

Decision-Making Techniques for Community Groups

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Community groups often have a problem coming to a decision about projects to undertake. Quite often, resources, both human and financial, are limited; the number of problems seem overwhelming; or there are forceful advocates of a "pet" project. How can a group overcome these difficulties?

The four decision-making techniques shown in this guide will make the task easier. The first two techniques generate ideas about community goals or projects, while the last two prioritize the alternatives you have identified.

Idea-generating techniques

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a technique that generates a large number of ideas in a short time period. It works best when group members know each other and have some degree of trust. The most important thing to remember about brainstorming is that it is intended to generate ideas — not judge ideas.

You will need the following supplies for a brainstorming session: Paper or a chalkboard; felt-tip markers or chalk and an eraser; and masking tape.

Begin the brainstorming session by writing the topic on the paper or chalkboard. Make sure everyone understands the topic — but don't give too many details, it might influence their opinion. Brainstorming continues as long as people have ideas, but limit their time by saying: "We will take the next two minutes to think of as many ideas as we can about."

Time limits help people be creative and spontaneous without the pressure of thinking they will be at the task forever. If there are additional ideas after the time limit, continue the process, but be careful not to let it go on too long.

Next, ask people to call out ideas as quickly as they can and write them on the paper or chalkboard **exactly** as they were stated. It is important to resist the urge to write what you think people mean, rather than what they say.

In fact, it is a good idea to point out that this activity is not to evaluate the ideas; evaluations come later. No idea should be rejected as being "impractical," "silly" or "off-the-wall."

Encourage everyone to give one idea, but don't force those who are reluctant. End the brainstorming session while people are participating enthusiastically, rather than forcing them to think of "just one more." Usually, brainstorming is not the ultimate decision-making activity. The results of a brainstorming session will probably be used in other decision-making processes such as the nominal group technique or paired-weighting, which will be discussed later.

Brain Drain

The "Brain Drain" is like brainstorming except it introduces a competitive element into the activity. Begin by dividing the participants into groups of three to five and provide each group with a sheet of paper and a marker. Ask them to write down as many ideas as they can in one minute that relate to the topic under consideration.

After one minute, stop and find out which group has the most ideas. Give the groups one more minute to add to their list. Stop and once again find out which group has the most ideas. Give the groups another additional minute. Stop and ask each group to report on their ideas.

Consolidate ideas by listing them on a master list. Encourage combining and clarifying ideas if necessary, but don't eliminate ideas. Once again, elimination is done using other decision-making techniques.

Idea-prioritizing techniques

Paired weighting

Paired weighting is a good way for a group to prioritize items because it ensures consideration of every item. The activity is relatively easy to do after the list of items has been generated. Here are the steps:

- The list of items is displayed or given to each person.
- Each person receives a "Paired weighting form" and is asked to work individually.
- Everyone starts by comparing item #1, in line one, with item #2, in line one, circling the one they believe is most important. Similarly, item #1 is then compared with #3, #4, etc. Continue comparing the items for each line.
- Each person then totals the number of times #1 is circled and puts it in the blank at the end of the line.
- The process continues until all lines have been completed.

- The number circled the most often is considered the most important item to the person doing the weighting.
- The last step of the process is to total the group's "votes" for each item. This shows the relative importance of items for the group.

While this technique seems complicated, it becomes easy to use with practice. It can be used to rank 20 items or less and is a good tool for helping groups prioritize decisions in a logical fashion.

Paired weighting form

<u>1</u> 2	<u>1</u> 3	<u>1</u> 4	<u>1</u> 5	<u>1</u> 6	<u>1</u> 7	<u>1</u> 8	<u>1</u> 9	<u>1</u> 10	1	=
	<u>2</u> 3	<u>2</u> 4	<u>2</u> 5	<u>2</u> 6	<u>2</u> 7	<u>2</u> 8	<u>2</u> 9	<u>2</u> 10	2	=
		<u>3</u> 4	<u>3</u> 5	<u>3</u> 6	<u>3</u> 7	<u>3</u> 8	<u>3</u> 9	<u>3</u> 10	3	=
			<u>4</u> 5	<u>4</u> 6	<u>4</u> 7	<u>4</u> 8	<u>4</u> 9	<u>4</u> 10	4	=
				<u>5</u> 6	<u>5</u> 7	<u>5</u> 8	<u>5</u> 9	<u>5</u> 10	5	=
					<u>6</u> 7	<u>6</u> 8	<u>6</u> 9	<u>6</u> 10	6	=
						<u>7</u> 8	<u>7</u> 9	<u>7</u> 10	7	=
							<u>8</u> 9	<u>8</u> 10	8	=
								<u>9</u> 10	9	=
									10	=

Nominal Group Process

The Nominal Group Process (NGP) is a technique used for complex problems or to focus action on a community issue. NGP is most useful in situations where individual judgments need to be considered and combined with others to arrive at a decision that cannot be made by one person.

It is a method of pooling knowledge and judgment for the group's benefit. It consists of seven steps that may take several hours to complete, depending upon the number of people involved. This process works effectively with groups of all sizes.

NGP steps are:

- The leader states the question to be considered.
- Individuals generate ideas.
- Ideas are listed.
- Ideas are clarified and similar ideas are combined.
- Ideas are ranked.
- Initial ranking of ideas is discussed.
- Final ranking and consensus.

