



UNIT III: Group/ Organizational Leadership Skills

Module 3: Group Decisions

Every group makes decisions. The way a group makes decisions influences how people feel about the group. It can also determine how well the group members support the decision, as well as how they convey their support to others.

Groups make decisions regarding their functions and purposes, plans and programs, community projects and political activities. The level of group agreement affects the feelings various group members have when decisions are being made. The way a group feels after making a decision becomes especially important if the group plans to have a continuing positive relationship.

It is increasingly difficult today to solve many problems for two reasons. (1) the complexity of the issues facing organizations and communities, and (2) the number and diversity of people who expect to participate in making decisions.

Steps in Decision-Making

The general decision-making process involves a sequence of steps. Group facilitators and members should:

1. Recognize the problem or opportunity. The process begins with recognizing a possible need for change.
2. Analyze the situation. Once a difference is recognized between “what is” and “what could be,” study the situation carefully to determine exactly what is causing the difference.
3. Consider the goal or goals you want to reach. The goals you choose are influenced by the values you have — what you believe is important. Becoming more aware of your values and the priorities you put on them helps you see more clearly what is desired.
4. Look for alternatives. Look for as many alternatives as possible to solve your problem — not just the obvious or habitual ones. Creative thinking, reading and talking to other people may uncover more possibilities.
5. Consider the consequences. One of the key elements of the decision-making process is looking ahead to see “what might happen if we do this.” Consider the use of resources: how much time, energy, skill, money, knowledge, resources are required?
6. Select the best alternative. Look at the alternatives and select the one that seems best for you. If there is no “best” alternative, or none seems satisfactory, perhaps a new alternative can be made by combining some of the possibilities.
7. Act upon the decision. Making a decision doesn’t end with choosing the best alternative — it must also be put into action.

8. Accept the responsibility for the decision. Most decisions are made under conditions of uncertainty, imperfect knowledge and limited resources. You do “the best you can with what you’ve got.”
9. Evaluate the results. The outcome or results of decisions should be evaluated to determine their effectiveness.⁵

Decision-Making Processes

The following information will provide details on two very different decision-making processes, parliamentary procedure and consensus agreement

Parliamentary Procedure

The purpose of parliamentary procedure is to help a group transact business efficiently, protect the rights of the individual, and preserve a spirit of harmony.¹

Some groups avoid parliamentary procedure because they assume it is too complex. Others assume that they need a “professional parliamentarian.” Both assumptions are wrong. A basic knowledge can make parliamentary procedure work for your group.

Most of us belong to one or more organizations which use parliamentary procedure, and we need at least a basic knowledge of the correct procedures. Parliamentary procedure is to help a group transact business efficiently, protect the rights of the individual, and preserve a spirit of harmony.

Everyone in the group must know parliamentary procedure in order for it to work. When some know it and others do not, the rules can actually prevent participation. Even the most formal meetings have a provision for clarifying procedural confusion. Under this provision, called “rising to a point of order,” anyone can ask the chair to explain exactly what’s going on. If the chair or some other “expert” cannot explain the procedure to everyone’s satisfaction, then it is best to begin with a simple motion. Don’t hesitate to request a clarification of procedure at any time. If you understand what’s going on, but see that a number of people do not, ask for clarification.

Principles

Parliamentary law is simple in principle. It is based on common sense and courtesy:

- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Every member has equal rights.
- Each item presented is entitled to discussion time.
- The decisions of the majority are upheld, but the rights of the minority to offer dissenting opinions and differing views are respected. Most groups get along very well with relatively informal procedures. However, the larger the group or the “hotter” the issue, the more important a carefully planned procedure is.

The Standard Order

Groups often establish a standard order of business to give members a sense of security. Knowing what to expect allows members to focus on relevant issues rather than try to anticipate the unknown. The following agenda outline is commonly used.²

1. Call to Order:

“Will the meeting please come to order?”

2. Reading and Approval of the Minutes:

“Will the secretary please read the minutes of the last meeting?” “Are there any corrections to the minutes of the last meeting?” “There being no corrections, the minutes will stand approved as read.”

3. Officers’ Reports:

- a. President — announcements, discussion of agendas and important agenda items, time limits, “ground rules,” welcomes, introductions.
- b. Vice president — reports or comments.
- c. Treasurer — given and filed at each meeting, but differs from other officers’ reports in that it does not receive formal approval until it has been audited.

