

Susan J. Fowler Consulting

110 Wild Ginger Ridge, Chapel Hill, NC 27517
919-933-9421
sjf110@bellsouth.net

Decision-making in Groups

All groups working to accomplish something together must make decisions, large and small. A variety of decision-making methods may be in play, even within one group or organization. Each has its use at the appropriate time and each has consequences for future actions. An effective group will choose the method most appropriate to:

- The degree of internal commitment required to effectively implement the decision,
- The nature of the decision or task at hand,
- The group's history and culture, and the climate it wishes to establish and maintain, and
- The amount of time available.

Kinds of decisions

1. Decision by lack of response ("Plop"). Someone throws out an idea, and before anyone can say anything, someone suggests another. This continues until the group finally acts on one. All the ideas that have gone by were, essentially, decided by lack of response. The floors of many meeting rooms are covered with plops. A structured brainstorming session, with agreed upon guidelines, is of course, and exception to this case.
2. Decision by single authority. One person decides after listening to group discussion. This person could be the official leader or someone who is regarded as an expert on the matter at hand. This can be a very efficient decision making method, but it may yield a low degree of commitment, thereby potentially undermining the implementation. Commitment will be further undermined if the group was expecting to have the decision-making authority rather than only input.
3. Decision by minority. A single person or small group can "railroad" a decision by not giving opposition and opportunity to build up. A quick call for objections to a proposal, immediately followed by two seconds of silence, followed by "Let's go ahead, then," is often the signal of a minority rule decision. On the other hand, officially delegating decision making authority to a specific sub-group, such as a committee, can be an effective way for a group to accomplish more work.
4. Decision by majority rule: voting or polling. This is, of course, the "American Way," but often groups do not do a good job of implementing decisions made in this manner. Voting creates coalitions, and the preoccupation of the losing coalition is not how to implement what the majority wants, but how to win the next battle.

5. Decision by consensus. Consensus is a very effective, but often time consuming, method. Consensus is not the same thing as unanimity. It is a state of affairs where all members understand the decision and feel they can support it, even if it was not their first choice. For consensus to be genuine, each member must feel they have had a fair chance to influence the decision. They must be allowed to state their opposition and feel that others have heard and understood their position. A conscious effort to check each person's view will prevent minority decisions from masquerading as consensus. Skilled facilitation can help the process be more effective and efficient. Consensus process can be and often is modified to meet a group's needs or to respond to difficulties with the process. Some groups use "consensus minus one." A system called "sociocracy" uses a "consent" process, which is a highly structured form of consensus decision-making (see third page of this document for more detail on the consent process).
6. Decision by Unanimous Consent. Unanimity is the perfect consensus but this standard is too high for most situations. For most decisions consensus is enough if it is real consensus.

Signs of effective decision-making

1. Everyone understands the nature of the decision to be made and participates in balanced and complementary ways.
2. The group has a defined decision making process, and everyone is willing to follow it.
3. The group knows the extent of its authority to make the decision, and everyone who needs to be present to make the decision is present.
4. Group members exchange ideas openly and listen to learn. They check for understanding before agreeing or disagreeing with another member's view.
5. If the group is having trouble getting to a decision, it tries to find out why and to figure out what needs to happen so that it can move forward.
6. Once a decision is made, the next steps are clear.

Sociocracy

The principles and practices were developed by Gerard Enderburg based on:

- Modern management theory and practices
- Quaker traditions of peace education and the valuing of each person
- Cybernetics, the science of communications and control

4 key design principles

- 1) Decision making on policy issues by consent
- 2) Organizing in circles
- 3) Double-linking
- 4) Elections by consent

Uses the consent process:

- Decisions are made based on everyone's range of tolerance rather than their preferences
- The decision reached is then implemented
- The decision reached is followed by measuring how well it is working
- The solution is refined as needed based on what is really happening rather than what might have been imagined beforehand