Running an NGP session is not difficult, but it takes some planning and organization. For example, groups larger than 15 should be subdivided into groups of six to eight. One leader per small group is helpful, although one person could do the session alone with proper preparation.

Supplies needed for a NGP are:

- 3 x 5 note cards (at least 3 for each participant),
- pencils or markers, and
- an easel (or masking tape) and flip chart.

A typical NGP session might go something like this:

Step 1

The group leader states a question to be considered. For example, the question might be: "List the five most important reasons why you consider your community to be a good place to live."

Step 2

Each person lists their reasons on a 3 x 5 card without discussing them with the others. Allow five to 10 minutes for this activity. A typical card might look something like this:

- It has a good park.
- The crime rate is low.
- I can always find a parking place downtown.
- The shops have a good selection of clothes.
- Taxes are low.

Step 3

The group leader asks each person in turn to give one answer to the question which is then listed on the flip chart. Do not discuss the items listed; the goal is simply to record. This round-robin listing continues until each person has all of their ideas on the flip chart. This may take 20 to 40 minutes. A typical flip chart might look like this:

- The crime rate is low.
- It's a good place to raise children.
- Downtown shops carry a good selection.
- The school system is very good.
- I can always find a parking place downtown.
- Good place to raise tomatoes.
- Taxes are low.
- AAA-rated school.
- Good park.
- Joe's prices on pig's feet are pretty good.
- Nice place to raise kids.
- Good place to raise cain.

Do not debate the ideas

The purpose is not to eliminate good ideas that seem unworkable; this takes place during the ranking phase. Keep this section at 20 minutes in length. This is what a flip chart might look like after items have been combined:

- The crime rate is low.
- It's a good place to raise children (combined with previous #11).
- Downtown shops carry a good selection.
- The school system is good — AAA-rated (combined with previous #8).
- I can always find a parking place downtown.
- Good place to raise tomatoes.
- Taxes are low.
- Good park (renumbered).
- Joe's prices on pig's feet are pretty good (renumbered).
- Good place to raise cain (renumbered).

Step 5

Now the group ranks the ideas on the flip chart. The leader numbers a second sheet of flip chart paper. Each person picks five items (more than five makes tabulation difficult) and writes them on their second 3 x 5 card along with the item's number. For example, the items selected might look like this:

- It's a good place to raise children.
- I can always find a parking place downtown.
- Good place to raise tomatoes.
- Taxes are low.
- Good place to raise cain.

Using the third card, each person writes down the numbers 1 through 5. Referring to their five items, each person ranks those items from 1 to 5 (1 is most important; 5 is least important). The card would then look like this:

1. #6
2. #7
3. #2
4. #5
5. #10

When everyone has finished, the leader tabulates the individual rankings. The completed tabulation might look like this:

1. 2,4,1,1,5
2. 4,5,5,1
3. 2,1
4. 1,1,2,1
5. 3
6. 3,2,4
- 7.
8. 1,3,2
- 9.
10. 4,4,3,3,5,5,3,2,2,4,3,5,5

The group leader then adds the "votes" for each item and divides by the number of votes that item received. Based on the scores, item #4 — "The school system is good." — ranked as most important receiving an average vote of 1.2; #3 — "Shops downtown carry a good selection." — was second; #8 — "Good park." — was third; #1 — "Low crime rate." — was fourth; and #5 and #6 tied for fifth.

1. $2,4,1,1,5 = 13/5 = 2.6$

2. $4,5,5,1 = 15/4 = 3.75$

3. $2,1 = 3/2 = 1.5$

4. $1,1,2,1 = 5/4 = 1.2$

5. $3 = 3/1 = 3$

6. $3,2,4 = 9/3 = 3$

7. $= 0$

8. $1,3,2 = 6/3 = 2$

9. $= 0$

10. $4,4,3,3,5,5,3,2,2,4,3,5,5 = 48/13 = 3.7$

Step 6

The group then has the opportunity to discuss the ranking. If the group is satisfied with the outcome, the process is complete.

Step 7

If the group is not satisfied with the outcome, it can decide to vote again. For example, vote on the top ranking items to be sure the ranking reflects the group's judgment. Occasionally, an item may rank high because it received only one or two votes, but those votes placed it as most important (for example, only two people voted for item #3 — "Shops downtown...", yet it was ranked as the second most important item; item #10 received 13 votes, but it did not show up in the top five because of its higher average).

There is nothing wrong with re-voting! The NGP is not a hard and fast process. It is simply a way to take a look at how the group feels; it is a way to come to consensus about a collection of individual ideas.

While it can seem complicated, after you have used it a few times you will see how useful it can be in helping a group come to a decision they can all support.

Conclusion

The decision-making techniques presented here represent only a few that can help you assist groups in identifying and choosing community projects or activities. If you would like to learn about other decision-making techniques, the following books may be of help:

- *The Volunteer Organization Handbook*, by Marie Arnot, Lee J. Cary and Mary Jean Houde, published by the Center for Volunteer Development, Cooperative Extension Service, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
- *Group Techniques for Program Planning*, by Andre L. Delbecq, Andrew H. Van de Ven and David H. Gustafson, published by Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, IL.