4. Standing Committees’ Reports:

Standing committees are those that are reappointed year to year.

5. Special Committees’ Reports:

These are special-project or one-time reports prepared by ad hoc committees.

6. Unfinished or Postponed Business:

This item is often included in committees’ or officers’ reports.

7. Old Business:

If unfinished business is included in officers’ and committees’ reports, no further old business may need to be discussed.

8. New Business:

Ask the group if there is any new business to come before the meeting.

9. Announcements:

10. Adjournment:

Group decisions with substantive content are generally required in the “Business” sections of the agenda.

Motions

The main motion is the basic tool in formal decision-making. To introduce a motion, a member should first receive recognition from the chair and then state the motion. Motions should begin with the phrase, “I move that . . .” Another member, without waiting to be recognized, may say, “I second the motion.” Seconding indicates that at least one other person wants the group to consider the matter. When a motion is seconded, the chair restates it and opens the matter for discussion. Members must be recognized by the chair before speaking to a motion. Normally, the first person who asks for recognition is entitled to speak. However, when several members wish to speak at the same time, certain guiding principles should determine the chair’s decision.

1. The chair should always show preference to the person who proposes the motion.
2. Generally, the chair should show preference to members who have not yet spoken and to those who seldom speak.
3. If the chair knows the opinions of the various members, he or she should alternate between members who favor the measure and those who oppose it.
4. The chair should confine discussion to what is before the group — the motion!

Kinds of Motions

For most groups, motions are not complicated. Even so, you should be aware of the five types of motions:

A *MAIN MOTION* introduces an action to the group. It is always debatable and amendable. Only one main motion may be “on the floor” at a time.

A *SUBSIDIARY MOTION* proposes to alter, postpone, or temporarily dispose of other motions, usually main motions. Amendments, referring to committee, and tabling are subsidiary motions.

An *INCIDENTAL MOTION* originates in another motion and affects the process of conducting business. Such a motion must be disposed of before action can be taken on the original motion. Motions to close nominations, to rise to a point of order, or to establish a method of voting are common incidental motions.

A *RENEWAL MOTION* lets the assembly bring a previous motion back to the floor for reconsideration. Example: taking from the table and reconsidering.

A *PRIVILEGED MOTION* is an action of the entire assembly, such as taking a recess or adjourning.

Amendments

When someone thinks the right topic is before the group, but would like to see the wording modified, he or she can propose an amendment. The purpose of an amendment is to change a motion already under consideration. After the discussion, the amendment is discussed and voted on. Then the group votes on the motion as amended.

Technically, a motion can be amended, and the amendment to the motion can be amended, but no further amendments may be made. If more amendments are needed, the motion was probably badly phrased in the first place. In such cases, it is better to withdraw the original motion and start with a new one.

Following is an example of how amendments are proposed and voted on:

FIRST MEMBER RECOGNIZED BY THE CHAIR: “I move that we purchase a new coffeemaker.”

ANOTHER MEMBER: “I second the motion.”

CHAIR: “It has been moved and seconded that the committee follow through with its report and buy a new coffeemaker. Any discussion?”

MEMBER RECOGNIZED BY THE CHAIR: “I move that we amend the motion to read, ‘a new drip coffeemaker’.”

ANOTHER MEMBER: “I second the amendment.”

CHAIR: “Is there any discussion on the amendment to add the word drip before

the word coffeemaker?” (Following the discussion, the chair may sense that the group is ready to vote, and say, “Are you ready to vote on the amendment?” The amendment is then voted on.)

CHAIR: “Since the amendment to the motion was passed, we will now vote on the amended motion which reads, “we shall purchase a new drip coffeemaker.” Is there any discussion? If not, we shall proceed to vote. All in favor say yes. All opposed no. The motion as amended is passed.”

Important Points and Terms

- Introduce complicated ideas by discussion; uncomplicated ideas, by motions. This practice eliminates the need for most amendments.
- Unless stated otherwise in the constitution and by-laws, the chair has the right to vote.
- A QUORUM is the number of persons who must be present at a meeting to take legal action on business matters. This number is usually specified in the bylaws.
- Most motions require a simple majority for passage. If a higher percentage is required, the chair or parliamentarian should tell the group what that percentage is.
- To TABLE a motion means to delay action on it. Unless a specific time is given for removing a tabled motion, the motion automatically comes back for consideration at the next regularly scheduled meeting.
- Occasionally, as the discussion begins to lag, a member of the group may call “QUESTION.” Some take this as a mandate to move on a vote. It is not. The chair should call for further discussion and decide if it is time to vote.

