



Effective Meetings #6 Selecting a Group Decision-Making Process

Introduction

Making effective, quality, fair decisions is one of the more difficult activities for a group. Group decision-making processes are often unstructured, frequently consisting of people arguing their opinions and submitting supporting evidence in an ad hoc fashion until somehow a generally acceptable solution emerges. Yet how a decision is made often has consequences beyond the decision itself. For example, if a faction does not feel its voice was heard or believes the process was unfair, there are likely to be negative consequences concerning their future participation.

Groups use processes (brainstorming, for example) to create and analyze alternatives, and other processes to make decisions by selection from available alternatives. This article focuses on group decision-making processes. The question of this article is, "Given a set of circumstances, what are guidelines that a group might use in selecting a decision-making method?"

Basis for Choosing a Decision-Making Method

Useful criteria for selecting a group decision-making method inhere in the characteristics of the situation. Here are three key situational characteristics on which to base the selection of a method:

- *Time Available to Make Decision.* The time frame in which the decision must be made. Outside factors may require a specific due date. The cost of making the decision vs. the value of the decision may also limit the time available. More time and resources would be allocated to a decision regarding new products and markets than to deciding where to hold the company holiday party.
- *Buy-in of Group.* Buy-in refers to the degree to which group members take ownership of the final decision. The likelihood that a decision will be implemented is a function of the group's buy-in. When implementation involves risks to or otherwise impacts on group members, a greater degree of buy-in is usually required. For example, when there are likely to be unknown major obstacles to implementation, or when there are significant disagreements among those responsible for implementation, or when there is an



impact on group members' compensation and work conditions, more buy-in is needed than when selecting a new office copier.

- *Complexity*: In addition to the complexity inherent to a situation, complexity stems from lack of satisfactory alternatives and from entrenched positions with no apparent common ground among group members.

Group Decision-Making Methods and Their Applications

These are decision-making methods typically used by groups:

- *Autocratic*: One person, typically the group leader, makes the decision, with or without input from the group. This method has the advantage of speed, but the quality of the decision, particularly in complex situations, is limited by the capability of the single decision-maker. Buy-in is likely to be minimal, particularly if the decision is not perceived as fair. The autocratic method is most applicable where decision speed and tight coordination are essential, such as in a military operation.
- *Plurality vote*: The decision is the alternative that receives more votes than any other alternative. Advantages of this method include speed (although it is not as fast as is possible with autocratic) and the support of at least some substantial subgroup. There is also often some perception of fairness, unless the same plurality repeatedly dominates votes. With more than two alternatives, the winning decision may be supported only by a minority.¹ Plurality vote is often a good compromise between speed (there is a decision after one vote) and gaining buy-in. The process is rarely satisfactory for complex situations because it requires a clear set of alternatives on which to vote, although there may be modification of alternatives as different subgroups maneuver for votes.
- *Majority or supermajority vote*: The decision is the alternative that receives at least 50%, or a specified higher percentage, of the votes. Advantages include speed (relative to the methods below) and more buy-in than plurality vote since the winning decision is supported by at least a majority of the group. This method is typically used where the issue is so important that it is worth taking more time or having a higher hurdle for passage. For example, the US House or Senate must have a 2/3 vote to overturn a presidential veto of a bill. The disadvantages of the plurality vote process regarding complex situations hold

¹ This is the problem faced by many parliamentary democracies where no party has more than 50% of the votes, resulting in complex and often fragile coalitions.



here as well, although the higher standard often requires wider participation in crafting a solution.

- *Last person standing*: Discussion continues until advocates for all but one alternative give up. A major disadvantage of this method is the long time that it may take to reach a conclusion. While the quality of the decision may be better than with the autocratic process, the winning result may be based on its advocates' stamina rather than its quality. Advantages include a minority with a significant concern being able to hold up the decision until they are satisfied and the airing of many points of view. Disadvantages include people leaving the group because decision processes often take too long, are uncomfortable, and may appear highly subjective.
- *Compromise*: The discussion continues until all participants agree on a solution with which they can live. Typically, this involves each side giving up something — often matched with the other side getting something — until a mutually acceptable solution is reached. An advantage of this method is at least the appearance of buy-in by most of the group. Disadvantages include a potentially long decision-making process typically leaving no one truly pleased with the solution. Furthermore, optimal negotiating strategies involve deception concerning what is really important to the parties, thereby inhibiting the creativity needed for solving complex problems.²
- *Consensus*: There is a decision only if every member of the group chooses the same alternative as the best alternative, with no compromise. This method is best when full group buy-in is required and when there is a high need for creativity. Although there are potentially long decision times, by establishing a few conditions, consensus need not necessarily take longer than compromise.³

Putting this Article into Action

For each decision that a group must make, review the characteristics of the situation and select a decision-making process. Generally, these three key characteristics dictate which method should be used:

- Time available to make decision
- Level of group buy-in required
- Complexity of the situation

² See *Effective Meetings #7: Consensus: Creativity and Win-Win*

³ See *Effective Meetings #8: Using Consensus Effectively*.



In general, the following guidelines apply:

Decision Method	Time to Make Decision	Buy-in of Group Required	Complexity of Situation
Autocratic	Very Little	Low	Low
Plurality	Little - Medium	Medium	Low - Medium
Majority	Medium	Medium+	Low - Medium
Last Person Standing	Long	Low - Medium	Low
Compromise	Medium - Long	Medium++	Medium+
Consensus	Medium - Long	High	High

Summary

Different circumstances call for different group decision-making methods. Consider the circumstances in terms of the time to make a decision, the buy-in required, and the complexity of the decision, and choose a decision-making process accordingly. Autocratic and plurality vote are best when speed is essential. Consensus is best when creativity and full group buy-in are required.