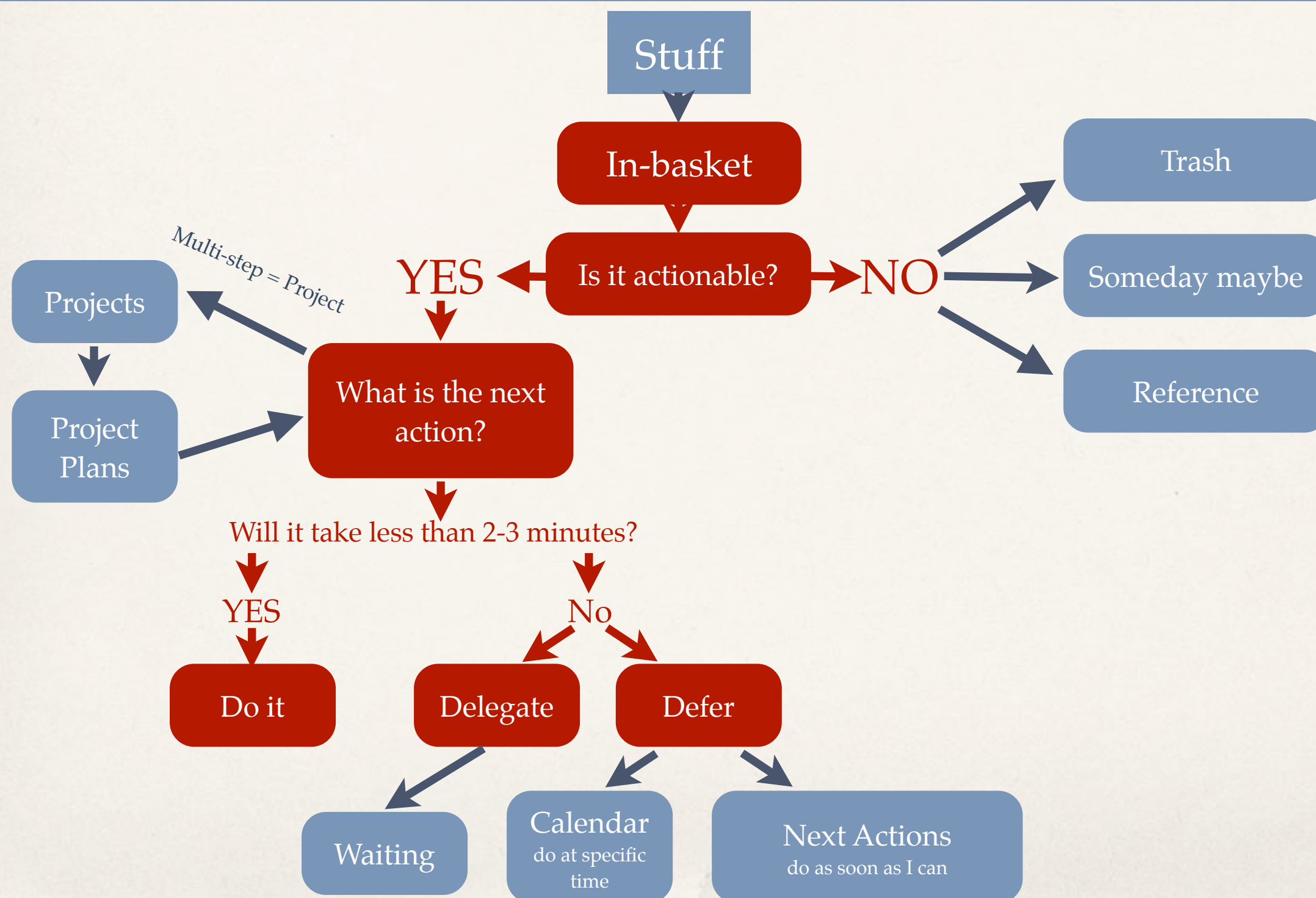
# Step 1: Collect



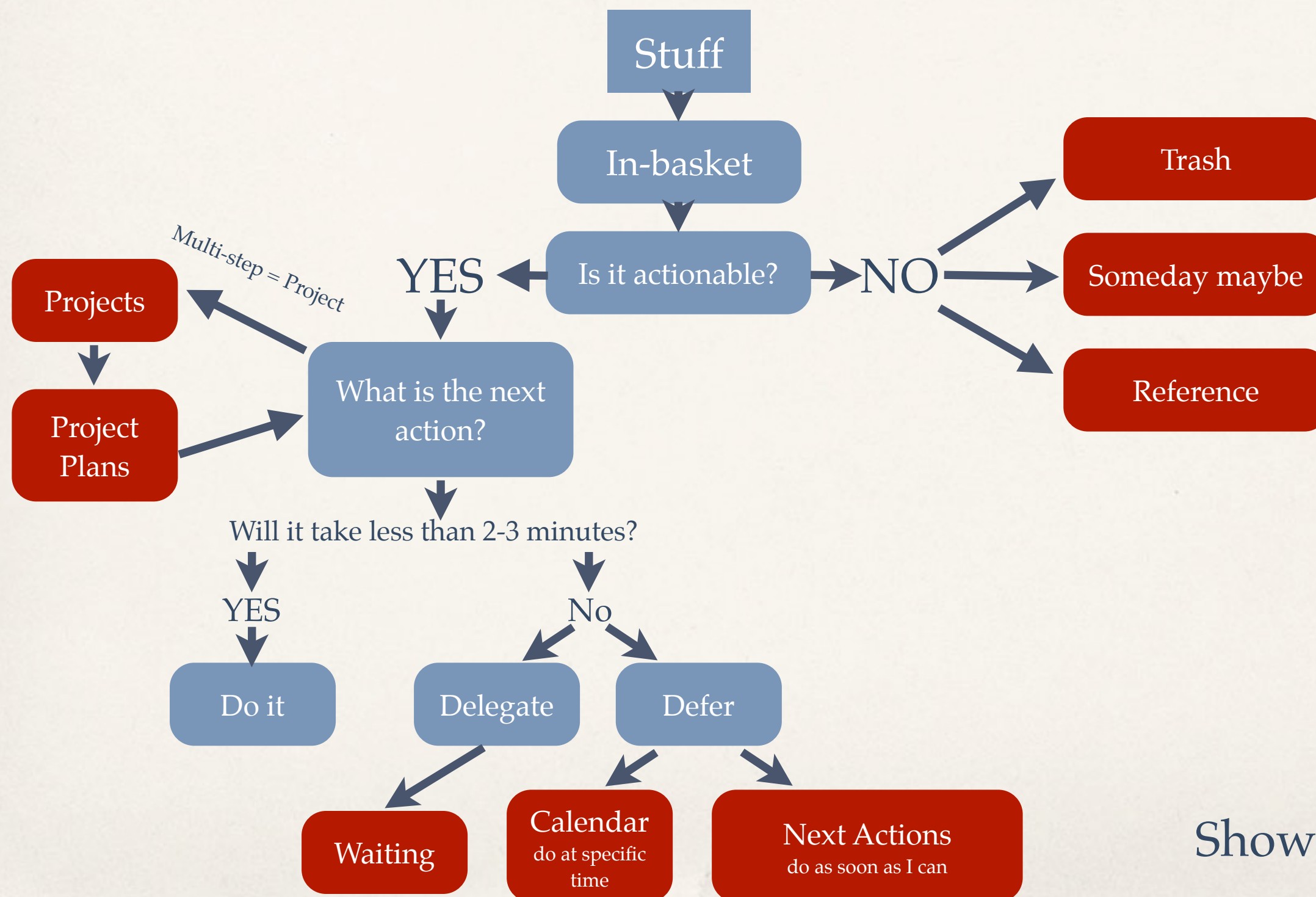
Show example



# Step 2: Process



# Step 3: Organize



Show example



# Step 3: Organize - Projects

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- ❖ Everything that takes more than one action to accomplish is by default a project!
- ❖ Natural project planning steps:
  - ❖ Defining purpose and principles
  - ❖ Outcome visioning
  - ❖ Brainstorming
  - ❖ Organizing
  - ❖ Identifying next actions

Audience  
participation

# Contexts to help the organization

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- ❖ A great way of helping you to organize tasks is to tag each task with one or more “contexts”
- ❖ Common contexts / tags I use
  - ❖ Location: Office, Home, Errand
  - ❖ Duration: 10m, 30m, 1h
  - ❖ People: Andy, Anna, Michael, ...
  - ❖ Type of task: Read, Write, Discuss, Think, ...
- ❖ You can then sort your task by context.
  - ❖ When working on emails, list your email tasks.
  - ❖ When you have an hour to read, list the “read” and “1h” tasks!
  - ❖ When you want to knock over a few short things before going home, list the “10m” tasks and do 3!

Show example



# Step 4: Review

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- ❖ To stay on top of things it is important to review everything you do. This review should happen at different levels with different frequency.
  - ❖ **Next actions** - Review more than once a day - Expect to have hundreds of hours of work in them!
  - ❖ **Current projects** - Review about once a week - Expect to have 50-100 projects at any given time!
  - ❖ **Areas of responsibility** - Teaching, Students, Admin, Research, ... - Review balance of activity in these areas about every 1-3 months
  - ❖ **One-to-two year goals** - What are the big things to achieve in the next couple of years? - Review every 3 months
  - ❖ **Three-to-five year vision** - Where do I want to be in 5 years? - Review every so often
