ARC CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR CLIMATE SYSTEM SCIENCE

MONASH University Science

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

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A few introductory points ...

- 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 one thing:

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

Perspective	Crazy Maker Visionary	Master & Commander
	Victim Responder	Micromanager Implementer

Control

D. Allen: How to Make it All Work

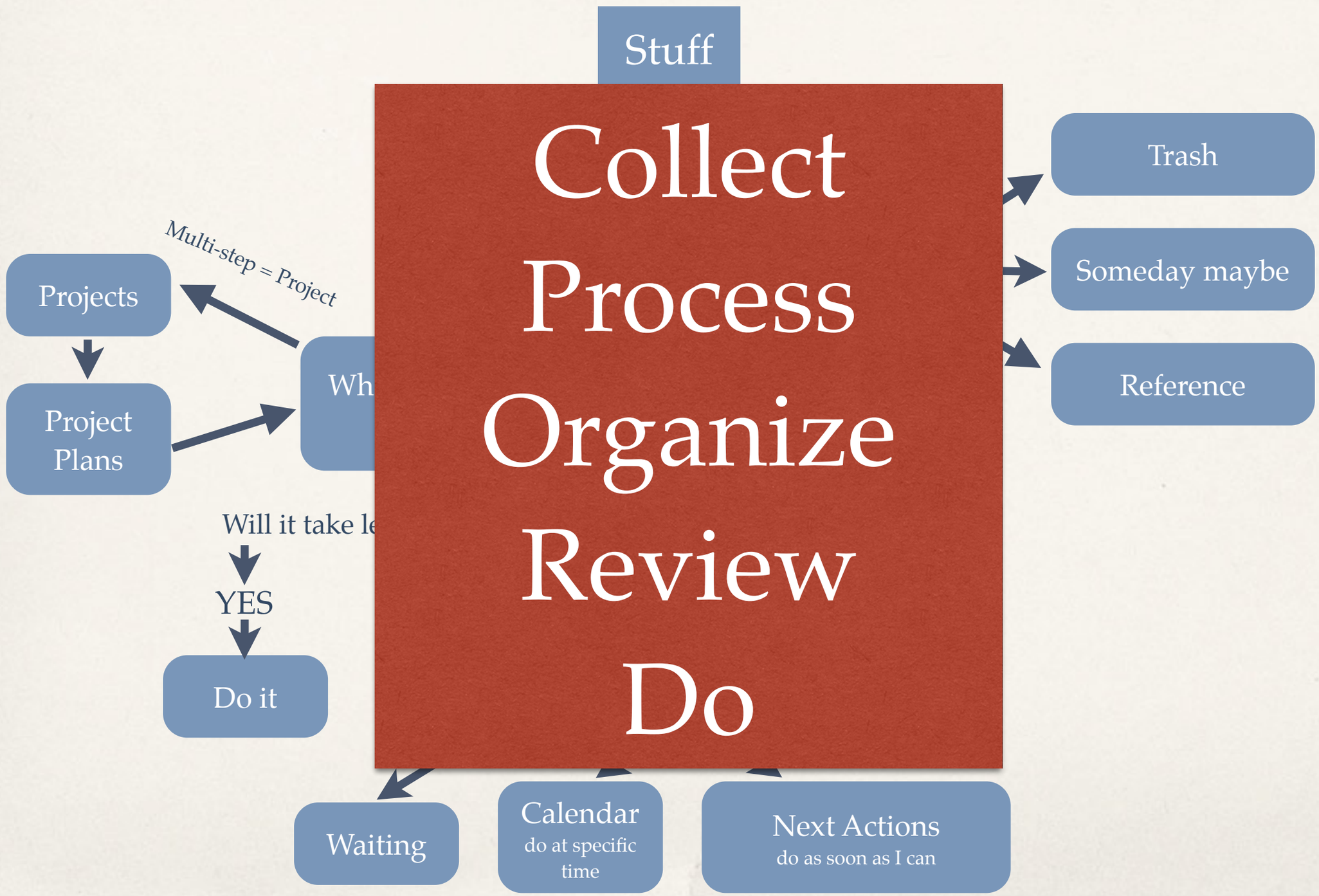
Planning

- 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!

