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Effective Meetings #7 Consensus: Creativity and Win-Win

Introduction

Effective Meetings #6: Selecting a Group Decision-Making Process describes six group decision-making processes and discusses how to select the most appropriate process based on the time available in which to make the decision, the buy-in required, and complexity of the situation. This article contrasts the consensus process with the other decision-making methods in terms of the creativity and buy-in they generate.

Optimal Strategies in Compromise

To begin, we will look at the process of compromise. In compromise, discussion continues until all participants agree on a solution with which they can live. A mutually acceptable solution results from a series of transactions, each of which consists of all sides getting something by giving up something.

Often there is an underlying assumption that each asset has the same value to all parties. Actually, compromise works best when assets under discussion are valued oppositely by the various parties. Then, each party can give up low value (to them) benefits in exchange for more highly valued (to them) benefits.

Knowing that they will have to give up something, each side often pads its initial position with low value benefits they are prepared to surrender. To extract the maximum value from the other side (and thus gain the maximum benefit), each participant pretends that these expendable assets are more valuable to them than they really are. Likewise, they minimize the importance of their core concerns so the other side does not target them. When a side must give up something, it offers one of its expendable benefits.

Since its optimal strategy is based on deception, compromise is unlikely to produce a creative result that pleases everyone. Nor is it likely to build positive long-term relationships, teamwork, or esprit de corps. Compromise could be called lose-lose because everyone loses something.



Other Group Decision-Making Processes

All but one of the other group decision-making processes described in *Effective Meetings #6* are equal to or worse than compromise in terms of producing creativity and buy-in. Methods based on voting are less likely than compromise to be creative because people typically select from pre-specified alternatives. In fact, compromise is frequently used when alternatives must be modified to satisfy various constituencies. Another method, autocratic decision-making, is limited by the creativity of the single decision-maker, and typically results in little group buy-in.

Optimal Strategies for Consensus

Consensus is a decision-making process which maximizes buy-in and creativity. In consensus, a decision is reached only if every participant, without compromise, freely chooses the same alternative as the best solution. Not the best solution they could get, or the one they have to settle for, but the best of all alternatives they know of or could imagine being feasible, regardless of what anyone else thinks. Another way of looking at consensus is that every member of the group has a veto and should use it if not completely satisfied.

For an effective consensus process, every member of the group must prefer a solution rather than a continuance of the status quo. Given that preference, the optimal strategy for each participant has two components:

1. Be candid and honest about what is important to you so others can create solutions that meet your needs (as well as theirs), and
2. Listen carefully to what is important to others so you can create solutions that meet their needs (as well as yours).

Because everyone has a veto, participants do not have to be alert to defend against having a solution forced upon them. Instead they can relax and focus on creating a solution that works for everyone, for if that cannot be done, there will be no solution, which is an undesirable situation for all.

Consensus optimizes creativity by motivating everyone to listen closely and openly and to cooperate to create a solution that works for everyone and thus generates full buy-in. Uniquely among group decision-making processes, consensus produces a true win-win.



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Putting this Article into Action

Where creativity and buy-in must be maximized, consider using consensus. See *Effective Meetings #8: Using Consensus Effectively* for guidelines on using the consensus process.

Summary

In situations requiring high levels of group buy-in and creativity, consensus is far superior to all other commonly used group decision-making processes. The result of consensus is a usually a highly creative solution that is best for everyone — a true win-win.