Section A, Parts 4: Decision Making

When you begin to work with others in groups, to plan an activity or a project for the school or community, you become involved in a group decision-making process. Decision making, a process in which you or your group select from among two or more possible choices, is a way to reason through life situations, to solve problems, and to modify behavior.

Most decisions are not simply "right" or "wrong," but effective or ineffective according to whether they have produced satisfactory or unsatisfactory results. When decision making involves a group, the way in which the decision is made becomes an important factor in whether or not the group supports it.

There are four major ways to make decisions. They extend on a continuum from most directed to least directed.

1. Autocratic
   One person makes the decision on behalf of the group. Generally this is a person with the authority to do so, or he or she presumes to have that power. Autocratic decisions are efficient and effective when the person who makes the decision has the authority and the information necessary to do so. They are not effective if the group does not go along with the decision, or the person making the decision does not have sufficient information.

2. Democratic
   The group participates in the decision by voting to resolve their differences. Each member has an equal say in the outcome. The process involves the group to a larger extent than in the autocratic mode. Members provide input so that the decision is more informed. However, the resolution by vote creates a majority and a minority. Thus, a proportion of the group is overruled. A win/lose situation has been created that leaves a disgruntled minority of losers. This leads to tension in the group, and decision making becomes competitive within the group.

3. Consensual
   After thorough discussion the group arrives at a resolution that each member can endorse. The widest possible interest and ownership for the most members is achieved. An individual member may not see the final decision as his or her favorite, but it is a good one that he or she will support. However, the process takes time.

4. Laissez-faire
   Decision making is left to the initiative of the group. If they choose to make a decision, they will. If not, they will not. The group may choose a variety of methods for making the decision. Laissez-faire invests the wisdom and power in the group to know when and how to make decisions. Participation may or may not be full. The risks are that the group will not rise to the occasion or that individual members will emerge to dominate the process.
A question that you may be faced with as a leader in your organization is, "Should I make the decision by myself, or should I involve others in the decision-making process?" Here are two questions that may help you decide upon your approach.

Do I have all the necessary information at hand in order to make a rational and correct decision?
If you do have all the necessary information to make a decision, then it may be appropriate for you to make the decision alone. However, if you do not have sufficient information, then you must involve other individuals who have the information.

If I make the decision by myself, will the other members of the organization accept it?
If you are reasonably sure that the other members of the organization will fully accept your decision, then it might be appropriate for you to make the decision. However, if you suspect that they will not accept a decision made solely by you, then you must involve them in the decision-making process.

It is often critical in group decision making that everyone in the group has some input into the decision and feels that his or her point of view has been heard. Most of the time everyone in the group will not agree to the decision(s). Then the group needs to come to some sort of consensus in which the members compromise or discuss an issue until they can all agree.

This is an important element in the decision-making process. In a group, individuals need to feel that their voice has been heard so that they can "buy" into the group's decision. If people do feel that they have played a role in the group's decision, they are more likely to stay involved with the group and its plans.

**CONSENSUAL DECISION MAKING**
As mentioned above, the decision-making style that generates the most widespread support for the final decision is consensus. To help understand why this is so, let's consider a possible decision-making situation. At the end of the year the photography club finds it has an unexpected surplus of $500. The club is split between holding an end-of-the-year picnic or investing the money in needed equipment for the dark room. The club president believes in the "democratic" tradition and puts the matter to a majority vote to resolve the conflict.

This may be democratic, but it is not effective leadership. Group decisions made by voting are win/lose situations and are detrimental to group productivity. A decision that leaves a little more than half the group's members winners also leaves a disgruntled minority of losers. This leads to tension in the group, and decision making becomes competitive within the group.

Win/lose situations interfere with listening; decrease sensitivity to other members; destroy creativity.

