



A series for people working together in groups

Good Decision Making

P. Corcoran

Most of our daily decisions are pretty automatic. When we need to make a decision, we very quickly measure the choices against our internalized personal values and interests. Typically, we then see a fairly obvious range of acceptable alternatives. We choose one and move on. We alone enjoy the benefits (or suffer the costs) of the decision.

We give up some of this autonomy when we become part of a group. What we gain in return is an ability to influence and add value to something larger—something that we care about but can't fully control ourselves.

Organizations of similar people pursuing similar interests often struggle with making decisions. When diverse groups of people are involved, the challenge is even greater. Nonetheless, the quality of your partnership is reflected in the quality of your decision making. A decision-making process that is clear, open, and understood will lead to better decisions.

This publication addresses several issues facing groups when making decisions.

The meetings management and communication skills discussed in EC 1508, *Effective Meetings Management*, and EC 1510, *Effective Communication*, also can help your group do a better job of decision making.

IN THIS PUBLICATION YOU'LL LEARN:

- The importance of understanding your decision-making process
- Why it is critical to document and track decisions
- Different ways people and groups make decisions
- Using the consensus approach
- Robert's Rules of Order and consensus decision making
- The roles of the meeting manager and facilitator
- Two important tips for making better decisions
- A comprehensive framework for making big decisions
- Common pitfalls in decision making

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

“In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used, or applied to a greater multitude of objects, than in America.”

Alexis de Tocqueville
Democracy in America

De Tocqueville wrote this observation in 1831. Some things haven’t changed.

We all belong to groups. De Tocqueville called them “associations,” but yours could be a council, committee, commission, delegation, alliance, club, lodge, union, partnership, organization, or coalition. It could be voluntary or professional, advisory or governing, official or casual.

Whatever it’s called, and however it’s con-figured, a group is made up of people working together on what’s important to them. The publications in this series (see page 12 for a list) are designed to help members of a group be more effective. Do they work? We think so. After all, we work together in groups too.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING YOUR DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

It is critically important that your group agree on how it will make official decisions, and that your bylaws specify how those decisions are to be made. If the decision-making process is unclear, different people can leave a meeting with a different understanding of the decision. Conflicting pronouncements then are made, leading to confusion, mixed messages, and distrust among group members.

If there are official and nonofficial members, group bylaws and meeting protocols need to make that distinction clear. For example, some groups have an executive committee that has authority beyond that of the general membership. Similarly, technical teams may have the power to make decisions in their subgroup without endorsement by the general membership.

Member orientation packets (including bylaws, membership, officers, vision statement, etc.) can make these roles clear. Additionally, a one-page decision-making “flow chart” can be handed out at meetings to remind everyone how decisions are made. This reminder is especially useful for those who may not attend regularly.

DOCUMENTING AND TRACKING DECISIONS

A common problem in groups is “discussing a decision to death” but not making a definitive decision. Often, the group’s energy wanes before a decision is reached, again leading people to different conclusions about the decision.

Whatever your decision-making process, you can manage this problem by using a flipchart dedicated to tracking decisions. When an issue comes up that warrants a formal decision, the meeting manager can instruct the recorder to write it on a flipchart visible to the group. The manager then determines whether the decision needs to be made immediately, deferred until later in the meeting, or saved for another meeting. Be sure to review decisions and non-decisions at the end of the meeting.

Include decisions and non-decisions in the minutes. The following is one possible ground rule: A decision isn’t a decision until it is written down and entered into the minutes of the meeting. Make sure the entry in the minutes includes the following:

- The issue that needed to be decided
- Whether a decision was made at the meeting

- What the decision was
- Any necessary follow-up

When the meeting minutes are approved, documented decisions also are approved. Official documentation of decisions and leadership provides a way to track the implementation of decisions through time.

DIFFERENT WAYS GROUPS MAKE DECISIONS

There are many different ways individuals and groups make decisions. Most are appropriate for some decisions; none is appropriate for all decisions. It's important to select a decision-making process that is appropriate for the decision at hand. Listed below are 10 common ways groups make decisions and the limitations of each of these methods (Miller et al.).

