

Group Decision Making

Student organization members and leaders make decisions in the group all the time. The decision making process can be stressful because people view it differently. For example, some people see it as a form of power struggle, some people cannot bear the idea of losing an argument and some people simply do not like to make decisions.

Decisions are an important part of group life and you may wonder how your group can improve in this area. This handout is designed to help you.

There are several types of group decisions:

1. Unilateral - a decision made by one person, often the nominal leader, without consultation with other group members. At times, it can be appropriate. For example, a minor decision that needs to be made right away. If it is repeated and inappropriate, this type of decision can carry a very low group commitment.
2. Handclasp - decisions made by two members. One suggests, the other endorses and carries it through without adequate discussion or group consideration. This type has high commitment for the two who made it, but generally not for the others.
3. Clique - similar to the Handclasp but with more people involved. This type usually occurs when a close sub-group decides what is good for the rest of the group. Repeated clique decisions cause splintering of the group and low commitment.
4. Baiting - a technique that reduces discussions around decisions. A person will say, "Now we are all agreed, right?!" and only the very brave will speak up. This usually suppresses obvious dissent and lowers group commitment.
5. Majority Rule - a popular way of making decisions. However, if the outcome of a secret ballot vote would produce any surprises, it is not a good time to make majority rule decisions. What happens is that a sizeable segment of the group may feel devalued and decrease their commitment to the decisions in which they "lose" to the majority vote.
6. Consensus - similar to Majority Rule, but everyone knows that what they think and value is being considered by all, and there will be no surprises if you vote. Each person will agree that, under the circumstances, which may not be ideal, the decision made is a fair and workable one that they can live with and support.

You may be able to think of and classify other types of decisions. Any type may prove effective under a given set of circumstances. However, it is obvious that the first five approaches are likely to reinforce the powerful in the group and create tension. Morale and membership commitment can be lowered if these are the usual methods of making organizational decisions.

Since members possess the essential ingredients for the solutions to all problems, group decisions should be based on all members' input. Certainly, if there are decisions that only take a few people to make, it may not be necessary to involve an entire group. We recommend that you consider the following points about the assets and liabilities of consensus decisions.

I. Assets Of Group Consensus Approach:

- A. Greater sum total of knowledge and information.
- B. Greater number of approaches to a problem.
- C. Participation in problem solving increases acceptance -- A lower-quality solution that has wide acceptance can be more effective than a higher-quality solution that lacks acceptance.
- D. Better comprehension of the decision - The chances for communication failures are greatly reduced when the individuals who must work together in executing the decision have participated in making it.
- E. Greater commitment of the members to the decision.

II. Liabilities Of Group Consensus Approach:

- A. Social Pressure - Minority opinions in groups can have little influence on the solution reached, even when these opinions are correct ones. Reaching agreement in a group often is confused with finding the "right answer".

- B. Individual Domination - Skilled manipulators or dominant individuals can emerge and capture more than their share of influence on the outcome.
- C. Conflicting Secondary Goal - People may aim at winning the argument at the cost of finding the best answer.
- D. Risk Taking - The risk of not getting their own way can prevent people from fully participating in the discussion.
- E. Time - Listening and considering all points of view in order to arrive at the best solution takes time.

III. Factors That Serve As Liabilities Or Assets Depending Largely Upon The Skills of The Discussion Leader

- A. Disagreement - Can serve either to create hard feelings among members or lead to a resolution of conflict and hence to an innovative solution.
- B. Conflicting individual interests vs. mutual interests.
- C. More time may be needed to reach consensus.
- D. Who has the greatest influence and who willingly changes their opinions can reinforce the existing power structure and stifle future member input and cooperation.

Having understood the advantages and possible problems of the consensus approach, you are encouraged to use this method to make decisions whenever possible. An operational way of defining a consensus decision is where every member of the group can say, "Well, that may not be exactly how I would have done it, but I can live with it and support it."

Group Consensus Guidelines

Effectiveness in communication is of paramount importance in the consensus decision making process. You can enhance your group communication by paying attention to the following "DO's and DON'Ts".

DO:

- Listen, not only to the words but to the rationale being offered.
- Pursue, your point and be persistent if you have good information.
- Manage, your time effectively, relative to the number of decisions that are being made.
- Involve all team members to ensure use of their knowledge and experience.
- Strive for the best answer. Thinking in cause-and-effect terms avoids dealing only with symptoms.

DON'T:

- Argue for the sake of winning your point. You may learn something by remaining open-minded.
- Give up on your conclusion simply to avoid conflict. Let objective reasons or sound information prevail.
- Allow the group to get hung up on a specific item-move on and come back later.
- Compete by assuming that someone must win and someone must lose. Look for the best alternative.
- Resort to voting. This tends to split the group into winners and losers.

The Leaders Role

This approach to group decision making places the leader in a particular role in which he/she must cease to contribute, avoid evaluation, and refrain from thinking about solutions or group products. Instead he/she must concentrate on the group process by assuming responsibility for accurate communication between members.

The ways decisions are made testify to the degree of effectiveness of a group. Here is a list of characteristics of effective and ineffective groups and members:

Effective Groups

- generate more ideas than individuals generate independently
- have a high level of participation
- develop a climate where members can be relaxed, open, and direct
- are task-oriented

Effective Group Members

- defer to members who they are certain have the facts
- form loyalties to their own group
- encourage and support other group members
- mediate differences in the group

Ineffective Groups

- pool ignorance and misinformation
- eject non-conforming members
- force members to comply or compromise
- engage in "groupthink" (premature acceptance of an alternative to preserve good feelings within the group)
- take action because they can't think of any reason not to

Ineffective Group Members

- give in on items they are sure of
- oppose or block decisions without cause
- dominate discussions