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This article looks at the benefits of group decision making. Research shows that groups working together to reach consensus are likely to produce decisions that are far better than those made by individuals acting alone.

Making effective organisational decisions

More and more decisions in organisations are being made by groups of people rather than individuals. This trend is increasing with the move towards self-managed teams and project based management. The groups are most often 'natural' function teams, but may also be individuals from across the organisation that come together to undertake a specific task and need to make decisions collectively.

When it's done effectively, group decision-making can be a powerful organisational tool.

The challenge in group decision-making

At **=mc** we are increasingly being asked to support collaborative working in organisations, whether it's an outcome from the recent restructure, or because the latest employee survey identified the build up of silos as a key area of concern — or something else. Whatever the driver, poor internal collaboration can have dire consequences on the effectiveness of the organisation.

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For senior managers in particular, being seen to make collective decisions is really important. Leadership is about demonstrating a united front outside the meeting — however heated the debate leading up to the decision. In all group decision-making, it's essential for everyone to trust the process so that even if an individual would have chosen differently if it had been left to them, they can still get behind the group agreement and take responsible action to support it. If there is no trust in the process, frustration and disagreement can lead to people not owning that decision and even working actively against it.

There are numerous ways of making collective decisions, so how do you choose the right one to ensure the decision sticks?

Types of decision-making processes

As you might expect, there are many ways of making decisions, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Here are just a few examples.

Type of decision	Advantages	Disadvantages
Unilateral — made by a single person for the entire group	Useful when expert or technical opinion needed.	Can breed resentment and lower commitment to the group's efforts if it is not clear why the decision makers hold all the power.
Minority — made by a few people in the group		
Voting — the majority rules	**Consensus** — not full agreement, but a decision that everyone can 'live with'.	May leave out a large minority which incurs the same resentments and lowering of commitment as unilateral and minority decision making.
Unanimous — all the group members are in agreement	Everyone is — apparently — on board.	Can take a very long time. If a unanimous decision is reached quickly, check everyone really agrees and is not just going along with he decision for the sake of harmony.

Type of decision	Advantages	Disadvantages
Consensus — not full agreement, but a decision that everyone can 'live with'	Everyone in the group given the opportunity to express their opinion before the decision is reached. The results has at least the txt support of everyone.	Can take a long time.

Case Study: Decide on the decision makers!

One organisation we have worked with closely illustrates the challenges senior managers often have when making decisions about change — let's call them CharityCo.

CharityCo was facing tough times. Due to a downturn in the economy and increasing competition for fundraising, they needed to make cuts of 25%. The team identified three choices: reduce the services they delivered (directly impacting on vulnerable beneficiaries and end users); reduce staffing levels (by making redundancies); or reduce pay for all staff (enforcing a unilateral pay cut). They were stuck between a rock, a hard place and another rock.

While they all agreed that reducing the service was not an option the senior team could not decide between redundancies or pay cut — and nor did they have an expert on the team they could delegate to make the decision. So, they determined to put the two options — detailing the pros and cons of each — before the people that would be impacted the most — the staff. A vote was held and the nearly everyone chose the pay cut. A 20% pay cut was applied to all staff, including senior management. While not everyone agreed with the outcome, they all felt they had a chance to have their say and accepted it.

Achieving consensus

Research shows that groups working together to reach consensus are likely to produce decisions that are far better than those made by individuals acting alone.

Consensus has a number of advantages:

- *Groups bring a greater sum of knowledge and information to the discussion of a problem*. Individuals making decisions are limited by their own knowledge. In a group, individuals can fill in the gaps in knowledge — each group member may be able to supply a different piece of the puzzle.

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- *Groups bring a greater number of approaches and perspectives to a problem.* Each person has a unique perspective that is the result of his/her personality, training and experiences. The combination of these differing perspectives enables the group as a whole to produce a more thoughtful and critical decision than an individual can do on their own.

- *Allowing groups to make decisions increases the understanding, acceptance and commitment to those decisions.* When an individual takes a decision alone, he or she often relies on others to carry out the decision — and persuading them to do so may not be easy. On the other hand, when a group makes a decision, each member understands the options and why that particular solution was chosen. They are committed to the decision because they participated in making it.

Consensus relies on each member of the group fully participating in the decision making process. Full participation is not just a matter of 'allowing' each person to speak. It involves specifically asking each person for their input and making the space for individuals to share their knowledge and opinions, even if they differ from those of the majority of in the group. It also involves coming up with new approaches to problem solving by combining everyone's past knowledge and experience rather than relying on any individual.

Outlined below are the six skills that are key to achieving true consensus and ensuring high quality group decision-making.

1. *Capturing Information*: each member should actively gather as much information as possible from the discussion. Individuals who listen carefully and try to understand what is being said absorb important data that can aid in the final decision. Taking in information and retaining it can be difficult in practice. Capturing ideas on flip charts for everyone to see can be helpful, as is pausing to summarise information at regular points during the discussion.

2. *Reflecting on interpretations*: ideas and information offered should not be accepted without critical reflection. Members need to examine evidence from different perspectives and approaches. Each member explaining how they define the problem, what criteria they are using to evaluate the solutions, and what limits they place on those solutions helps the group to come to a clear decision.

3. *Testing assumptions*: as a group move toward consensus, certain assumptions and interim decisions are made. In order for the group to progress, members should have a common understanding of what has been decided and what criteria and assumptions have been made and agreed on. Continually testing assumptions allows the group to proceed smoothly.

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4. *Receiving feedback*: accepting constructive criticism in an open manner is just as important as giving it — though admitting that your own idea is not perfectly sound can be difficult. And the more work that went into an idea the harder it can be to give it up. A group discussion can turn into a conflict of wills, in which members spend their time arguing for their own positions, without considering the faults in those positions or the merits of others' ideas. More importantly, a focus on convincing others of the correctness of your own idea may blind group members to the possibilities of combining ideas in unique and creative ways. To avoid this each input should be offered as tentative and subject to feedback from the group.

5. *Building ideas:* building new ideas from those that have been shared is at the core of effective group decision making. As individuals, members offer their unique perspectives on problems, others in the group may modify their own ideas with new information. A conflict in assumptions or interpretation of the problem will often cause the group to reframe the problems and in the process devise new, higher-quality solutions. In this way, the group's decision is the result of the collective process of consensus decision-making.

6. *Taking time*: reaching consensus too quickly is a major symptom of groupthink. Group members are so concerned with agreement that they ignore legitimate objections and concerns. The result is a poor quality decision. Even if the group has previously agreed to an action, new information may surface in discussion of another point that calls into question the previous decision. Too often groups will not go back and alter their first decision, because they have committed to it. In order for group decision making to be effective, no decision along the way should be set in concrete. Groups should continually re-evaluate decisions if new information warrants another look.

Avoiding mind-sets to make effective decisions

To make truly effective decisions in groups it is important to be reflective and mindful throughout the process of decision-making. Groups can get stuck in regular patterns, but the six skills allow groups to get past 'same old' to high quality solutions. Building consensus demonstrates leadership, empowers the group and ensures commitment.

And if you want to further develop your leadership skills, take a look at our public training courses:

- **Leadership Skills for Managers**
- **Strategic Leadership**