Impulsive choices

Sometimes we make decisions based on whatever feels right at the moment. This method lacks any thoughtful consideration of how the choices relate to our key objectives and to other alternatives.

Yes/no choices

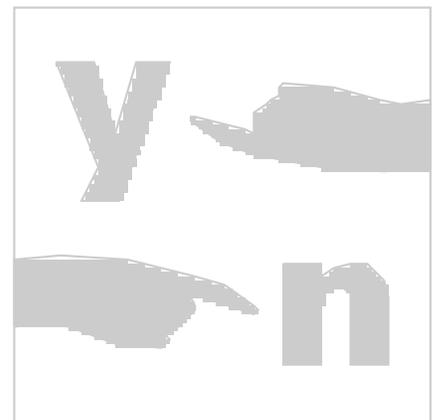
When we phrase a choice as a yes/no question, it implies a choice between change and no change. There is no third option. This approach doesn't consider how the choices might affect the things that are important to us. It also eliminates consideration of other alternatives.

Either/or choices

These choices are similar to yes/no choices and have similar limitations. Also, we tend to structure either/or choices so that one alternative clearly is best. Then we collect information that supports that choice.

Automatic choices

These choices are the crutches of noncritical thinkers. Examples include, "That's the way we've always done it," "Low bid wins," and "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Such automatic behavior keeps us from looking at how the choices relate to what we value. They can keep us from making more appropriate choices.



“Objective” choices

“Letting the facts decide” gives more power to the people who collect the facts than to the people who have authority to make decisions. Unless the group’s values are stated explicitly in the form of criteria for decision making, there is no guidance to the people who collect and interpret data. This approach also limits creativity and win/win alternatives and often leads to “analysis paralysis” because all of the data never are available.

Weighing pros and cons

This is a more thoughtful approach, but still is overly simplistic and resembles yes/no and either/or choices. As in those approaches, the choices aren’t weighed against values. This method implies that more than one alternative is being considered (which is good), but creative “new” choices are unlikely to emerge.

To this list of specific ways people make decisions, Mosvick and Nelson add four general “approaches” to decision making: the authoritarian, majority, minority, and consensus approaches.

Authoritarian decisions

In this method, a chairperson makes a final decision with minimal, if any, input from others. This method is fast, but rarely effective. It excludes valuable input from the people who will have to implement the decision.

Majority decisions

Voting is democratic and participative, but votes often are framed as either/or choices that oversimplify the issues.

Minority decisions

In practice, majority rule often is distorted by two or three people who force a minority decision on the entire group. Persistent individuals can dominate the thinking of others and lobby for votes by appealing to factions in the group.

Consensus decisions

Consensus decisions are the easiest to implement because everybody affected agrees not to block the decision. The disadvantage is that this method is very time-consuming and is vulnerable to sabotage by ill-intended members.

USING THE CONSENSUS APPROACH

Many groups strive for consensus in their decisions; some are required to use it. Consensus typically is described as an agreement that all members can live with and support—or at least not sabotage—even if it is not everyone’s preferred decision. The protocols for coming to consensus vary widely. Consensus is an approach for working through issues, and can be part of any decision-making method.

The purpose of raising the standard of decision making to consensus (instead of majority vote) is to encourage people to work through an issue rather than around it. It’s easy to avoid thinking seriously about the concerns of a minority when all you have to do is outvote them. Majority voting systems often create factions within the group and lead to power plays outside of meetings.

Deeper issues and fundamental interests emerge when people spend the time and effort trying to reach consensus. The group is forced to explore the assumptions and motivations behind each position. The key question to ask is, “What line of reasoning led you to your position?” This question seeks to identify people’s “interests” rather than their stated “positions.”

Groups often are surprised to find out how often supposedly “opposite” positions actually share many common interests. Decisions based on fundamental interests lead to solutions that everyone can support.

A potential pitfall in trying to achieve a consensus decision is that you may end up with a “lowest common denominator” decision. The challenge of consensus decision making is to make decisions that incorporate the fundamental interests of everyone but still are worthwhile.

Frustration with consensus can result in a desire to institute a voting procedure, usually a “super majority” vote of some high percentage. Although this method is efficient, it is not always effective. Reverting to a vote reduces the imperative to get to the bottom of important issues and undermines the spirit of coming to consensus. A better solution is to develop good facilitation skills for achieving consensus (see below).



