Decision Methods with Ingrid Bens
IAF Moscow April 2016

Helping groups make decisions is one of the most challenging aspects of group work. People may be pursuing hidden agendas, have differing opinions or be polarized. Since most group conflict erupts during decision-making conversations, it is important that all facilitators possess a range of tools for helping groups arrive at a decision that will be sustained after the members have left the meeting.

Through short presentations and group discussion this session:

- Explores the challenges inherent in decision-making
- Identifies group norms that will prevent dysfunctional behaviors
- Stresses the importance of clarifying empowerment levels
- Describes a variety of decision-making tools in terms of their impact and when they will work most effectively.

Session Objectives:

- To explore the main reasons decision-making sessions become ineffective
- To identify the key norms that need to be in place during challenging decision-making discussions
- To stress the importance of identifying the appropriate empowerment level for each discussion
- To describe five different methods for making a group decision and use those methods in solving a case study.

_____

Concept # 1 - Conversation Structures

Before delving into the techniques for making group decisions, it's important to understand that there are two types of facilitated conversations: they are either decision making in nature or they are not. Each type of conversation has distinct features that dictate the techniques used to manage them.

Non-Decision-Making Conversations

Non-decision-making conversations are those in which group members simply share ideas or information. During non-decision-making discussions, the facilitator simply records all ideas without checking with others to test if they concur. Examples of non-decision-making conversations include:

- A brainstorming session in which all ideas are accepted and not judged
- An information-sharing session in which group members describe their experiences or update each other
- A relationship-building session in which people get to know each other
- A discussion aimed at making a list of individual preferences or key factors in a situation

In non-decision-making conversations, all ideas are recorded without being filtered. Sometimes, these ideas are ranked and sorted later.

Decision-Making Conversations

Decision-making conversations are those discussions in which group member ideas are combined to arrive at either an action plan or a rule that group members feel they can accept and implement.

Facilitators need to manage decision-making conversations differently than non-decision-making ones, since they need to help members reach agreement. This involves clarifying ideas, ping-ponging ideas around so others can add their thoughts, making statements that summarize the discussion and recording the group opinion. Examples of decision-making discussions:

- Deciding between two alternatives
- Creating group norms or rules of conduct for a meeting
- Building a compromise solution that everyone can live with
- Developing joint solutions to a problem

_____

Comparing Decision-making with Non-Decision-making

Non-Decision-Making	Decision Making
- Conversations in which no action plans or norms are identified or ratified. Examples include:	- Discussions in which action plans or rules are identified and ratified

- Information sharing
   - Brainstorming
   - List making
	- Discussions where members arrive at a joint decision

- One-way dialogue	- Interactive dialogue
- The facilitator records individual ideas	- The facilitator records the group opinion

Concept # 2 - Norms that support effective decision-making

Differences of opinion can easily degenerate into dysfunction during decision-making discussions. That's why all major decision-making conversations need to have a set of norms that are specifically agreed to by the members. To identify the most commonly needed norms in these situations form small discussion groups to explore the two questions below: (10 minutes total)

Question #1: What causes some decision-making discussions to come dysfunctional? What behaviors contribute to the problem?

Question #2: What norming questions can you ask a group in advance of a decision-making discussion to prompt them to set rules or norms that will help to eliminate these problems?

_____

_____

What can cause decision-making discussions to become ineffective?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Norming questions that will prompt group members to set rules that create an effective environment:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Concept # 3 – Empowerment Levels

Before beginning any decision-making discussion always clarify which empowerment level is in effect. When empowerment levels are unclear people make assumptions. When their assumptions are not met this leads to confusion and loss of trust in the process. There are four empowerment levels:

Level I – The decision is made by one person and group members must comply

Level II – Group members are asked for their opinions but the decision is made by someone else. Group members must comply.

Level III – Group members can make a decision and develop recommendations, but must gain approval before taking action.

Level IV – Group members can make a decision and implement their action plans without needing to seek approvals.

