

Making Decisions

Overview

Purpose

The purpose of this module is to enable participants to enhance a team's ability to make decisions

Objectives

At the end of this module participants will be able to:

- Identify stages of decision making.
- Discuss advantages and disadvantages of four different decision-making strategies.
- Recognize challenges to decision making.
- Facilitate consensus decision making.

Content

- Stages of Decision-Making
- Decision -Making Model
- Decision-Making Methods
- Ineffective Decision-Making Behaviors

Stages of Decision-Making

Teams routinely make decisions. They might decide about a course of action, how to state a goal, ground rules for behavior, how long meetings should last, and how to accomplish a given task or solve a problem. How a team makes decisions tells us much about how well it is functioning.

Although no two teams reach decisions in exactly the same way, most teams follow these stages.¹

1. Orientation
 - Defining the problem.
 - Planning the process to reach the decision.
2. Discussion
 - Gathering information.
 - Identifying alternatives.
 - Evaluating alternatives.
3. Decision making
 - Choosing team solutions.
4. Implementation

¹ Adapted from Forsyth, D.R., *Group Dynamics*, Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., Pacific Grove, California, 1990..

- Adhering to the decision.
- Evaluating the decision.

Orientation Stage

In the orientation stage of decision making, teams discuss and plan the process they will use in reaching decisions. For example, they might want to try to achieve consensus, or they might want to use a decision matrix to make a decision

Most teams, when presented with a task, tend to start working on the problem immediately rather than spending time getting organized as a team. Teams often believe that planning activities are not as important as the actual task. Many team members feel that discussing how decisions will be made is a waste of time; they feel they can rely on whatever procedures were used in the past.

However, lack of planning can lead to significant problems as the team tries to complete their task in a timely manner. Several studies have shown that teams that plan their decision-making process ahead of time have a more positive team atmosphere, including greater verbal interaction, satisfaction with team leadership, and flexibility in performing tasks.

Discussion Stage

During the discussion stage of decision making, the team gathers and processes information relevant to the decision. The team identifies positive and negative consequences of the various alternatives. The more alternatives a team generates, the greater the likelihood they will make a good decision. Poor decisions usually occur when the team fails to generate enough good choices. The time spent in active discussion is essential to effective decision making. Each team member's unique point of view is elicited, thus ensuring a wide number of alternatives for the team.

Decision-Making Stage

In this stage, the team uses the decision-making process they decided on during the orientation stage. Several methods are described below. The team must understand the advantages and disadvantages of each method and choose an appropriate decision-making process for its needs. Each can be appropriate in different situations; however each method may have consequences for future team operations. The team must understand these consequences well enough to choose a decision-making process that fits the amount of time available, the kind of task being worked on, and the climate the team wants to establish.

Implementation Stage

In this stage, decisions are put into action - except in the case of a decision to *not* take any action - in which case the follow up may be to communicate that decision to appropriate people. After a decision has been reached it

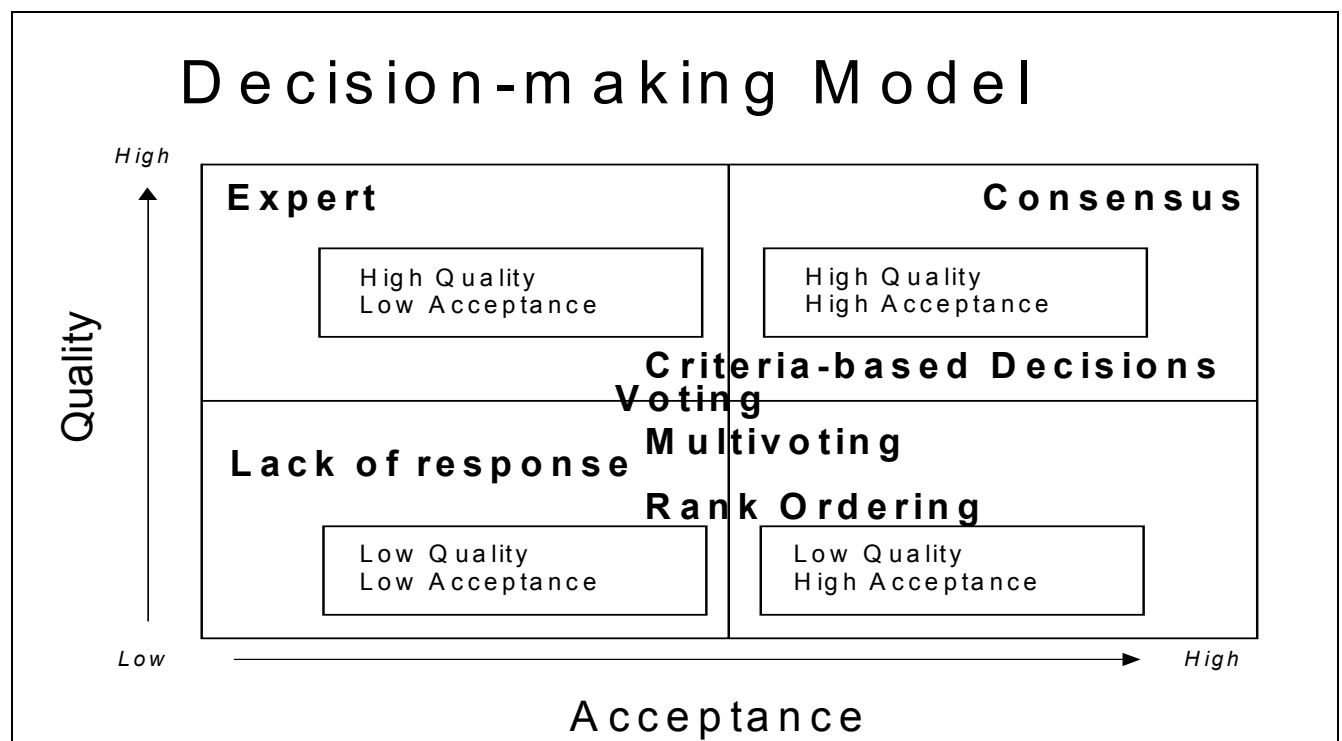
should be very clear who will do what, by when. The team must have sufficient understanding of the reasons behind the decision in order to initiate and complete the required tasks.

