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Consensus decision-making: Better decisions in less time

by Linda Rising

Some futurists tell us that effective organizations in the next decade will use consensus as a model for the way in which we will work. This seems very inefficient. Are there good ways to make this work now, for the rest of us?

By consensus decision-making, I mean that decisions reflect the ideas and thoughts of all team members. The decisions are acceptable to everyone. It is not unanimity, that is, the outcome may not be everyone's first choice, and it is not a majority vote. [ASU]

Peter Drucker says, "You can work or you can meet - you can't do both." With today's business imperative to get more done with less, making every meeting count is more important than ever. I think we all feel that most meetings are a waste of time. Meeting experts have determined that roughly 53% of all the time spent in meetings is unproductive, worthless, and of little consequence. [Nelson00]

A poll of professionals and managers produced 1,305 examples of problems encountered in meetings. Of these, the following sixteen account for over 90% of all meeting problems [Meetings]:

- Getting off the subject
- No goals or agenda
- Disorganized
- Ineffective leadership/lack of control
- Wasted time
- Ineffective decision-making
- No pre-meeting orientation
- Too lengthy
- Poor/inadequate preparation
- Inconclusive

- Irrelevant information discussed
- Starting late
- Interruptions
- Rambling, redundant discussion
- Individuals dominate discussion
- No published results or follow-up action

Let's see if we can attack one of these: ineffective decision-making. It's a time management principle that you should never put more time and energy into making a decision than the decision is worth, so perhaps the first rule of thumb we can practice is: Make the decision even if all the facts are not known. You will never know everything there is to know about something that is going to happen in the future. There will always be some risk. Don't waste time procrastinating. In practice, however, we get stuck in "analysis paralysis" and endless discussion. The discussion accomplishes nothing but wasting time, as we spin around and around endlessly.

But, wait! Doesn't discussion alter the course of the decision? Isn't that what it's all about? We want to get all sides of the issue on the table, so that the best possible result can be produced. If we don't have the discussion, then aren't we at even more risk?

Is discussion convincing? According to one researcher who studied decision strategies, he began with the assumption that decisions were made rationally. He assumed that options were collected and examined and on the basis of logical and rational processes, the decision was made. He was wrong. Subjects showed little inclination toward systematic thinking. Instead they would make a gut choice and then use the information that had been gathered to justify the decision they had already made. If this is true, then during discussion we filter information according to our biases and reinforce the decision we have already made. The discussion, in other words, gains us nothing. [Klein98]

In today's pressure cooker environment, many are called upon to make decisions that affect lives. According to one fireground commander, "I don't make decisions. I don't remember when I've ever made a decision." The reason for the lack of decision-making: There was just no time. The building would burn down by the time he considered all the options. [Klein98]

Researchers have studied the way physicians determine diagnoses. Physicians ostensibly suppress any explanations until they have studied all the symptoms, to make sure they do not overlook something. The studies found, however, that physicians form hypotheses and explanations from the very beginning and use these to direct their examinations. [Klein98]

High-pressure situations and uncertainty make it difficult to apply a decision-making process. Uncertainty is and will be inevitable. Because uncertainty is inevitable, decisions can never be perfect. Often we believe that we can improve the decision by collecting more information, but in the process we lose opportunities. Skilled decision makers appear to know when to wait and when to act. Most important, they accept the need to act despite uncertainty. [Klein98]

Astute readers will note that these research reports come from a book by Gary Klein, *Sources of Power*. It is about an intriguing effort to study how we make decisions. I recommend this book highly. It turns our ideas of how we behave upside down.

You have probably experienced group decision-making as a voting activity in which the majority wins and everyone else loses. Consensus decision-making is quite different. In its purest form, it requires that every member consent to the decision before the group can adopt it. The notion of a group of diverse, strong-minded people coalescing behind decision after decision, and all feeling like winners as a result, may seem like a pipe dream. Perhaps it only works, you may think, when some people are willing simply to go along with a decision they dislike to avoid the pain of conflict. [Shaffer93]

Actually, the opposite is true. Consensus works only when people who feel uncomfortable about a proposed solution are willing to speak up and take the risk of engaging in conflict until a solution emerges that everyone can support. Suppressing feelings and reservations deprives the group of the information it needs to make the wisest decision. If you go along with the majority for the sake of harmony or time efficiency while harboring doubts or resentments, you reduce the consensus to majority rule. This not only weakens the power of the process, but also the long-term vitality of the community. [Shaffer93]

Consensus rests on the belief that every member of the group—however naïve, experienced, confused, or articulate—holds a portion of the truth and that no one holds all of the truth. It assumes that the best decision arises when everyone involved hears each other out about every aspect of the issue while keeping an open mind and heart. [Shaffer93]

Once you have developed full agreement, your group can move forward. No disgruntled minority will drag its feet or otherwise sabotage your success. All of you will own the decision and will support it with your full energy. You will know that you have tapped the wisdom and creativity of every member of your group and developed a solution more effective than any one of you could have developed alone. [Shaffer93]

In organizations, consensus works only when a clear fallback procedure exists, for example, the leader can make the decision when the group seems unable to do so. In most groups, the fallback is the majority vote. One way of implementing this is to hand everyone a set of cards that can be used to display their feelings about any decision:

Green – I support the proposal

Orange – I have a question

Red – I do not support the proposal

You can also use thumbs-up, thumbs-sideways, and thumbs-down to mean the same thing. [Shaffer93]

The real purpose of this article is to introduce you to a process I learned when I was the technical editor for a book by Jim and Michele McCarthy [Mccarthy+02]. They are former Microsofties, who used this protocol at Microsoft to make faster decisions. Did I get your attention with the mention of Microsoft?

I've seen this in action and it works. It may seem complicated at first, but when a team uses it, everyone quickly understands how decisions are made and it saves time, but still allows for everyone's input.

The proposer says, "I propose <a concise, actionable proposal involving one and only one issue>."

The proposer says, "1-2-3."

All team members vote simultaneously:

"Yes" voters give a thumbs-up.

"No" voters give a thumbs-down and may also say, "I refuse to support this," meaning that nothing the proposer can do will convince them to go along with the proposal.

"Support-it" voters show a hand flat, which says, "I can live with this proposal. I believe that it is probably the best way for us to proceed now. I support it, even though I have reservations."

The proposal fails if any of the following applies:

If the combination of "no" voters (outliers) and "support-it" voters is too great (usually about one-third), the proposal is dead.

If any "no" voter says, "I refuse to support this," the proposal is dead.

If there are just a few "no" voters, the proposer resolves outliers' issues by trying to bring the outliers in at least cost. No one else