Calling “question” is sometimes confused with the very formal parliamentary motion, “I call for the previous question,” which is a motion requiring the end of discussion. This motion requires a second, is not debatable or amendable, and requires a two-thirds majority to pass. If the motion is passed, the chair must move immediately to vote on the main motion (without discussion). If the motion calling for the previous question fails, discussion of the main motion resumes.

Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus decision-making is a way of working together, a way in which everyone’s values and interests can be considered. It is a process of coming to an agreement on a particular problem or issue.³

A meeting conducted by consensus is less formal than using parliamentary procedure. A problem or opportunity for the group is brought up for discussion, without requiring a formal motion. The group discusses the suggestion, working toward clarifying the issues and the need for action. The leader/facilitator encourages input from all and then guides the group toward making a decision. A formal motion is not made, but the leader states the consensus agreement and checks to make sure everyone is willing to support the decision.

In a consensus process, different interests work together to identify issues, to educate each other about their concerns, to generate options, and then to reach agreements that all sides can accept. This does not mean that all sides will be equally enthusiastic about a solution; rather, participants recognize that it is the best solution

available.

In consensus decision-making, the group can take no action that is not consented to by all members. Consensus does not necessarily mean unanimity, where everyone is of one mind and in full agreement with a decision, although it may. Everyone must agree that they can “live with” and support the decision. Consensus happens as a synthesis of values and ideas rather than one side winning. The consensus decision-making process is different from the use of parliamentary procedures and accepting the vote of the majority. Voting results in a “win-lose situation.” Sometimes the losers are unwilling to support the winning position, which hampers implementation of the decision.^{3,4}

Why Use the Consensus Process?

Open communication. People talk with one another regarding their perceptions of the situation, the issues associated with the problem, their concerns and needs, and their ideas about possible solutions. Problems are clearly identified. This exchange provides the basis for designing workable and acceptable alternatives.

More informed decisions. Drawing on the thinking of a diverse group usually encourages greater creativity and a larger number of options. Several options may be combined to make a more satisfactory decision.

Acceptance of the outcome. People who have worked together to understand the issues and who have developed solutions using consensus will see the reasoning behind a recommendation or solution. Seldom will they challenge the results of a consensus decision.

Faster implementation. The process sets the stage for an action plan — Who, What, When, Where and How. People will not block implementation if they understand that a plan reflects their interests.

Creation of new networks. Participants establish a constructive relationship with one another that serves the organization or community into the future. As new issues surface, individuals are more likely to contact one another to discuss and initiate joint problem solving activities.

Cooperative effort. Consensus is a cooperative group effort and all members have a share in the decision. Members are given the opportunity to propose changes, thus helping the group to reach a decision.

When to Use Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus decision-making is an appropriate way to make group decisions. The process can work well whether the group is small or large. With a large group, a sequence of small group discussions is used. Reaching consensus takes more time than just voting, but the outcome is often worth it. The group leader must be willing to share control; group members must be willing to express their views honestly.⁵

The process is especially useful when:

- People must work together over a period of time.
- An issue is complex.
- Many parties are involved.
- The issues are negotiable.

- People are willing to participate.
- The concept of a losing side is undesirable.

There are times when consensus approaches are not appropriate, such as when:

- The group is facing an emergency and quick action is needed.
- The timing is not right, relevant information is not available, or there is not enough time to achieve a consensus decision given mandated deadlines.
- Legal clarification is needed.
- The group is so polarized that productive face-to-face discussions are not possible.
- The level of concern about the issue is not great.

Implementing Solutions

A consensus agreement must also address how the recommendations will be implemented. Along with a description of what is to be done, an agreement should also specify how each decision will be implemented, who will be responsible, what tasks are expected, within what period of time the tasks are to be completed, and where the resources will be obtained.

Negotiating Decisions

Dealing with both your interests and the other person's or group's interest is the basis for negotiating a satisfactory agreement.

