

How does your organization make decisions?

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



You have likely heard this phrase:

“A person’s eyes are the window to their soul.”

I have another version:

“How an organization makes decisions is a window into its culture.”

How does your organization make decisions? How do you deal with disagreement?

“We simply decide without thinking much about the decision process.”

-Jim Nightingale

Decision making is one of the most important things that we do in our organizations. Despite its importance, organizations tend to take a very hands-off, passive approach to decision making. Your organization likely has explicit, written policies on how to request vacation and where employees are supposed to park, but it might not have any explicit public agreements on how it makes decisions and deals with disagreements.

Problematic.

Having an unwritten, unclear, inconsistent approach to decision making compromises that capacity in your organization. Without explicit agreements in place, these social processes are very susceptible to human nature, time pressures, power dynamics, personality conflicts, mood swings, etc. — all things that do not have anything to do with good decision making.

Vague, ambiguous social processes do not invite full participation. It can be risky (either in perception or in reality) for someone to fully engage when uncertain of norms and expectations and roles. Rather than aggregating individual talents and abilities, these processes are wasteful of them.

So these social processes are commonly starved of the diversity of ideas and perspective that they so desperately need.

Disagreement done well is incredibly valuable and in fact fuels robust decision making, problem solving and innovation, all things we desperately need more of. Regardless of its value and importance, disagreement does not come naturally in the workplace and requires leaders to be very deliberate and intentional about the practices they put in place.

“Groups often fail to outperform individuals because they prematurely move to consensus, with dissenting opinions being suppressed or dismissed.”

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-Hackman, Morris (1975), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*

What might an explicit framework for decision making look like? It should answer these questions:

1. What commitments do participants make to each other? Beyond “ground rules,” they should be about physical AND emotional presence and a commitment to holding each other accountable.
2. How are decisions actually made? Is there going to be a period of time for open discussion after which someone will decide or a vote will be taken? Do you use a consensus model, majority rules, boss rules or unanimity? Do employees know this, do they learn it when they are becoming employees?
3. What does respectful disagreement look like? If you want people to disagree, you have to make it safe for them, and clear expectations provide a sense of safety.
4. What do you do when the group deviates from the agreed-upon process or when someone is failing to deliver on their commitments? You do not really have a framework in place if there aren’t some mechanisms for holding each other accountable.
5. How do you evaluate and continue to improve? One of the great advantages to developing an explicit framework for decision making is that we can much more easily learn and improve and adjust our model as needed. What are you going to do formally and informally to collect feedback on the process and ideas for improvement?

This is how your organization creates a social container strong enough to capture what emerges from the noisy intersection of different perspectives, identities, disciplines and experiences and decision making becomes a source of advantage.

Be good to each other.