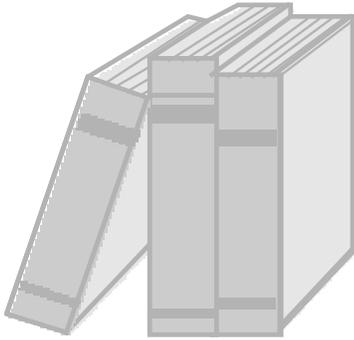
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ROBERT'S RULES AND CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

Most groups use some form of parliamentary procedure to run their meetings. Robert's Rules of Order is the contemporary version of this ancient English tradition (De Vries, 1994). The benefits of this method for managing meetings are its familiarity and use in many of the groups in which members are involved.

The down side to using Robert's Rules of Order in a consensus-based structure is its use of the majority vote for making decisions. Seeking consensus is the opposite of "voting." The point isn't to tabulate yea's and nay's, but to establish a consensus position on a motion. An initial "vote" gives the group a sense of how close it is to consensus, but mixing and matching processes can be confusing. See EC 1508 for more information.

The following approach can be used if your group blends Robert's Rules of Order with consensus decision making. Follow Robert's Rules through the "motion" step. Then, instead of asking for a vote, ask "can any official member not support this motion as stated?" If nobody speaks out, you have consensus. If any official member cannot support the decision, the meeting manager needs to assess whether to proceed with seeking consensus right then, postpone the decision, or see whether there is consensus not to make the decision. Whatever the decision, it needs to be documented in the minutes of the meeting.



THE ROLE OF THE MEETING MANAGER AND FACILITATOR

The job of the meeting manager is to run the meeting and make sure decisions get made. That is, to get the group through the agenda in the time available. It is a full-time job. When the group needs additional help with an issue, a facilitator can be very valuable.

Facilitators can be useful when the group moves from reporting and conducting general business to a more task-oriented situation such as decision making. These situations might include seeking consensus on a sticky topic, brainstorming lists of new ideas, prioritizing activities, mediating disputes among members, or going through a decision-making process.

The value of the facilitator is that he or she serves as the group disciplinarian. Once the group decides what they need to do and what the ground rules are for doing it, the facilitator holds them to it. It isn't always a popular job. Good facilitators develop skillful ways of helping groups be productive while maintaining civility and goodwill among members. See EC 1508 for a more detailed discussion of meetings management and facilitators.

TWO IMPORTANT TIPS FOR MAKING BETTER DECISIONS

Many methods for problem solving and decision making are available to groups (Mosvick and Nelson). The book *Rural Resource Management* (Miller et al., 1994) offers a comprehensive framework and a clear process for making decisions. An important part of this method is that it checks the tendency to make hasty decisions.

Two important principles in this approach are: (1) separating creative thinking from critical thinking, and (2) establishing specific criteria for a good decision before coming up with a decision. Both techniques require people to make thoughtful decisions, not quick ones.

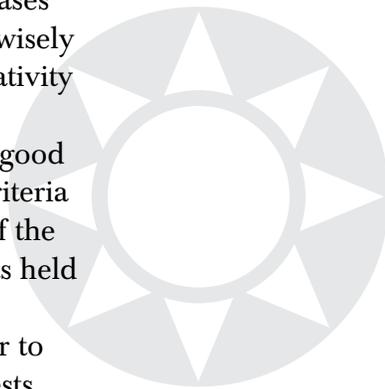
Creative thinking is the generation of ideas and solutions free from constraints. It lets you explore potentially better ways of doing things. Critical thinking is the challenging of ideas based on known constraints. It tests your creative ideas against reality. Both are essential to effective decision making.

For example, when brainstorming a list of ideas, facilitators ask that people not criticize any idea until after the brainstorming session. After brainstorming, all of the ideas are evaluated critically. This separation of creative thinking from critical thinking increases the range of possible solutions and then helps the group select wisely from that list. Criticizing ideas when they are offered stifles creativity and leads to “group think.”