Decisions may be evaluated by how efficiently the team reaches the relevant performance objective. The question the team must address is “Did the recommended action meet the objective?”

A Model of Decision-Making Techniques

Problem-solving research has revealed two dimensions that correlate with a decision’s effectiveness: quality and acceptance. The quality of a decision is dependent on the decision maker’s grasp and use of the known facts. The acceptance of a decision is dependent on the reactions of the people who must implement that decision.

The levels of quality and acceptance required vary from decision to decision; an effective decision is one that meets the need for quality and acceptance for that particular decision.



Decision-Making Methods

Decision by Lack of Response

This is a very common, but often invisible, method. Someone suggests an idea and before it is discussed, someone suggests another idea. This continues until the group finds one it will work on. Basically, everyone has decided “not to decide” on the earlier ideas. The advantage is that little time is spent on ideas that do not engage the group members. The disadvantage

is that some ideas go unexplored.

Decision Made by Expert(s) on the Team

The team may include someone who knows more about the issue and the members turn to this person to make the decision. This expert may or may not be the team leader. This is an efficient way to make a decision, but some team members may be dissatisfied with the decision.

Voting

- *Rank Ordering:* Each team member ranks all of the proposed ideas. The team agrees to average the rankings and select the alternative with the highest score. This method is useful to start discussions and to assess where the team stands. However, it is not a way to make the best decisions because it does not take full advantage of give-and-take among the team members.
- *Multivoting:* A technique similar to rank ordering that uses repeated votes and tallies to help a team reduce a long list of items to a list of priorities.
- *Majority Vote:* This method is used most often. Majority rule can be swift and efficient, but can also leave an unsatisfied minority. The process may sacrifice decision quality and team cohesiveness for efficiency.

Remember that in any voting, someone wins and someone loses. Multivoting helps to reduce the sense of loss, because something that each person voted for is likely to be included at the top of the list. If the goal is for all members to support the final decision, voting may not be the best choice.

Criteria-based Decisions – Decision Matrix

This technique evaluates options against criteria. It is effective when options are complex or when multiple criteria should be considered in making a choice. The steps in using a decision matrix are:

- Choose criteria: common criteria for selecting a decision may be the feasibility of implementation, cost effectiveness, resistance from management, and so on. The team may use brainstorming to come up with criteria for a particular decision or use criteria suggested by other sources. There are sample criteria listed in the QA Project monograph, *A Modern Paradigm for Quality Improvement* in the section on using decision matrices.
- Determine the rating scale. Score the options based on whether, or how well, an option meets a given criterion. Scores of “high,” “medium,” and “low” can be used.
- Take one option at a time and assign a score. This can be done by individuals and then totaled for the team, or the team can discuss the

answers and agree on a single rating.

- The option that scores the highest wins.

Using a criteria matrix is more objective than just polling the team members for their opinion, but the steps in choosing criteria and scoring the options also call for agreements that may be difficult to achieve. A matrix is more difficult to use if the criteria are weighted.

Consensus

Consensus occurs when all team members agree on a solution or action. Consensus is sometimes difficult to reach, so not every decision can be made in this way. It is the desired method for making decisions that will have a major impact on the direction of the project or conduct of the team, such as, which problem to study, or what ground rules to establish.

Consensus means finding a proposal acceptable to everyone; no one opposes it. Consensus requires time, active participation, listening skills, and creativity. It is sometimes referred to as the “win-win” method because the discussion continues until everyone is satisfied with the decision. Not everyone must agree with all aspects of the choice, and some of the less important “criteria” may be overlooked, but everyone does agree that the choice is the best overall.

Consensus is achieved when each individual team member can nod “yes” to these types of questions.²

- Will you agree this is the next step?
- Can you live with this position?
- Are you comfortable with this course of action?
- Can you support this alternative?

