

DECISION-MAKING METHODS FOR GROUPS AND TEAMS

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The work of groups such as teams, committees, task forces, etc., is often measured by the quality of the decisions and actions that they produce and the time they took to produce them. There are several ways in which groups can make decisions. They are all appropriate to some situations and may be inappropriate to others. This listing of decision-making methods describes the different methods and the conditions which make them appropriate or inappropriate.

Default decision: When a no decision is a decision. Default decisions are most often made by the group simply ignoring a suggestion or an option offered for consideration. A default decision may be appropriate when a suggestion is made that is irrelevant or distracting from the thrust of the team's direction. For example, a participant may suggest that the team take a break from the discussion just as a particularly important and timely issue comes up for consideration. It might be appropriate (although impolite, perhaps) to just ignore the suggestion and carry on with the discussion. Default decisions can sometimes inappropriately reflect a group's bias against certain people or types of ideas. Ignoring options because of group bias can lead to team ineffectiveness. For example, a team of mostly male engineers may tend to ignore ideas that are offered by a woman member because of an unconscious bias against women as engineers.

Executive decision: When a leader with positional, expert, or some other kind of power, authorizes an action or makes a priority choice. Executive decisions may be appropriate when legal, technical, or other inflexible and/or certain conditions apply to the situation and only one option will fit the circumstance. For example, the team leader may announce that the first priority for the team's consideration is a certain project because of a company contractual obligation. In such instances, all the decision requires of the team members is compliance. Executive decisions may be inappropriate concerning matters that could benefit from the full team's consideration or when self-determination, initiative, creativity, and/or willingness of participants is required for successful implementation of a decision or solution to a problem.

Individual decision: When one person decides on a certain action involving the rest of the group and proceeds to take the action without any further consideration by the group. Individual decisions may be appropriate when other group members are not adversely affected by the decision and may benefit from it. For example, a team member decides to bring refreshments to the meeting. Individual decisions may be inappropriate when they require others to extend their efforts without their concurrence. For example, an individual (not the leader) suggests the group should change its meeting room to another place and proceeds to go there in the expectation that everyone else will follow without discussion.

Pairing or handclasp decision: When one person makes a suggestion for a decision or solution and another immediately agrees and influences the group to close out consideration of any other options. Pairing may be appropriate when the consequences of the decision are limited and other participants have no strong feelings about alternative options. For example, the team may be considering where to go for refreshments after a long meeting when one member suggests a place and another member enthusiastically supports the idea. The group heads for the suggested location without further consideration of options. Pairing or handclasp decisions are inappropriate when the decision options should be fully explored before making a choice or when follow-up support for the decision will require effort from all participants. Pairing gives the illusion of a democratic or participative decision-making process, but can be deceptively coercive if questioning the decision results in some form of sanction from the group, the leaders, or those involved in the handclasp.

Majority vote decision: When more than half of those involved agree with a certain decision or solution. Voting is appropriate when all have agreed to abide by majority vote and the procedures for information sharing and discussion permit informed voting by participants. For example, there is strong opinion concerning the allocation of the group's annual budget. Allocation decisions may be made this year by voting after discussing all the options and benefits for each of them. Voting creates winners and losers which may contribute to an erosion of support for the decision or solution or blame for those in the majority in the face of subsequent resistance or changing circumstances. A variation on the voting method is the taking of a "straw poll" in which participants indicate their tentative preference(s) without necessarily finally committing themselves to a decision so that everyone can see the prevailing opinions of the participants. Polling is occasionally used as a preliminary method to test for the possibility of consensus.

Consensus decision: When every individual is at least 70% comfortable with the decision and is willing to give the decision 100% of their support. Consensus building is appropriate when there is no self-evident decision or solution known, when a variety of perspectives and options will contribute to the improved quality of the final decision, or when support for the decision is as important as the decision itself. For example, a team has a challenge that must be met and must come to agreement on how to proceed. This decision may take many forms but, at base, must be supported if it is to be successful for all team members. Consensus decision-making seeks to develop win-win outcomes in which all participants benefit from the decision or solution. All participants are accountable to the group for supporting the consensus decision or solution. Consensus can be blocked by the unwillingness of just a single individual.

Unanimous decision: When every individual agrees fully with the decision. This method is appropriate when those involved have a previous agreement, contract, or understanding that cannot or should not be changed without full concurrence by all. For example, people pay a fee to attend a course in which the published schedule shows all meetings to be held on Monday evenings. This meeting time should not be changed except with the unanimous consent of all. Unanimous decisions are rarely required and are the most difficult to achieve because the decision for the group must be exactly what everyone chooses for themselves.