It's critical to establish clear criteria for determining “what a good decision would look like” before coming up with a decision. Criteria are “essential elements” that the group thinks need to be part of the final decision. Criteria are statements of values and key interests held by the group.

Identifying and refining criteria for decision making is similar to the consensus-building technique of focusing on people's interests instead of their positions. When making complex decisions, the point is to first identify the elements that members think any good final decision must have. Sound decisions then are crafted according to key criteria shared by the group.

If groups spend adequate time agreeing on their criteria, adopting the final alternative is easy. This step is especially useful for groups that must use consensus.



A DECISION-MAKING MODEL

What is the decision to be made?

- State the decision clearly.
- State the group's long-term goals and short-term objectives.
- Limit the scope of the decision to its essentials.

On what criteria will the decision be made?

- List all of the criteria the group thinks are essential.
- Refine the criteria. Group similar criteria, restate others for clarity, etc.
- Rank the criteria in order of importance.

What alternative courses of action exist?

- List several alternatives but do not evaluate them.
- Refine the alternatives.
- Review the list of criteria and the proposed alternatives.

What is the expected effect of each alternative on each criterion?

- For each alternative, go through the list of criteria.
- Discuss the likely impact of each alternative on every criterion.
- Record your opinions.

Which is the best alternative for each criterion?

- List each criterion.
- Identify the preferred alternative from the perspective of each criterion.
- Record your conclusions.

Which is the best alternative overall?

- Does one alternative meet all of the criteria?
- Does one alternative meet the highest ranked criterion?
- Is there a new alternative that can emerge from a short list of alternatives?

A DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK

The decision-making framework at the left is a model for making important decisions on complex issues. The “deciding” in these cases actually is an extended form of problem solving.

After generating a few alternative solutions, the group decides which one is best under the circumstances. As business consultant Peter Drucker says, “A decision is. . . a choice between alternatives. It is rarely a choice between right and wrong. It is at best a choice between ‘almost right’ and ‘probably wrong.’”

The framework below incorporates a step-by-step process (in italics) that guides the sequence of your questions and answers in a way that helps separate creative idea generation from critical evaluation. It also forces the group to fully develop decision-making criteria before selecting an alternative.

Following this framework will lead to more thoughtful decisions. Probably the most important points are to generate more than one alternative and to compare the impact of alternatives on each criterion. These steps counter the tendency to jump to decisions.

COMMON PITFALLS IN DECISION MAKING

The decision-making approach described above takes discipline to put into practice. Unfortunately, many groups (especially those without facilitators) abandon the structured sequence once fast-paced interaction and conflict begin. Here are some common pitfalls that groups encounter and some tips for avoiding them (see EC 1511, *Dealing with Stumbling Blocks*, for more information):

- Ignoring a full definition of the problem and moving immediately to a discussion of solutions. Make sure you spend plenty of time exploring and defining all aspects of the

problem so you can understand all of the implications of the alternative solutions.

- Ignoring systematic analysis of the problem and paying attention only to the most current, dramatic, and controversial aspects of the problem. Develop sound critical thinking skills and devote more time to understanding what caused the problem.
- Ignoring the need to establish criteria or standards by which solutions will be evaluated. Establish these criteria early in your deliberations, before solutions are discussed, in order to focus the discussion on relevant topics.
- Concentrating solely on the quality of the decision while ignoring the need to gain group acceptance of the decision. There usually are several equally good options from which to choose. Spend enough time selecting the option most acceptable to the group. You'll find that this decision also is the one most likely to be implemented.

SUMMARY/SELF REVIEW

By now, you should have a better understanding of how groups can improve the quality of their decisions. Different groups have different needs for their decision-making structure. The most important thing is for your group to agree on a process, make sure everyone understands it, and stick to it. Also, as your group makes decisions, be sure to document them and enter them into the meeting minutes.

Consensus raises the standard for decision making. It offers the best chance of finding effective gain/gain solutions. It also is slower and less efficient in terms of time. The trade-off is effectiveness over efficiency. Coming to consensus usually requires a skilled meeting manager or facilitator.

Big decisions need a more sophisticated process than little ones. Whatever the framework, it is important to develop clear criteria about what a good decision would look like before making the decision. The generation of good alternatives is helped by thinking both creatively and critically.