Following are some guidelines to achieve consensus³:

- Encourage everyone to express their views and share their knowledge and expertise.
- Encourage others to explain their views more fully by giving an example, describing the logic behind them, or stating them in other words.
- Seek out differences of opinion. Disagreements can help the group’s decision. A wide range of information and opinions can result in a greater chance for a more desirable solution.
- Be sure you understand another team member’s view before

² Hackett, D. and Martin, C.L. *Facilitation Skills for Team Leaders*, Crisp Publications, Inc. Menlo Park CA, 1993

³ Adapted from Haynes, Marion E. *Effective Meeting Skills*, Crisp Publications, Inc. Menlo Park, CA, 1998..

disagreeing with it. Try expressing it in your own words and see if the other person agrees that your statement expresses his or her meaning.

- Avoid arguing for your position. Present your position clearly and logically, listen to the team's reactions, and consider them carefully.
- Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when discussions reach a stalemate. Continue to look for the next-most acceptable alternative for all parties.
- Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict. When agreement seems to come quickly and easily, explore the reasons and be sure everyone accepts the solution for similar or complementary reasons. Yield only to positions that have objective and logically sound foundations.
- Avoid techniques such as voting, averaging, and bargaining to reduce conflict. When a dissenting member finally agrees, don't provide a reward by allowing him or her to "win" on some later point.

Deciding NOT to decide

Occasionally a team will make a conscious choice to not make a decision. This can be a good action if the team realizes they lack information, if the decision is not time-critical, if there are widely divergent points of view that need time for examination, or if the team suspects that changes in the environment or the problem will redefine the situation and make a decision moot.

Ineffective Decision Making Behaviors

Avoiding Discussion and Decision Making

Teams may purposefully or unconsciously use a variety of avoidance strategies when making decisions.

- **Procrastinating:** The team postpones a decision rather than studying alternatives and discussing their relative merits. This may happen if there are strong feelings about the decision and the team is trying to avoid arguments.
- **Bolstering:** The team quickly, but arbitrarily, formulates a decision without thinking things through completely. Then, to legitimize the solution, the value of favorable consequences is exaggerated and the importance or likelihood of unfavorable consequences is minimized.
- **Avoiding responsibility:** The team denies responsibility by delegating the decision to another group or by diffusing accountability throughout the entire organization.
- **Ignoring alternatives:** The team considers only choices that are very similar to the existing situation; they "play it safe" and do not apply any creativity to the issue.

- **Satisfying:** Members accept as satisfactory any solution that meets minimal criteria even if superior solutions exist.
- **Trivializing the Discussion:** The team avoids dealing with larger issues by focusing on minor sub-issues.

While these decision-limiting strategies may help individual members cope, they undermine the team's need for information. It is important that the coach, and ultimately, the team identify these behaviors and take corrective action. Once they are recognized, the team will be able to move along, using clarifying, confirming, feedback and conflict management skills.

“Groupthink”

Consensus decisions are preferred in teamwork because the goal is for members to accept the decision and move into the implementation stage. However, sometimes consensus needs to be looked at more closely. In some circumstances, teams may be victims of “groupthink”. “Groupthink” occurs when individual members fail to voice their inner doubts about the decisions that are made. This occurs if consensus was reached quickly, without testing, analyzing, critically evaluating or considering the implications of the decision.

Teams prone to “groupthink” tend to have leaders who are held in high esteem and with whom few members will disagree. A team may be more likely to suffer from the effects of “groupthink” when it is in the *norming* stage. During this stage, members are consciously committed to accepting others and taking pride in getting along with one another by providing support and encouragement to each member's ideas. Decisions made at this time may not represent the true inner feelings of all members. If this is happening, the team has lost its objectivity and the leader/coach needs to help the team improve its decision making.

Symptoms of “groupthink” are:

- Critical thinking is not encouraged or rewarded within the group.
- Team members think their group can do no wrong.
- Team members are very concerned about justifying their actions.
- Team members apply pressure to “go along” to those who are not supporting the team.
- Team members often *believe* they have reached a true consensus.
- Team members are very concerned about reinforcing the leader's beliefs.

A leader/coach can use the following approaches to reduce “groupthink” and to encourage critical, independent thinking.

- Help team members be sensitive to status differences that may affect decision making.
- Evaluate the team's productivity and interactions at the end of each

meeting and assess whether any of the symptoms of “groupthink” have been apparent.

- Assign a team member to play the role of “devil’s advocate” and back a contrary view so as to get productive discussion going.
- Ask team members to subdivide into small groups and to consider any potential problems with the suggested solutions.

“Groupthink” tends to occur because of beliefs among the team members that everyone should get along and that conflict should be avoided. But conflict occurs because people are different and have their own ways of doing things. It is the expression of differences that leads to the best solutions.

Conflict is healthy within a group and does not have to be unkind or unpleasant. It is how the conflict is *managed* that determines whether the outcomes of the differences of opinion are positive or negative for the team.

Conflict management is the subject of the next training module.

References and Recommended Reading

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