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Leadership for Today Effective Decision Making Strategies for Groups

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Effective Decision Making Strategies for Groups

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Have you ever been faced with making a difficult decision? If so, you were likely challenged to discover facts, balance emotions, and take into account the consequences that the resulting action will have on others. In other words, decision making is hard work!

Decision making is also not an easy process for organizations, committees, and groups of people to undertake. In all likelihood, we can remember times when a group successfully (or not so successfully) made a decision. Often, well-thought-out decisions are remembered for their successful impact on the group or community. Likewise, poor decision making by a group will long be remembered for its negative consequences. Therefore, productive and well-functioning committees and groups will employ a variety of strategic processes for making decisions.

## SUCCESSFUL DECISION MAKING STRATEGIES

The process of decision making begins with the identification both of an issue and of the various actions that can be taken to address the issue. Successful groups will begin the decision making process by **framing** the issue. This step involves clarifying the issue by identifying the facts associated with it. The goal is to help all members of the group understand the issue in a common way.

Once the issue has been framed, the group should engage in a **discussion** about potential solutions or courses of action that can be taken. The concept of discussion can be approached in two ways: dialogue and debate. A **dialogue** is often collaborative in nature, with the intent being to identify and share various facts and ideas. The purpose of a dialogue is to listen to all ideas while understanding the meaning and common ground of the various points of view. A **debate** is usually confrontational, with the intent being to sell the benefits of one point of view while finding fault with an opposing viewpoint. While both types of discussion can have

merit in a group decision making process, most groups that utilize a **dialogue approach** in their discussions will find that they have a broader understanding of the facts and of what the facts mean, the consequences, and the feelings involved with the various ideas and actions. As a result, the group will be more informed and will take more ownership in the resulting decision.

After framing an issue and discussing potential solutions or courses of action, effective groups will be candid and inclusive when brainstorming about the consequences of those actions; this includes openly discussing and **identifying the advantages and disadvantages** of each proposed solution or course of action. As advantages and disadvantages are identified and further discussed, the group may eliminate the discussion of less favorable proposed solutions or courses of action

Once the proposed solutions or courses of action have been narrowed, the time for decision making has arrived. Often, groups will employ one of two methods for *deciding* the outcome of an issue. They will either employ a *vote* of the group members or they will employ a *consensus process*. A group vote will result in a *majority rule* outcome or decision. Conversely, a consensus process will involve the group members working together to narrow the scope of solutions in such a way that they identify one common solution that all members can agree with or support. The consensus decision making philosophy will often result in group members feeling that they were consulted and involved in identifying the solution, even if the decision is not one they would have made if they were making the decision independently. Decisions made by consensus will also result in a higher level of support by group members than those decisions made by majority vote – as some members may feel like they "lost" their voice during the voting process.

Frame the Issue

Deciding the Outcome

Discussion

Consider the Consequences
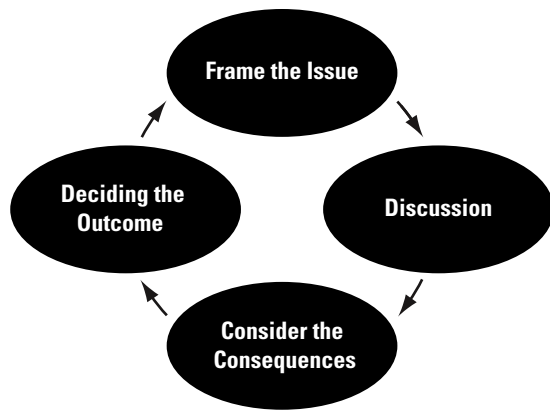
Special suggestions to assure success

When the time comes to engage in a decision making process, all effective groups should establish a few ground rules to help guide the process. Ground rules help assure that the behavior of the group is respectful and targeted at maintaining good relations between individual members. Ground rules should be *identified* by the group as a whole at the beginning of the decision making process. Examples of ground rules include the following:

- Only one person can speak at a time.
- Ask questions in order to understand what is being said.
- Be respectful of the ideas that are shared.

Post the ground rules on paper at the front of the room – so that all members can see and be reminded of them as the decision making process progresses. When ground rules are visible, any group member can reflect on them and gently remind others if the rules are not being followed.

Facilitative leadership by the group's president or chairperson during a decision making process is also necessary for success. A facilitative leader will not have a pre-determined preference for a specific outcome. Instead, they focus their energies on creating a safe environment for the group members to engage in the decision making process. They will seek group inclusion, engaging all members in discussions and helping participants make connections to the various viewpoints and common interests of the group.

Finally, the decision making process is not complete until the group implements the decision and observes the actual results. Effective groups will revisit their decisions from time to time – looking for positive and negative outcomes from the decision. At times, the group may need to adapt the decision based on the results, while at other times the decision will continue to stand as initially implemented.

REFERENCES

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