The Empowerment Continuum

Management Control			Group Control
Telling	Selling	Participating	Delegating
Management decides then informs staff	Management seeks input before deciding	Groups decide but only act with approval	Groups decide and take action
I Directive	**II** Consultative	**III** Participative	**IV** Delegative

Empowerment Exercise: In small groups discuss each level, the good things about each, the drawbacks of each and most important, when each empowerment level is appropriate.

1. **For each level, identify:**

   - The pros or pluses of using that empowerment level.

   - The cons or negatives of using that empowerment level

   - The conditions in the situation or the group that tell you that this level is appropriate.

Fill in the blanks on the page that follows:

_____

Empowerment Levels Discussion

Level I – **Directive** – the leader/management decides alone then tells group members what to do

Pros – fast, clear direction, clear accountability, exploits management expertise

Cons – lack of input, low or no buy in from staff, only one perspective

When this level is appropriate – time constraints, if the person deciding is the only one qualified to decide, when information can not be shared

Level II – **Consultative** – the leader/management makes the decision but seeks group member input before deciding to get staff perspectives

Pros -

Cons -

When this level is appropriate –

Level III – **Participative** – Group members make a decision and create detailed action plans but they need to gain management approval before acting.

Pros -

Cons -

When this level is appropriate -

Level IV– Delegative – Group member can make a decision and implement any action they want without the need to gain management approval.

Pros -

Cons -

When this level is appropriate -

_____

Concept #4: Decision Methods

Decision Options Summary Chart

Option	Pros	Cons	Uses
Consensus Building	Collaborative, systematic, participative, discussion-oriented, encourages commitment	Takes time, requires data and member skills	Important issues, when total buy-in matters
Multi-Voting	Systematic, objective, participative, feels like a win	Limits dialogue, influenced choices, real priorities may not surface	To sort or prioritize a long list of options
Compromise	Discussion, creates a solution	Adversarial, win/lose, divides the group	When positions are polarized, when consensus is improbable
Majority Voting	Fast, high quality with dialogue, clear outcome	May be too fast, winners and losers, influenced choices	Trivial matter, if division of group is acceptable
One Person Decides	Can be fast, clear accountability	Lack of input, low buy-in, no synergy	When one person is the expert, individual willing to take sole responsibility

The Software Dilemma Group Discussion:

Read through the following sequence of decisions that this group must make. Assume that you are their facilitator. For each decision point, identify the decision method you would recommend, then describe the reason for choosing that approach.

1. The IT Team needs to make a series of decisions about buying new software for the customer service team. All of the members of the customer service team have strong opinions about the traits of effective software.

There appear to be three software programs that could be purchased. Each package has different strengths and weaknesses. Any decision needs to consider a number of variables, such as cost, reliability, simplicity and degree of available technical support. All of the members of the user group have different needs and concerns.

Which decision-making option should be used for this phase of the decision? Why?

2. Based on educational background and experience, only one member of the IT Team has the expertise to conduct research into the actual effectiveness of the three software options and determine which most closely matches the priorities of the end users.

Which decision-making option should be used for this phase of the decision? Why?

3. Once the final decision about which software program should be purchased has been made, the IT Team is faced with two distinct implementation options. Members don't agree on which they like.

Some think the IT Team should just close for a full week while everyone gets trained at once. This will let them all start working with the new program at the same time. These folks argue that the IT Team is operating within a limited time frame and needs to get on with the implementation process.

Other staff members think this is too disruptive and favor staggered training and more gradual implementation over several weeks and even months. These folks think the total change proposal is too drastic.

Which decision-making option should be used for this phase of the decision? Why?

4. The Marketing Department has provided the IT Team with two very different logos to launch their new help-line. The members are divided about which they like and must decide which logo to go with.

Which decision-making option should be used for this phase of the decision? Why?

5. Once the new program is finally about to be rolled out, the IT Team finds that it faces a real challenge booking all of the users into the training sessions given the very limited training room space at the head office. In addition, people work in a variety of locations and are operating on different shifts.

Which decision-making option should be used for this phase of the decision? Why?