In focusing on interest as opposed to positions, be sure and recognize that behind everyone's position are interests that are both compatible as well as conflicting. The idea of successful negotiation is to find those interests in common. Pay attention to their interests, ideas, and choices, and generate as many multiple interests as possible.

Separate the people from the problem

Many times people confuse the problem with the personal relationship. When people become angry on a personal level, it is very difficult to reach any kind of solution even though everyone would benefit from the solution. Using your relationship as leverage will tend to damage any on-going commitment from the other party. When a people-problem has developed, this should be dealt with directly, independently, not as part of the decision that needs to be negotiated.⁶

Listen to understand

In trying to differentiate the problem from the people it is important that you try to listen and understand what is being said in the meeting. When you talk you should focus on being understood rather than just making your point. People are less defensive if you talk about yourself rather than them. For example, "I am feeling uncomfortable," rather than, "You seem to be feeling uncomfortable." People are more willing to share their feelings, if you can be straightforward about yours.

Try to understand the framework in which the other person is operating. If you

were in their situation, what would your viewpoint be about the problem? You have certain ideas, feelings, or fears about an issue. Others may not have the same frame of reference as you do. It is helpful to discuss their perceptions as well as yours and to understand their vantage point. When everyone becomes involved in the process of reaching a solution they tend to have more ownership in the outcome and is felt by all. Try to find areas where it is possible for you to agree without sacrificing your interests in the negotiation.

Make emotions legitimate in your discussion

Do not react to emotions or outbursts as if they were a personal attack. Deal with those feelings by acknowledging them. Whenever possible differentiate emotions from the facts in trying to solve a problem.

You need to learn from the group why certain ideas are acceptable, why others are not, and how they fit into the underlying interest of all parties. Many interests stem from basic needs such as economic well-being, recognition, being well-liked, feeling secure, and being seen as a successful human being. Always make sure, if possible, that these needs are being met in any process of negotiation. A lot of times their interests can be met without any compromise of your interests. Be concise and clear about the problem and as helpful as possible in dealing with people.

Allow enough time

Avoid making difficult decisions at just one meeting. Choices are often not satisfactory when they are made before enough information has been generated. They usually end up as a single answer to a complex situation. Generate many ideas and incorporate those in meeting people's needs. There are always many ways to come up with a satisfactory solution.

Try to separate the solution from the discussion of the problem. There should always be a period of brainstorming to generate ideas before the decision is made. The broader you can make the scope of the situation, the more possibilities you generate as options. This suggests that you are trying to identify differing interests and meet as many of them as possible without giving in.

Reaching agreement

Often it is possible to generate an agreement when these kinds of interests and differences are understood by the various parties. When decision points are near, make it as easy as possible for the other party to accept. This may mean paying a lot of attention to people's feelings, such as face-saving and relationship building.

In setting out to reach an agreement, try to set up objective criteria that will be mutually acceptable to all parties. Deciding on ground rules and procedures, as well as on data sources, are often the first steps to building agreement. Think about the fairness of standards with which you will judge your agreement. Tactics such as fear and threats are not productive in maintaining relationships.⁶

Summary

The decision-making process is a lengthy one that involves a series of steps. By following these steps members will feel the item in question has been clearly analyzed and they have had a part in reaching a decision.

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A project of the
K-State Research and Extension
Developing Effective Leadership Program Team

Katey Walker, Co-chair
Extension Specialist
Family Resource & Public Policy

Margaret Phillips,
Co-chair
Extension Specialist
FACS, South Central Area

Stan McAdoo,
Co-chair
Extension PRIDE
Program Coordinator

Ann Domsch
Extension Specialist
4-H and Youth Programs
Southeast Area

Diane Mack
Extension Specialist
4-H and Youth Programs
Northeast Area

Sharolyn Flaming
Jackson
County Extension Agent
FACS, Riley County

Glenn Newdigger
County Extension Agent
Barber County

Pat Fultz
Extension Specialist
4-H and Youth Programs

Ron Wilson
Huck Boyd National Institute
for Rural Development

Dan Kahl
Extension Associate
Kansas Environmental
Leadership Program
(KELP)

Tracy Rutherford
Assistant Professor
Agricultural Communications
and Journalism

Michele Crago
County Extension Agent,
4-H
Wyandotte County

Connie Hoch
County Extension Agent
FACS, Lyon County

Ray Ladd
County Extension Agent
Atchison County

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