

# making group decisions

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Do you find yourself frustrated when you work with groups? Do you sometimes feel like the real issues never get to the floor? Do people avoid them or skirt them to avoid hurting feelings and submitting ideas that might produce conflict? When we join with others to make group decisions, the dynamics of the decision-making process change. Groups make decisions in different ways than individuals. Because of this, we may be quite satisfied with our individual decision making and dissatisfied with that of our groups.

Often, group members feel better when they don't introduce dissonant or differing opinions. As a result, they may inaccurately believe that their group is functioning well because it hasn't experienced conflict. And, yet, the same group members express dissatisfaction with the decisions made. Why? Probably because, in an effort to emphasize conflict reduction, group members overlooked information critical to making an effective decision.

## **Decision-Making Process**

What kind of information is needed to make an effective decision? The answer depends on the importance of the decision. If the decision is very important, a wide array of information will be needed to reduce the risk of disastrous and costly results. The most effective decisions result when a group has:

1. Carefully examined many possible courses of action.
2. Considered the group goals that must be met.
3. Tried to balance negative as well as positive consequences of each alternative.
4. Intensively searched for and taken into account new information.
5. Made detailed plans for implementing a selected course of action.<sup>1</sup>

To help your group achieve satisfying decisions, you may wish to promote consensus seeking. The advantage of consensus

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is that it makes full use of available resources, especially information resources, and it helps creatively resolve conflicts. Everyone in a group may not be in 100% agreement with a chosen solution. Complete agreement is rarely achieved, nor is it the goal of consensus seeking.

To arrive at consensus, each participant must be sufficiently involved in the decision-making process to the extent that he/she understands the selection of a choice on the basis of logic and feasibility. When group members feel this way, then consensus has been achieved.<sup>2</sup>

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## **Groupthink**

### *Definition*

If consensus seeking is a desirable strategy for groups to use, why don't groups use it more often? Unfortunately, through time, groups drift into decision-making patterns. One of the more common, though ineffective, patterns is known as "Groupthink." Groupthink results from an emphasis on conflict reduction and frequently leads to defective decisions because a wide range of opinions and information is overlooked.<sup>3</sup>

A group is less susceptible to Groupthink if it isn't highly cohesive, regularly interacts with outside people or ideas, uses methodical ways of searching out and assessing information, and operates with low levels of stress. Frequently, a less susceptible group also has a nondirective type of leader. These clues may help you avoid drifting into Groupthink.

### *Symptoms*

Although the antecedent conditions for Groupthink exist, a group may not be operating in that pattern. To check for Groupthink, look for these symptoms:

- Feeling as a group that you're invulnerable to failure or to errors in evaluating information.
- Rationalizing, as a group, preferred choices ("justifications" constructed from feeling rather than evidence).
- Believing that you're an inherently moral group (the group overlooks dissonant information).
- Stereotyping of "out" groups (viewing other groups and their members as behaving or thinking in a uniform way, that is, "those government regulators").

- Pressuring group members who disagree to get in line with “the group thinking.”
- Censoring yourself and, as a result, not sharing information or opinions that may be different from the apparent preferences of the group.
- Believing or acting as though silence on the part of group members means that they agree with a point being discussed or with a decision.
- Preventing new or different ideas or information from reaching the group (“protecting” the group from having to consider some ideas or evidence).

### **Building Consensus**

Like Groupthink, majority vote, coin-flips, and compromise (which all involve members in trading positions and bargaining) are other patterns of group decision making. The bases for these patterns may be emotional, factual, or chance. Frequently, they don’t result in selection of the most feasible and logical alternative, and as such aren’t the same as consensus seeking.

How do we help a group to function well? Here are two important guidelines. First, the group must clearly define what types of decisions fall within its responsibility. Secondly, the effective group has clearly defined guidelines for how it will function and for how the guidelines may be changed.<sup>4</sup> The guidelines may be carefully developed to promote consensus seeking.

The following suggestions are designed to help a group build consensus. They’re not prescriptions for group behavior, but do provide behavioral targets that a group might strive to achieve to increase its effectiveness. A group may try to:

1. Examine goals related to a particular decision.
2. Use systematic ways of acquiring and analyzing information.
3. Actively solicit members’ preferences (new information) and differing opinions. For example, the occasional introduction of new people to present information may help the group gather useful information that would otherwise go undiscovered.
4. Avoid the assumption that silence equals agreement. People may remain silent because they don’t wish to incur disfavor not because they agree with a choice.
5. Be alert to stereotyping of other groups and actively avoid this in evaluating information about alternatives. However, negative labeling of “out” groups is easy to

- do. When this is done, valuable ideas may be missed because they're assigned the same negative label.
6. Encourage individuals to listen carefully by avoiding:
    - a. Assuming they know what a speaker is going to say.
    - b. Drifting away from what a speaker is saying.
    - c. Word-picking (focusing on one word rather than all the words in a communication).
  7. Recognize and reinforce the idea that winning and losing aren't conducive to effective group decisions. Participants can give ideas to the group and then detach themselves from the ideas.
  8. Avoid conflict-reducing techniques like majority vote, averages, bargaining, and coin-flips. These are tempting to groups, but each involves a "shut-down" of logic and reasoning as ways of finding the most beneficial choice.
  9. Have the group leader disclose his/her preferences among alternatives after group members have stated their positions. Occasional absences by the leader may facilitate members' expressions of preferences.

## Conclusion

As Extension educators, much of our work depends on group decision making. We need input from many types of advisory groups as we plan, develop, and implement programs in group settings. Many of us would like to enhance our group functioning. Attention to *how* we're making group decisions may help us do that. In contrast with other decision-making patterns, *consensus seeking* encourages appraisal of more information and provides a broader range of potential solutions. As a result, an Extension group is more likely to choose the best alternative and have greater confidence in the decision it has made. Changing our practices takes time and considerable effort. The ideas presented here provide some guidelines for moving groups in our communities toward greater effectiveness.

## Footnotes

1. Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 11.
2. Jay Hall, "Decisions, Decisions, Decisions," *Psychology Today*, V (November, 1971), 51-54 and 86-88.
3. Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*.
4. Fran Tarkenton, "The Management Huddle: Making Group Decision Work," *Sky*, VIII (July, 1979), 50-53.