Consider the following checklist when thinking about the decision making of your group:

- Is your decision-making structure appropriate for your group (thorough, but not too complex)?
- Do all members understand the decision-making process?
- Are meeting facilitators used when necessary?
- For big decisions, are criteria for a good decision identified before alternatives are considered?
- Do creative thinking and the generation of several options occur before options are evaluated critically?
- Are all decisions documented in writing?



EXERCISES

Decision-making methods

Review the section on different ways groups make decisions. During your next group meeting, notice which methods are used (e.g., majority decision, yes/no, or default). Do the methods change depending on the situation? Are there times when a more complex decision-making process is necessary?

Documenting decisions

At your next group meeting, pay particular attention to whether or not your decisions are documented. If necessary, propose formal adoption of a decision-making process and a means for documenting and tracking important decision.

RESOURCES

Training

The OSU Extension Family Community Leadership program at Oregon State University has excellent publications and training opportunities—often free or for a nominal charge—in many Oregon counties. Contact your county office of the OSU Extension Service for details.

University Associates offers a variety of training programs on group process and organizational development. They can be contacted at 3505 North Campbell Ave., Suite 505, Tucson, AZ 85719; phone: 520-322-6700; fax: 520-322-6789; email: info@universityassociates.com;

Web: www.universityassociates.com

Dialogue Dynamics, Christopher Roach, is a Corvallis-based trainer who has expertise on this subject. He can be contacted at 966 NW Sequoia, Corvallis, OR 97330; phone: 541-754-5521.

Information

How to Run a Meeting, by M.A. De Vries (Plume/Penguin Books USA, Inc., New York, 1994). ISBN 0-452-27128-2. \$7.95

Rural Resource Management, by S.E. Miller, C.W. Shinn, and W.R. Bentley (Iowa State University Press, Ames, 1994). ISBN 0-8138-0686-0.

An excellent resource for problem solving and decision making in community groups. Chapters on facilitating decision making “when no one is in charge” are especially useful.

We’ve Got to Start Meeting Like This! by R.K. Mosvick and R.B. Nelson (Park Avenue Productions, Indianapolis, 1996). ISBN 1-57112-069-6. A comprehensive treatment of how meetings are run and how they can be improved. Good chapter on decision making in groups.

The following Program for Community Problem

Solving materials are directed at community collaboration for a broad range of purposes, including economic development and social programs as well as land-use planning. All are available from Program for Community Problem Solving, 915 15th St. NW, Suite 601, Washington, DC 20005; phone: 202-783-2961; fax: 202-147-2161.

Involving Citizens in Community Decision Making, by J.L. Creighton. \$30. Directed at government agencies, this manual covers the formation and development of public participation programs, how to prepare a public participation plan, and specific implementation techniques.

Pulling Together: A Land Use and Development Consensus Building Manual, by D.R. Godschalk

et al. \$30. A detailed and comprehensive “guidebook for community leaders” with sections on developing a game plan, getting all parties to participate, building consensus, improving meetings, and learning from others. Includes case studies and sample materials.

Solving Community Problems by Consensus, by S. Carpenter. \$15. This guidebook geared toward local government managers and other community leaders covers strategies and techniques for using participatory group processes to resolve community problems, including: when consensus programs are appropriate; what types of problems lend themselves to the consensus approach; and the formats, phases, and considerations for running a consensus program. Includes case studies illustrating the techniques.

MOVING FORWARD—THE NEXT STEPS

On your own, use the lines below to fill in steps, actions, thoughts, contacts, etc. you’ll take to move yourself and your group ahead in improving decision-making skills.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____



OTHER PUBLICATIONS IN THIS SERIES

Choosing an Organizational Structure, Mission, and Goals, EC 1507, by Viviane Simon-Brown (April 1999). \$2.00

Creating Successful Partnerships, EC 1506, by Pat Corcoran (April 1999). \$2.00

Dealing with Stumbling Blocks, EC 1511, by Flaxen D.L. Conway (April 1999). \$2.00

Effective Communication, EC 1510, by Flaxen D.L. Conway (April 1999). \$2.00

Effective Meetings Management, EC 1508, by Viviane Simon-Brown (April 1999). \$2.00

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