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MAKING TEAM DECISIONS

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Abstract: Making decisions is one of the most important team responsibilities. Team members must not only make the most effective and appropriate decisions, but they must make decisions that will be supported by everyone on the team. This article presents seven decision-making methods for teams. It focuses on consensus, the most misunderstood, yet often the most needed method, providing suggestions for more efficiently reaching consensus.

How do teams make decisions? If you took a poll, most team members would say "by consensus"—without really knowing what consensus is or how to build a true team consensus. Most traditional teams use only one or two strategies to make decisions. However, high performing teams use a wide range of decision-making options, from one person (usually the team leader or expert) deciding to the entire team agreeing wholeheartedly, depending on the time available, involvement desired, expertise available within the team, and the need to develop the team. Several methods and the advantages and disadvantages of each are shown in Figure 1. Let's define each of these ways teams make decisions and some reasons why each may be successful.

Command Decisions. With this method, the team leader or expert decides. This method is useful when a decision must be made quickly and the leader is in control of the situation. The key here is for the leader to explain the decision and the reasons for making the decision to other team members as soon as possible.

Leader Decides with Input from Individuals. The advantage of obtaining input is that the leader does not have to bring all the team members together; yet he or she does collect information from them before making a decision. As information is collected, the key is for the leader to explain the criteria for making the decision, how others will be involved, and what type of input is needed (ideas, suggestions, information).

Leader Decides with Input from Team. By gathering the team together, the leader creates opportunities for creativity, synergy, and buy-in. However, the process does take more time and may create conflict if the leader makes a decision that is against the team's recommendation. The key is for the leader to explain the criteria for making the decision, how the team will be involved, what type of input is wanted, and the time available for discussion. In addition, the leader must clearly state up front that he or she will make the decision.

Majority Vote. Majority vote is useful when the issue is relatively inconsequential or the team is stuck. The advantage is that Americans are fairly comfortable with a hand vote. The key is for the leader to ensure that everyone understands what they are voting on and the rules involved *before* the actual vote is taken.

Method	Disadvantages	Advantages
Command decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not consider expertise in the group. • Limited implementation commitment. • Disagreement and resentment may decrease effectiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficient when leader has all information. • Fastest of all methods.
Leader decides with input from individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader must explain criteria and input multiple times, resulting in increased chance for miscommunication. • No chance for group brainstorming of new ideas. • May not have complete buy-in from team members after decision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not have to gather all team members together. • Not much time needed from members.
Leader decides with input from team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not create commitment to implementation. • May create competition among group members. • Members may tell leader what they think he or she wants to hear. • Potential for group think. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses entire group as a resource. • Gains benefit of group discussion. • Members can play off one another's ideas. • Takes less time.
Majority vote	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May leave minority dissatisfied. • Decision lacks total commitment. • May not utilize resources of team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good for fast decision when consensus is not important. • Closes discussions that are not important.
Minority rule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No widespread commitment. • Unresolved conflict may have future implications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful when all cannot meet. • May be opportunity for delegation. • Useful for simple, routine decisions. • Opportunity to use experts.
Unanimous agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very difficult to reach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be necessary for most critical decisions.
Consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes a great deal of time and psychological energy. • Time pressure must be minimal. • Potential for weak decision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produces innovative, high-quality decisions when done well. • Elicits commitment from all. • Uses all resources. • Future decision-making ability of group is enhanced.

Figure 1. Decision-Making Methods Employed by Teams

If the team must make a decision among many choices, 1/2-inch round labels can be used to prioritize. The leader can post the list on a flip chart and give each participant one vote per item. If the leader desires, team members can be given more than one label and allowed to vote for more than one item or to place all labels beside just one item. This produces a more dramatic visual representation of the team's preferences. Also, the leader could use two different colors of label so that team members could vote for first and second preferences. The results in this case could resemble Figure 2.