  - ❖ **Life!** Why do what I do? Does it all make sense? Is the answer really 42? - Review all the time ;-).

# Step 5: Do

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- ❖ We have planned well and know what our next actions are! However, we still need to do them. How can we make ourselves do what needs doing?
- ❖ **Procrastination is our worst enemy.**
- ❖ I use the **Pomodoro technique** to overcome this common problem.
- ❖ Basic idea:
  - ❖ Break work down into 25 minute blocks
  - ❖ Write down what you are going to do in the 25 minutes
  - ❖ Work on it without distraction
  - ❖ Take a 5 minute break after each 25 minute interval
  - ❖ Take a longer break every 3-4 intervals!
- ❖ Show Vitamin-R software



# Step 5: Do

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- ❖ For this to work you need periods in your day where you do not have meetings or other distractions.
- ❖ **Plan your days** so that those periods exist, ideally first thing in the morning when your head is clear and your energy levels high.
- ❖ **My trick:** The mornings are mine, the afternoons belong to others.

# Some email tips

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- ❖ **Do not watch your email all the time!**
- ❖ Instead define 2 or so Pomodoro intervals a day to **process it using the GTD method** - at the end of this processing your Inbox should be empty!
- ❖ As usual, short replies (<2-3 min) will be done as part of the processing. Longer replies will just enter your task management system **like any other task!**
- ❖ When working on something not email in a Pomodoro slice, **DO NOT CHECK** email. Switch it off altogether! Train your colleagues!



# Software that helps with this

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- ❖ GTD software I have tried:
  - ❖ Easy: Things, Firetask, 2Do
  - ❖ Medium: Omnifocus, OrganizePro, Pagico
  - ❖ Advanced: The Brain
- ❖ Pomodoro software: Vitamin-R (expensive); Time-out (Free)
- ❖ Brainstorming software: Mindmanager, FreeMind