

Can of Worms

When the work is bigger than it first seemed

Purpose: Use this when the original ask turns out to be bigger, more connected, or less clear than expected. Organize the issues (the “worms”) before you escalate them.

Before You Begin

Use this when...	Do not use this when...
• The task got bigger • More people, systems, or decisions are involved • The issue keeps repeating • Leadership input is needed	• The task is clear • You can finish it quickly • No wider decision is needed • The fix is obvious and contained

Untangle the Work

- 1. Original ask?** What were you trying to get done?
- 2. Why is it bigger now?** What became messier, more connected, or less clear?
- 3. Check your assumptions?** What did you assume that may not be true?
- 4. Current state?** Who is involved? What is happening now? Where is it getting stuck?
- 5. Real issue?** Name the issue underneath the original task.
- 6. Issue type?**
 - ☐ Task clarity ☐ Ownership ☐ Process ☐ Decision ☐ Policy ☐ Capacity
 - ☐ Priorities ☐ Strategy ☐ Other: _____
- 7. If we do nothing...?** What is the risk or consequence?
- 8. Options?** List one or two possible paths forward.
- 9. Recommendation?** Bring organized issues with a proposed solution.
- 10. Help needed?**
 - ☐ No help needed ☐ 1:1 discussion topic ☐ Leadership Team agenda topic
 - ☐ Immediate CEO/leader decision
- 11. What can still move forward now?** Name the work that can continue while the bigger issue is being sorted.

Prepare to Escalate

Decision needed?	
Recommended option?	
Who needs to engage?	
By when?	

Leader Note

What this tool is for: Use it when a task or request is not as simple as first assumed. It helps the team slow down, map the current state, name the real issue, and bring forward a recommendation instead of handing leadership an unorganized problem.

What leaders should reinforce: A “Can of Worms” is not failure. It is a signal that the work needs to be defined before anyone commits to it.

Redirect to Stop. Think. Plan. Do. when: The work remains small, contained, and low risk. Do not over-process a task that can be handled and completed.

Move toward the Project Builder when: The issue affects multiple people, systems, deadlines, or decisions; repeats over time; or requires coordination beyond one person.

What good looks like: The person can explain the original ask, what changed, the current state, the real issue, the options, a recommendation, and what can still move forward.

Coaching phrase: *“Do not just bring me the issues. Untangle them enough so we can decide what kind of work this really is.”*