

Appendix Q: Group Decision Making

Group decision making can be complicated. There are different ways to reach a decision and which method to use varies for each situation. Before calling for a vote, answer the following questions, to choose the most appropriate strategy:

Who needs to be included in this decision? Who are the important players that can help or hinder our success? Do we have all of the information to make this decision? When does the decision need to be made? Should we postpone a decision until we have more research or group members?

MAJORITY VOTE:

Description: Everyone gets one vote, the largest number of votes prevails.

Pros: Majority vote is fast and easy and can give you a general idea on how the group feels about an issue.

Cons: It creates winners and losers, and the losers don't necessarily like or support the majority's decision. Some rely on majority vote too frequently rather than the group working through issues to achieve a win/win solution.

When to use: Majority vote should be used when limited time is available to make the decision and when the decision does not need the full support of the membership to be successful. It may also be used to take a poll of the group before spending a lot of time on an issue that most of the group is against.

Tip: Ask everyone to state their experiences, opinions and feelings about the subject. By allowing everyone's input, people feel less rushed and have more information before voting.

DESIGNATED GROUP DECISION:

Description: A subgroup such as the board, a committee or task force is given the authority to make the decision for the whole group.

Pros: A smaller group may have the expertise or can research an issue before deciding the best course of action. Small groups may work quicker than the larger membership.

Cons: Minority vote may result in a disagreement between the decision-makers and the membership. The smaller group may think they have all the answers without considering all sides, and may leave out important facts or opinions.

When to Use: When the whole group does not have the time or expertise to consider all of the information around an issue. When the decision does not require the full support of the whole organization to be successful. It also can be used as an escape clause when a group is unable to reach consensus. (More about escape clauses later.)

LEADER DECIDES:

Description: The leader decides without a vote, or consensus of the group. They may or may not have requested input.

Pros: Leaders are in their positions because they have been hired or elected because of their knowledge and/or experience. Leaders should have full authority to make certain decisions. The leader can make quick decisions and it allows the larger group to focus on major issues and allow the leader to guide the organization on a daily basis.

Cons: This does not allow members of the group to have a voice in the organization. The leader may make decisions that do not reflect the group they lead or they may not have all of the information to make the best decision for the organization.

When to use: When the leader has specific information or authority to make a decision. The leader may not have time to bring the decision to the group or does not need input or support. The key is making sure everyone understands when the leader decides and when the group decides.

CONSENSUS:

Description: Consensus is a process where every member of the decision making group participates in the discussion and decision. Members express their ideas, opinions, experience, feelings and position on a specific issue. Each member's job is to listen to the ideas, opinions, experience, feelings and positions of all other members. The goal of consensus is to reach a carefully examined, thoughtfully considered decision that each member can support. Consensus does not always mean everyone thinks the solution is optimal, but is workable.

Consensus includes: pooling opinions, effective listening, discussing ideas and differences and agreement to the point that everyone can support a decision.

Consensus does not include: voting, majority rule, minority rule, leader rules or bargaining.

Pros: Allows all people to participate in the decision. Creates ownership and support from the group, which means a greater chance for success. Because everyone participates, more information and points of view are shared, decisions tend to be better. Members are more informed and may stay more connected to the organization.

Cons: Consensus is very time consuming and can be difficult to reach. It can be misused, overused, or used inappropriately. Can be a source of conflict if not used correctly.

When to Use: Use for those decisions when you want and need the whole group's support or for major issues that define the future of the organization. Consensus is a time-consuming process and should not be hurried.

Tips: Define deadlines for making the decision up front. Decide on an escape clause, or backup method if the group cannot reach consensus. The group may choose to revert to majority vote with a certain percentage of agreement (usually 85-90%) needed for the decision. The escape clause could include turning over the decision to a subgroup representing all perspectives--either to get additional information or to decide for the group.

Adapted from Neighborhood Resource Center of Colorado's Tip Sheet No. 6.