How Should We Decide – Elements of Sound Decision Making
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Studies in Group Leadership

How Should We Decide?

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Elements of Sound Decision Making

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Making decisions and solving problems takes much time and energy. Yet, most groups allocate little time and energy to selecting a decision-making model to evaluating the process once the decision has been reached or a solution attempted.

Ideally, decisions arise as a result of judgments and reasoning to a final conclusion. Problem solving involves the organization and arrangement of several decisions so that they will have some usefulness—solving a problem.

It's Real Work

Decision making and problem solving are rarely easy. They become increasingly complicated when they involve several people or a large group. Decisions are strongly affected by needs and the environment. Decisions are often influenced by other persons, authority figures, or by groups who exert pressure upon us.

At times, groups have difficulty, not only in making decisions, but also in living with decisions. Deciders must be concerned with both the quality of their decision and the acceptance of it.

Decision quality is based upon a number of factors: sound reasoning, adequate information, appropriate conclusion, and fairness. On the other hand, acceptance is based on agreement and satisfaction with the decision, willingness to support and/or work for its implementation. Quality of a decision is objective and based upon facts; acceptance is subjective and based on feelings.

Achieving both quality and acceptance in the same decision is difficult since, in many respects, they require different processes and emphases. High-quality decisions require satisfaction.

Satisfaction is usually a product of participation and involvement in the decision-making process. Satisfaction may have very little to do with information or reasoning.

Acceptance May Be the Goal

Group leaders must decide which is the primary goal of a particular decision and then initiate the appropriate process. In some situations, quality is of little consequence, and satisfaction is all important. The leader need not be concerned with which possible solution is the "best." Satisfaction is the key consideration. In other situations, quality must be the top priority; on other occasions quality and acceptance are of equal importance.

One reason for dissatisfaction with the way a group makes decisions or solves problems is failure of members to understand clearly the real nature of the group: they do not understand the actual **purpose** of the group. A policy-making body and action group are not the same, though one group may have both functions. Often we think of making policy as the "end" of deliberations; actually, it is the beginning since implementation is inevitable whether by the same group or by another. How often have you heard the complaint, "This group never **does** anything!" Quite possibly this group isn't **supposed** to do anything.

Bodies such as school boards may go beyond their area of responsibility and become an action group. Hence, they become involved in problem-solving quandaries in addition to their policy determinations. They over-extend themselves by confronting details not rightly in their domain. They must, however, be responsible for the management of the total system; this means that they may need to intervene if checks and balances are not working properly.

Strategies Vary

Individuals solve problems in a variety of ways:

1. Let someone else tell them how to act to solve the problem.
2. Study, and analyze the problem and draw their own conclusions.
3. Wait for a flash of insight to reveal the solution.
4. Mull the problem over in the mind, allowing it to "incubate" until a solution occurs to them.
5. Seek advice from others and arrive at a joint decision.

Groups or group leaders may function in similar ways. Some strategies produce better results than others and may be more appropriate in certain cases. No hard and fast rules can be set forth. Groups must consider their own particular needs and situations and then choose the model that is most valid for them.

Groups generally make decisions on the basis of majority support. Bylaws often specify that business will be conducted according to Roberts' Rules of Order or some other parliamentary guide, and may specify the majority required for passage. This implies that motions will be offered and heads counted—the majority rules.

Sometimes in large groups or in groups where conflicts are severe, voting appears to be the best and fairest option. It is efficient and makes it possible to schedule time. It provides an opportun-

ity for all to participate in an orderly manner.

However, voting is a win/lose strategy. It limits the alternatives and frequently hardens positions early in the deliberations. Once an individual has voiced his or her views, it may be difficult to shift ground without losing face.

Decision Making Takes Time

The question of how much time to spend reaching a decision or solving a problem has no answer. Solving a problem takes time. The big question for groups is whether to spend time deciding or gaining acceptance: do we focus on "satisfaction" before voting—spending time then or, after the fact, "mending bridges" and working to gain support?

Time saved reaching a decision by vote may be expended threefold later trying to win support for the decision. Time spent in reaching maximum agreement on a solution is time well spent.

Consensus Works for Some

In its purist form, consensus implies 100 percent agreement. This is rarely possible in group decisions; however, many groups come close. It is surprising how much groups can agree on if their focus is on "where we are together" rather than on "where we are apart." Reaching absolute consensus requires very much time. Groups that try to short-circuit the true consensus process and reach agreement too quickly are avoiding differences of opinion and not reaching agreement.

Consensus seeks to bring all parties to a mutually satisfying resolution of the problem. It requires a willingness to stop arguing for personal interests and a belief that out of discussion of differences can come better decisions.

Some group decisions are based on modified consensus (maximum agreement possible) with the built-in provision that if members don't want to spend time and effort working toward this kind of decision, they have the option of not participating in the deliberations. But if they choose to "side-step" the deliberative responsiblity, they also give up the right to find fault and negate the decision worked out by others. This appears to be a fair exchange: if one isn't willing to spend the time and effort necessary to arrive at a quality decision with a high degree of acceptance, then one relinquishes the right to criticize and reject. Normally, most members want to participate in deliberations. But there are occasions and issues that may not concern all members, and certain members would prefer non-participation.

The higher the level of agreement, the more supportive participants in the deliberations are likely to be in carrying out and promoting the solution. The greater the involvement in the deliberation, the greater the commitment to the resulting solution.

