



Deciding how to Decide

It is possible for a new group to go for many meetings without a clear decision-making process. However, it is important to recognize that this is a risky situation. It may be that your group decides to stick with majority rule, which is the most commonly-recognized form of democracy. But there are many ways that decisions can be made, and in the long run it is essential that everyone knows the rules. Otherwise, you may experience a breakdown.

There is also a more insidious way that lack of a clear process can be harmful to your group: You may be like-minded enough that discussions tend to reach an informal consensus. This happy state of affairs can continue indefinitely without a clear agreement about what constitutes a decision; but it can also mask disagreement, thereby sapping the group's energy. And that deceptive calm may also end in abrupt and unpleasant ways.

Unless you know how you make decisions, that lack can cause several kinds of problems:

- **Longer discussions**, as you must occasionally discuss whether a decision is made
- **Lack of legitimacy**, if members disagree but are afraid to break the unanimity
- **Loss of participation**, among newcomers who may be confused by a fuzzy process
- **Division of the group**, if a decision's legitimacy is challenged
- **Disintegration or stalemate**, if a decision cannot be established at all

The first three problems tend to remain under the surface, and are generally not acknowledged in meetings. People may talk about their frustration privately, or may not even be able to articulate the problem. But it may undermine their interest and participation, and thereby weaken the organization.

The final two problems are more obvious when they happen. Suddenly, in the midst of making a decision, a challenge erupts: One person expresses dissent to the consensus, and claims that really it is only necessary to get a majority, since that is the cultural norm. Or perhaps it someone is outvoted but claims that a certain decision is important enough that consensus is needed.

In any case, there are now two decisions to be made simultaneously, with one dependent on the other. And it becomes very difficult to look at what is in the long-term best interest of the group, because a certain decision on process will affect the outcome of the issue at hand. Further complicating things, there may be an air of frustration about the process challenge or an urgency to the first decision, making it impossible to take the time to have an open conversation.

How to decide how to decide

In order to avoid problems stemming from an unclear decision-making process, it is important to take the time to decide how to decide, before you really need to make a serious decision. This may seem like an unpalatable – or even absurd – way to spend meeting time, and it is often neglected because it competes with more urgent matters. However, it is an important part of creating any group. After all, it is difficult issues that are most likely to reveal process shortcomings. Having a clear process will save time in the long run, and may make the difference between whether your group reaches its objectives, muddles along or falls apart.

Decision-making processes actually form a continuum, and any attempt at classification will require arbitrary distinctions. Nevertheless, it is useful to examine some different points along the spectrum. This provides some common language, and a shared understanding of each method's advantages and disadvantages:

Autocracy: very quick and easy, not much buy-in, requires much enforcement

Consultative: a bit more inclusive than autocracy, and less error-prone

Majority: Most familiar and quite inclusive, but still competitive form

Supermajority: Provides stronger legitimacy than majority

Consensus: Shifts to building a solution that is agreeable to everyone

Unanimity: Great when it happens, but not a tenable decision-making process.

Some of these are not really democratic methods. But they help frame issue and you may find it appropriate to use them when delegating certain minor decisions to an individual or small group.

In order to maximize the chances that a decision-making process will work well, it is important to start with a commonly-understood method. Most often, this is majority rules, which is largely viewed as synonymous with democracy. However, once the group has had a chance to discuss its options, it may wish to move to supermajority or consensus. If that is the case, a good rule of thumb is: *the decision to use a decision-making process must be able to achieve that threshold.*

Put another way, there must be a consensus to use consensus. 75% of your group must be willing to use a 75% supermajority. A majority must accept majority rule. If you have trouble reaching an agreement, it may be helpful to try out the higher threshold process for a trial period, and then revisit the decision. You can also try again later, at a specific date.

Someone should prepare a short presentation on what consensus is, and then use the process that you are suggesting to check for consensus. If you have a group that has already been informally using consensus, this process can be quick and simple; you can skip straight to a consideration of consensus, and backtrack only if necessary.

Consensus decision-making is covered in detail in a related document.