

Decision-Making Models

Using consensus decision-making to increase team effectiveness

By Judith Stein

A decision-making model describes the method a team will use to make decisions. The most important factor in successful decision-making is that every team member is clear about how a particular decision will be made. Who will be making the decision? How will team members be involved? By when? Knowing these things allows team members to be fully informed participants in discussions - "Will we be giving input to the team leader so he can make the decision?" or "Will we need to discuss this topic and come to agreement during this meeting?"

Knowing how a particular decision will be made can also help a team plan their meeting agendas more effectively and lead to more collaborative team process. Most importantly, understanding how decisions will be made helps to build support for the final decision and active commitment to that decision's implementation. Because effective teams work towards the fullest participation of each member, teams often use some version of a consensus decision-making model. When used appropriately, this model of decision-making can maximize the quality of a team's decisions. (More on consensus decisions, below.)

There are a number of possible models for decision-making; each of these models may be appropriate for particular types of decisions. From least participatory to most, some examples of decision-making models include:

1. Team leader decides and informs the team - this may be appropriate for time-sensitive decisions or for decisions where the team is likely to support and implement the decision regardless of whether or not they've given input. Example: the team leader decides to cancel a particular team meeting because key participants cannot attend.

2. Team leader gathers input from team then decides -- this model may be helpful where expert opinion or input is needed from the team to make the best decision. The synergy of team discussion may lead to a richer decision, but the team itself doesn't need to come to agreement about the particular course of action. Example: the team leader has a good discussion with the team about how they view the team's needs, but the team leader writes the final position description for an opening on the team.

3. Consensus decisions - The word consensus is often thought to mean unanimous agreement but this is not necessarily the case. Consensus decisions include input from and acceptance by each member of the team. Consensus decisions have a very high level of team involvement and can lead to strong, well-supported decisions. (More on

consensus follows.) Example: Coming to consensus about the success criteria that a team will use to evaluate its progress on a particular project.

4. Consensus with a fallback: This decision-making model may be the most effective way to implement consensus decision-making because it pre-sets a course of action to be taken if the team is unable to make a decision within an appropriate amount of time. Of course the time allocated for a particular decision will depend on the decision's complexity, importance and the difficulty of implementation. The preferred fallback may be to the team leader, who considers the team's input and then decides. The existence of a fallback plan keeps the team moving forward without ignoring input from team members. Example: After a lengthy discussion about the team's motto, the team leader observes that there is still considerable disagreement among team members. She gets agreement from the team to go to their fallback: that she will take all of their input and make the decision herself. The team agrees to this.

5. Team leader sets constraints and delegates decisions to team members - once team members know about any critical constraints, a team leader can delegate a decision to the team or a sub-group of the team. This decision-making model helps teams share the responsibility for decisions, can help the team and individual members develop decision-making skills, and allows the team leader to use his/her time in another way. Example: a team leader gives a subgroup the authority to design and print a brochure, given pricing and style constraints.

Some teams might also use a "**majority rules**" voting method for some decisions. While this method is familiar to most of us, on important decisions it can leave some team members feeling like they have "lost." Majority vote can be an effective decision-making model for low-impact decisions, but it will be less effective in values-laden decisions or decisions where active buy-in is crucial. At a minimum, it would be important to have thoughtful and inclusive discussion prior to any major "majority rules" decision-making.

More on consensus

Now that we know that consensus decision-making is not necessarily unanimous support for a particular decision, it is important to define just what consensus decision-making is. Consensus is achieved when everyone on the team has had ample opportunity to have his or her ideas considered and can fully support the team's decision. Consensus decisions mean that the entire team has come to agreement on a course of action, even if individuals might have a different preference. Consensus decisions often lead to completely new solutions that the team arrives at in the course of its discussion.

In the course of the discussion leading to consensus, individual team members may change their ideas (based on new information or perspectives from their team) or they may decide to defer their individual feelings or needs to those of the team. The key

point is that this process is deliberate and fully voluntary on the part of the team member. Positive reasons why individuals modify their positions to support a team's decision include:

- Agreement with most parts of the proposed decision
- A decision to let go of a non-crucial element of their point of view in order to strengthen team alignment on the topic
- Understanding that the final decision does not compromise their values
- An assessment that the final decision has the best chance for successful implementation because so many members of the team support it

Reaching consensus can take time, although consensus-based decision-making gets easier with practice. Teams using a consensus-based decision-making model will need to develop good meeting practices to make sure that every individual has an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. The ability to define the decision topic clearly, and the ability to build agreements and sensitivity to the team's process will all help successful decision-making by consensus.

It is important that the team pay attention to group process so that no team member changes his or her mind because they fear repercussions for disagreement, or they are somehow "bullied" by the team (through hostile remarks or "friendly teasing") into changing their views.

Team members can check for consensus by seeing if each member of the team can agree to the following four statements:

- 1. I've heard your positions.**
- 2. I believe you've heard my position.**
- 3. The decision does not compromise my values.**
- 4. I can fully support the proposed decision and its implementation.**

In good consensus decision-making, every member of the team must feel that they have been listened to and that their ideas have been given a fair assessment.

From ***Team Problem Solving*** by Sandy Pokras

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http://web.mit.edu/hr/oed/learn/teams/art_decisions.html