Where decisions are reached by motion and majority vote, some time lag may be desirable before finalizing the decision or making it operative. Bylaws may or may not provide for delayed voting or pre-announcing the motion to be offered. The general intent in both cases is similar—to prevent hurried, non-reflective decision making. Deliberations need not drag on for several meetings, but thought and reflection are necessary in reasoning through to a sound conclusion.

Common Elements

Problem-solving processes are numerous but have common elements. They tend to proceed in somewhat similar stages regardless of what we call them. In all cases there is a need to:

1. identify and define the goal or goals.
2. identify and examine the nature and causes of obstacles to reaching the goal.
3. establish criteria or standards for reaching a solution. (Some do this by restating the problem in terms of what they would like it to be—their concept of the problem resolved, or the ideal solution.)
4. determine the present location, point of encounter—where is the group in relation to reaching its objective?
5. seek and describe as many solutions as appear useful in the situation.
6. evaluate each solution for its potential in meeting the criteria.
7. evaluate each solution for its potential detriments.
8. determine which solutions are most likely to meet the criteria the least detrimentally.

One approach to problem solving involves developing a chart that focuses on the important elements of problem solving. Such a chart contains the following information:

Column 1: statements describing the problem.

Column 2: statements describing and ranking essentials of a satisfactory solution. (What does a "satisfactory" solution look like?)

Column 3: possible solutions.

Column 4: costs associated with each suggested solution.

Column 5: expected benefits from each solution.

Column 6: "so what" judgmental statements or conclusions about the possible solutions.

Some people think of "hindrances" or "obstacles" rather than "costs." There is no magic in words so long as they are clearly understood. Obstacles or costs might include such considerations as: lack of expertise, too few resources—human or financial, solution would require too much time, solution would violate the constitution or be contrary to some other priority, solution would not be popular.

It is important that groups seriously consider the "costs" of their solutions. There may be high costs in choosing the best high-quality solution, but the group may need to "stretch" in order to solve the problem. For this reason, thinking of costs and benefits may be helpful. Costs of such things as need for increased participation, recruitment of certain additional members, and if greater financial resources are not insurmountable the group is truly sold on the solution. A group that takes on the challenge posed by such costs may not only solve a problem, but may emerge stronger and healthier.

Good Solutions

Good solutions have some characteristics in common:

1. They can be easily communicated, are clear-cut and precise.
2. They offer realistic expectations.
3. They are consistent with the ongoing program and purpose of the organization.
4. They allow for some flexibility or modification.
5. They fulfill specified criteria.
6. They have more benefits than negative costs and do not produce even greater problems.
7. They relate directly to the designated problem.
8. They are based upon valid reasoning and adequate information.

Perhaps more important than the specific staging of the decision making system is the thoroughness of the reasoning. There is no doubt about it—solving even small problems takes time and willingness to listen and reflect. A plan or procedure insures that all aspects will be considered and some weighting of the available time will occur. Otherwise groups are inclined to minimize the time spent in analyzing the problem and establishing criteria and focus too soon on solutions.

Brainstorming or its modification can be useful in problem solving. It is valuable if the group tends to "nit pick" or belabor evaluation of any new or innovative suggestion. Since brainstorming withholds evaluation until a specified time, there is more opportunity to offer suggested solutions. A group may refer brainstorm ideas to a committee for screening; possible solutions can then be offered within a problem-solving frame of reference.

Another problem-solving procedure addresses itself with ordering of problems and the manner of approaching them. Members generally can discern the more serious problems. Grouping problems or concerns as "more" and "less" serious gives members control over the situation.

The first phase of this procedure is to separate the more and the less serious items; phase two is consideration and resolution of the "less" serious items. Once the group has proved to itself that it can solve problems, it is easier to move into Phase three, the resolution of the tough or "more" serious considerations.

Nominal Group Process

The nominal group process is a method of reaching group decision on a specific problem or question. It permits and insures idea input by each participant and allows a group to decide which ideas are most important.

Nominal group involves three phases and five steps.

Phase I—A "nominal phase" includes (1) the silent listing of ideas in writing by each individual; (2) sharing and recording in round-robin fashion all ideas until there are no further ideas to share. The ideas are listed quickly, without discussion.

Phase II—The "discussion phase" (3) is not free-wheeling. Instead, each idea is given attention. The person suggesting an idea has opportunity to clarify or explain the idea. Others can add support or non-support. Round-robin discussion of ideas insures input by all group members without domination by anyone.

Phase III—A "voting phase" (4) allows each individual to privately rank or rate items numerically. (5) The collective group decision is based on the pooled outcome of individual votes. This form of voting insures each member equal input.

A group larger than 12 can split into two or more sub-groups. Each sub-group goes through the three phases. When a sub-group has voted its outcome, it shares its top five ideas with the total group. Based on the information shared by the sub-groups, participants vote a second time and rank the items numerically. The overall group decision of the top five ideas will be based on the pooled outcome of all individual votes.

Evaluate!

Once a group has chosen a solution to its problem, its members may feel like erasing the matter from their consciousness. That group is only three-quarters "home." There is a real need to assess or evaluate the deliberative process once it has been completed. What are the dimensions of a "good" problem solving method? Groups will probably want to phrase their own yardsticks; some of the measurements are: appropriateness, adequacy, sufficiency, fairness. Having made some effort at evaluation, the group leaders should record their conclusions so that they may select problem-solving methods in the future on the basis of past experience and though rather than by whim.

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