A better approach to the voting problem is a win/win situation, a technique called consensus. The group members, after a thorough discussion, agree on one or more alternatives. An individual member may not see the final decision as his or her favorite, but it is a good one that he or she will be able to live with and support.
Characteristics of consensual decision making include:
(Source: Nebraska Association of Student Councils Projects and Activities Handbook, 1992 edition, p. 77)

- The problem (or decision) under consideration should be viewed as a mutual problem that stands in the way of reaching commonly shared goals.
- You need enough time for all to state their positions.
- Each member must actively participate in the process, stating opinions and listening to others.
- The climate should be cooperative and supportive.
- Avoid arguing for a position just because it is your own. Back up positions you take with logic and facts.
- Support positions with which you find some agreement, but don't adopt a position just to reach an agreement.
- Avoid changing your mind only to avoid conflict. Encourage others to give you facts and logic before trying to change their minds.
- Avoid techniques designed to reduce conflict such as polling, voting, averaging, or trading votes. Don't make deals.
- Explore controversies and search for areas of agreement. Consider differences of opinion helpful as long as they can be supported by facts or logic. Constructive controversies can yield the best decisions.
- Don't withhold information just to be nice.
- If needed, use your intuition but make it clear to the group that you're doing it. Intuition is valid in an argument if presented properly.
- Seek the best alternative that everyone can support, even if a smaller majority supports another alternative.

Potential advantages of using the consensus approach:
- Through the sharing of information all members will know the other members' feeling on the issues, which will promote unity and greater understanding.
- Members can all have a sense of ownership in the decision and will therefore work harder to carry out the decision.
- Since all members have a say in the final outcome, the decision will usually be of a much higher quality.

Potential disadvantages of using the consensus approach:
- Consensus reaching can be time-consuming.
- Consensus reaching can place a great demand on the group leader to be facilitator, communicator, listener, and moderator to make sure discussion is not dominated by a few members.

One Method for Achieving Consensus
1. Each member of the group (for sake of example, say there are 16) lists in order of importance, the six (also arbitrary number) possible solutions, ideas, or projects they would like to see the group select.
2. Eight groups of two people each are formed. Each group should list its six solutions, using the ones developed by the individuals as their basis for discussion.

3. Four groups of four people are formed. Each group again ranks the six top solutions, using what each group of two developed as the basis for discussion.

4. Two groups of eight follow the same procedure as above.

5. Finally, the group is reunited as one, and all 16 (or however many members there are) individuals discuss until they come up with one final list or item.

**Negotiation Strategies**

*WIN-WIN APPROACH*

> Define the conflict as a mutual problem. Pursue goals held in common.
> Find creative agreements that are satisfying to both parties or present a mutually acceptable compromise.
> Have an accurate personal understanding of one's own needs and show them correctly.
> Try to equalize power by emphasizing mutual interdependence, avoiding harm, inconvenience, harassment, embarrassment to the other party.
> Make sure contacts are on the basis of equal power.
> Use open, honest, and accurate communication of one's needs, goals, position, and proposals.
> Work to have highest empathy and understanding of others' position, feelings, and frame of reference.
> Communicate a problem-solving orientation.
> Avoid threats in order to reduce others' defensiveness.
> Express hostility to get rid of feelings that may interfere with future cooperation.
> Communicate flexibility of position to help in creative problem solving.
> Behave predictably; though flexible behavior is appropriate, it is not designed to take the other party by surprise.
> Change position as soon as possible to help in problem solving.
> Promote clarity, predictability, mutual understanding to help in problem solving.
> Use cooperative behaviors to establish trust and mutual cooperation. Seek third parties to help in problem solving.
> Emphasize exploring both similarities and differences in positions.

*WIN-LOSE APPROACH*


> Define the conflict as a win-lose situation.
> Pursue one's own goals.
> Force the other party into submission.
> Have an accurate personal understanding of one's own needs, but publicly disguise or misrepresent them.
> Try to increase one's power over the other party by emphasizing one's independence from the other and the other's dependence upon oneself.
> Try to arrange contact where one's own power is the greater.
> Use deceitful, inaccurate, and misleading communication of one's needs, goals, position, and proposals.
> Avoid all empathy and understanding of other's position, feelings, and frame of reference.
> Communicate a win-lose orientation. Use threats to get submission.
> Hostility is expressed to subdue the other.
> Communicate highest commitment (rigid adherence) to one's position to force the other to give in.
> Behave unpredictably to use the element of surprise.
> Concede and change slowly to force concessions from the other.
> Increase ambiguity and uncertainty in an attempt to use deception and confusion to one's advantage.
> Use cooperative behaviors to grab the chance to exploit other's cooperativeness.
> Isolate the other to reduce the possibility of his forming a coalition with third parties.
> Emphasize only differences in positions and the superiority of one's own.