Minority Rule. Minority rule is a standard default for routine team decision making and useful for less important issues. It does, however, require a team member to have the courage to speak up with an opposing viewpoint. From a positive perspective, the team may request a subject-matter "expert" in the group to make a decision. The key is that the team must support this method of decision making and the decision reached.

Unanimous Agreement. The hardest way to reach a decision is by unanimous agreement. This strategy is not recommended unless all team members must agree, as in matters of life or death.

Consensus. When there is consensus, everyone can live with *and* support the decision, but it is not necessarily everyone's first choice. Leaders use consensus for important issues when the team must learn about all the alternatives and issues, and then implement the decision. Reaching consensus increases the likelihood and ease of successfully implementing a decision.

Consensus is not the same as unanimity, wherein a decision is everyone's first choice. Nor is it a compromise, whereby each person makes con-



Figure 2. Making a Team Decision by Affixing Labels

cessions to achieve a team decision. As Robert Ludlum said, a compromise is "a decision which pleases no one, except in knowing that no one else got what they wanted either." Consensus is a process. The team *builds* a consensus—striving to reach a decision that best reflects the thinking of *all* team members. Consensus is a bigger, better decision that is built from the input of each and every team member.

When a team decides to make a decision by consensus, the leader must explain exactly what consensus means and why it is important for the team to reach it. The leader must ensure that all team members understand the issue and the most important aspects of the decision. To prevent confusion, he or she must take the time to define terms, as well as identify and outline any constraints (e.g., time, financial, resources, political). The leader must remind each member to participate fully in the discussion and that each has equal power to support or block any proposals. Finally, the team must agree on a "fallback" decision-making strategy in case consensus cannot be reached. For a group of peers, the fallback strategy is usually to use majority vote. When the leader is part of the group, the fallback strategy may be to defer to the leader.

To build a consensus, the leader *must* hear from everyone on the team. Many teams do this by soliciting opinions from everyone in the group or by brainstorming every possible option and then looking for opportunities to combine, create, and synergize the items into a better idea.

The following questions can be used to help a team be more creative before trying to reach consensus:

- "All of these items are possible. Do we have to choose only one?"
- "Is there any way we can use the best features of all of our options?"
- "What would happen if we added/deleted features of several options. Would that move us closer to what we want?"
- "Could we try out several options in parallel before we commit to just one?"

Team energy increases as new ideas and possibilities surface. Using a trial-and-error approach appears chaotic; however, it is well worth it if a team builds a new, synergistic alternative based on the best of the best.

When it appears that a team has reached a decision, the leader usually takes a "straw poll" to see how close or how far apart the team members are. The leader reminds the team at this point that this is not a final vote, but simply a way to determine how much work must be done to build consensus. These sentence starters can be used:

- "It sounds as though we are making progress. Let's check that out with a quick straw poll to see how close we are to a consensus. We'll go right around the table. Sally?"
- "Let's see if everyone either can agree with or can agree to support the most popular alternative. Let's start with Emile and go around the room."

Record the responses and summarize the results. If everyone can live with and support the alternative, then the team has reached a consensus.

Try this quick, fun approach to testing for consensus: the "Five L Straw Poll." Give each person a Post-it™ Tape Flag. Draw the "Five L" scale on a flip chart, as shown in Figure 3. Describe each "L" as you write it. Say something like "You *loathe* it or hate it. You will *lament* it and moan about it in the parking lot. You can *live* with it. You can *like* it. Or you can really *love* it."