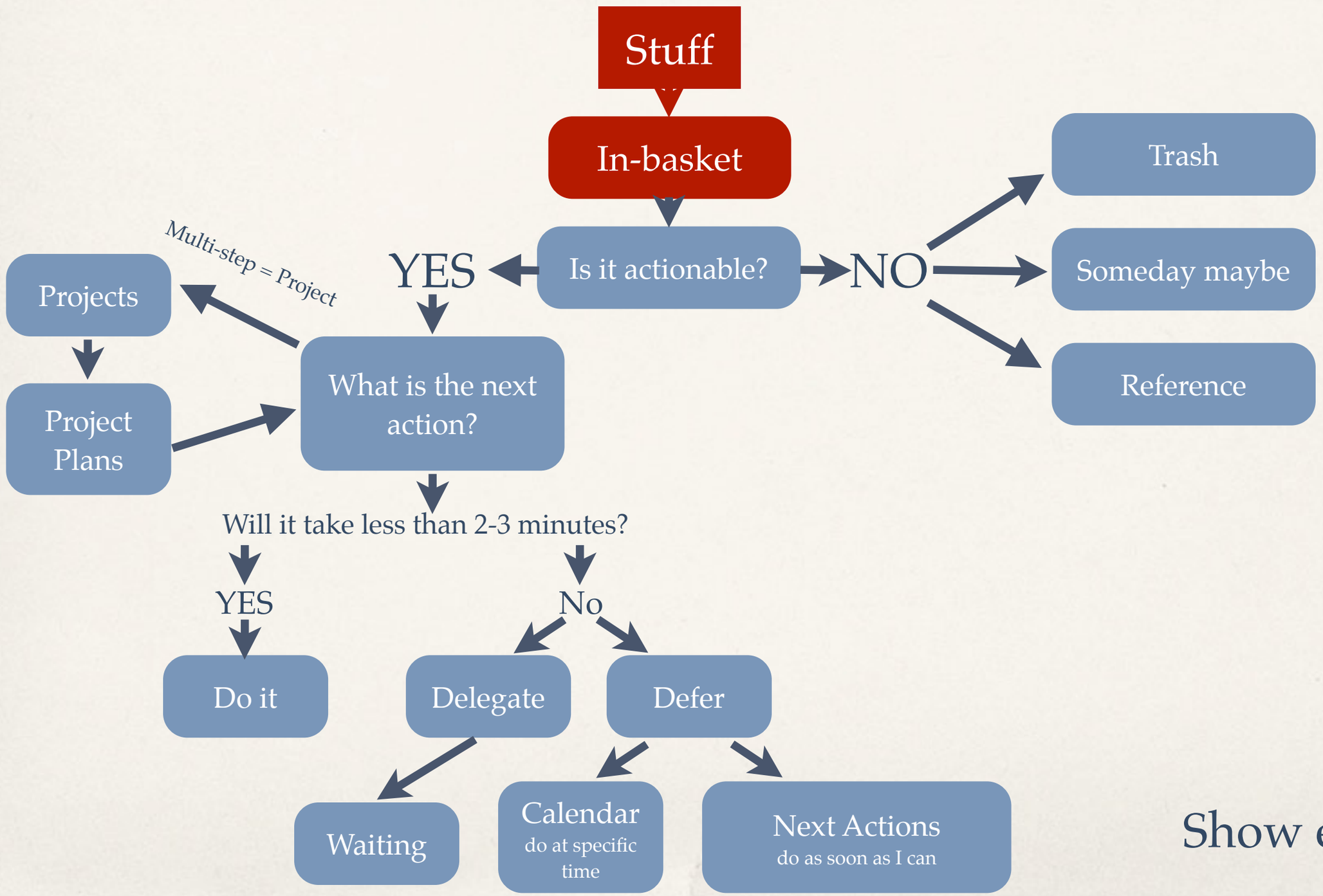
Planning

- 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

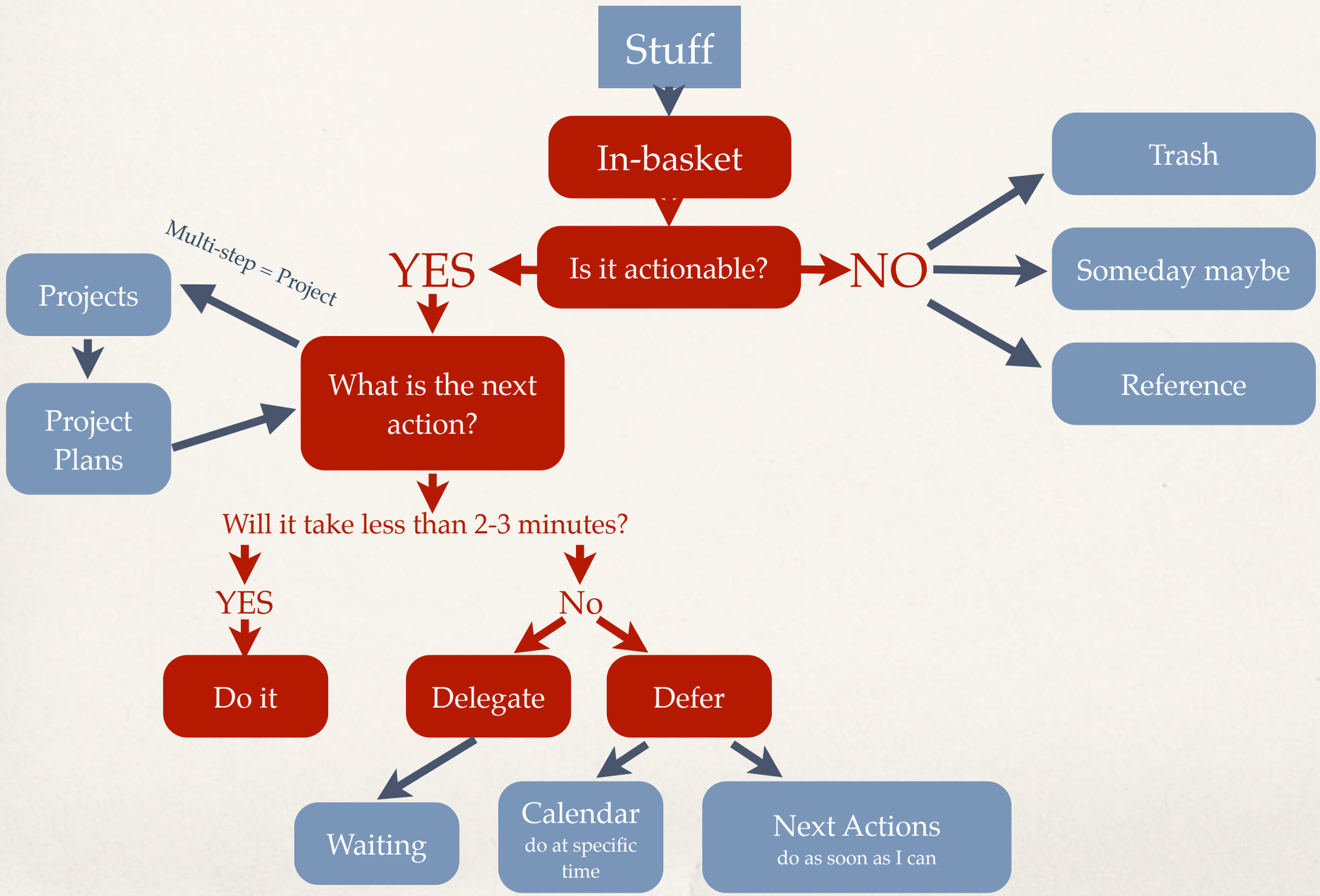


Step 1: Collect

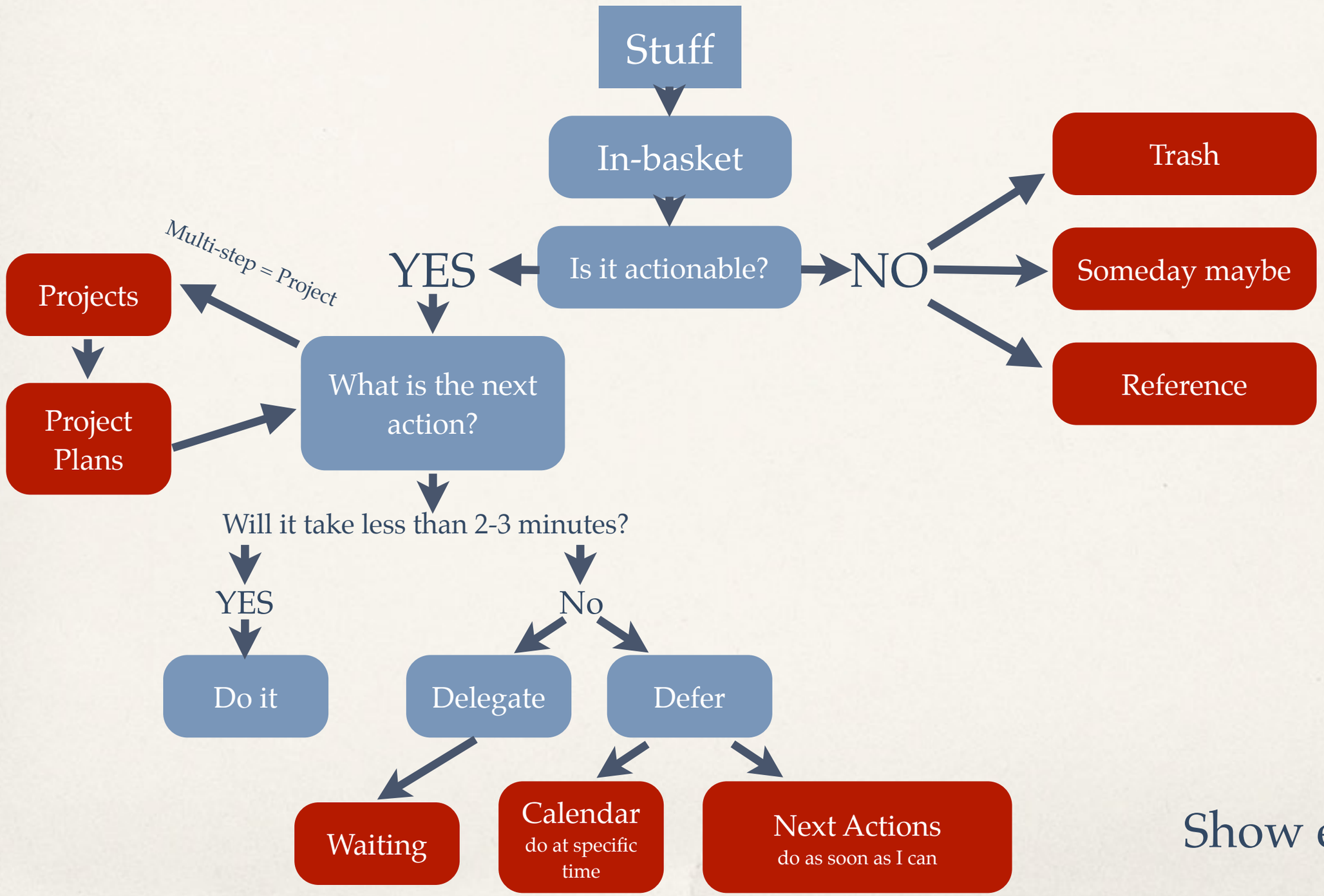


Show example

Step 2: Process



Step 3: Organize



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Step 3: Organize - Projects

- 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

Contexts to help the organization

- 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

- 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

- 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

- 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

- **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

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