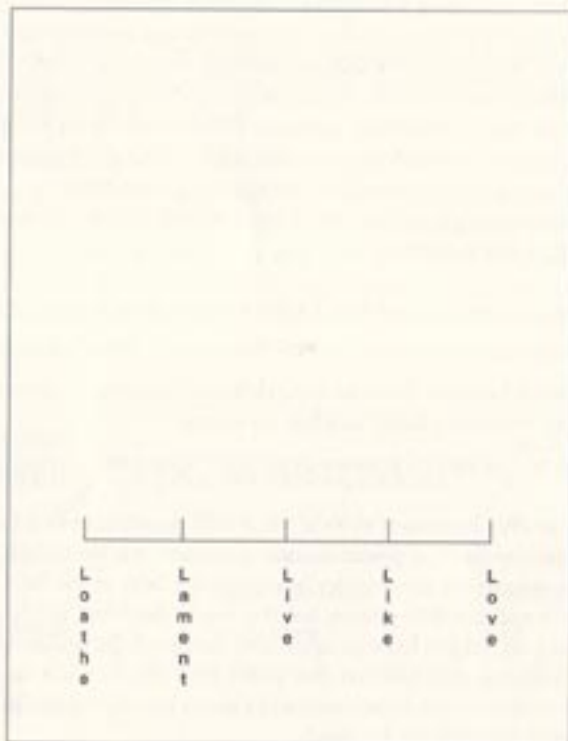


Figure 3. Sample Five L Scale

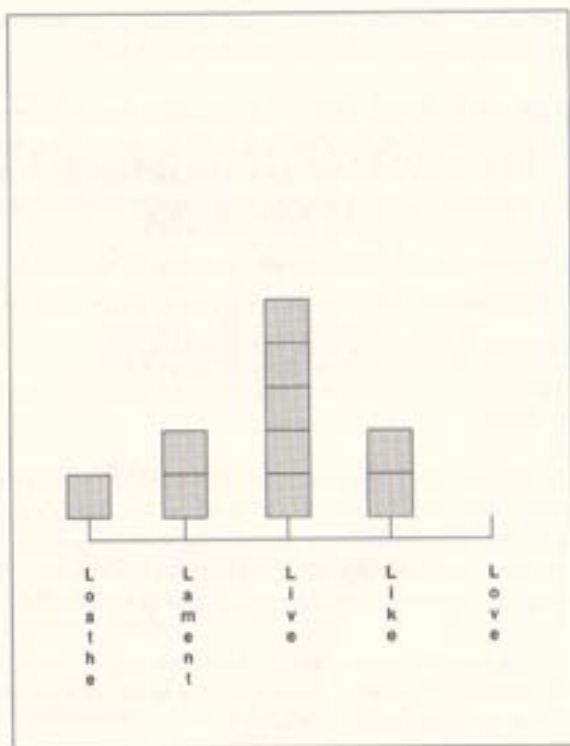


Figure 4. Sample Five L Bar Chart

Now ask the team members to think silently about the proposed alternative. Then ask them to place their tape flags on the flip chart, building a bar chart, such as the one in Figure 4.

Ask if the team believes there is a consensus, that is, the alternative received at least a "live with" or better vote. In the event there are votes that are in the "loathe" or "lament" categories, the leader must check with the team to see why people have voted that way, being careful not to pick on a specific person, but hearing feedback from team members.

If your team cannot reach consensus, try these sentence starters:

- "There seems to be a lot of support for this alternative. What would it take for *everyone* to support it?"

- "What is getting in the way of some team members' ability to support this alternative? What could we do to meet those needs?"

Integrate the feedback and create another, better alternative! Continue to build agreement for the decision until there is true consensus, that is, when everyone can live with *and* support the decision. Four criteria must be met before a decision can be declared to have been made by consensus.

1. All team members must have had an opportunity to provide input.
2. All team members must believe that they were heard and understood.
3. Everyone must be able to state the decision clearly.
4. All team members must agree to support the decision in what they say and what they do.

If time runs out, the leader must decide whether to postpone the decision for another time or whether to fall back to another decision-making method. If a leader uses the fallback decision option frequently or for many key decisions, something is happening that must be addressed. Many times, the "something" is happening outside of the group or is beyond the team's control.

By building a consensus, team leaders have a greater chance of producing a better quality decision, a more cohesive team, and smoother implementation of the decisions that are made.

Kristin Arnold maintains a private consulting practice specializing in facilitation services and training, with an emphasis on strategic planning, strategic partnerships, collaborative problem solving, and team building. Ms. Arnold has extensive experience as both an internal and external consultant with a wide variety of manufacturing and service industries, as well as the government sector.