Group Decision Making

Because the performance of a group involves taking into account the needs and opinions of every group member, being able to come to an equitable decision as efficiently as possible is important for the functioning of the group. There are a variety of ways to make decisions as a group; the seven-step decision-making model presented below offers an effective structure for choosing an appropriate course of action for a particular task or project. It can also be an effective method for dealing with a problem or interpersonal conflict that arises within the group.

1. **Identify the decision to be made.** Before beginning to gather information and list alternatives, it is important for you as a group to understand clearly what you are trying to decide so you have a goal on which to focus your discussions. Potential questions to ask are: What are the particulars of the assigned task? What are we being asked to do? What conflict is affecting our group effectiveness? What barrier to effective group work are we facing?
2. **Analyze the issue under discussion**. Once you have defined your goal (i.e., the decision to be made or the problem to be overcome), examine the data and resources that you already have, and identify what additional information you may need. Ask yourselves: What is causing the problem? For whom is this a problem? What is wrong with the current situation? Why do we need to deal with this issue/decision? Where else can we find resources?
3. **Establish criteria.**Identify the criteria or conditions that would determine whether a chosen solution is successful. Ideally, a solution will be feasible, move the group forward, and meet the needs of every group member. You may want to rank the criteria in order of importance (for example., circumstances may be such that some issues may not be fully resolved). Consider these questions: What would make a solution/decision successful? What issues need to be dealt with in the solution? What criteria will help us determine whether everyone is happy with the solution/decision? Are some criteria more necessary than others?
4. **Brainstorm potential solutions.** Using the resources and information collected above, brainstorm for potential solutions to the problem or decision identified in step 1. This involves collecting as many ideas as possible. At this stage, ideas should not be criticized or evaluated. Some questions to ask include: What are some possible solutions that would meet most of our established criteria? Are there any options that we may have overlooked? What could we do in the absence of constraints?
5. **Evaluate options and select the best one.**Once you have a list of potential solutions, you are now ready to evaluate them for the best alternative according to the criteria identified in step 3. Remember that you may be able to combine ideas to create a solution. Ideally, everyone would agree with solution (a consensus), but it's possible that not everyone will. In this case, you will need to use a different decision making methods (see methods in next section). Additional questions to ask when evaluating alternatives are: What are the pros/cons for each option? Which option is the most realistic to accomplish for now? Which option is the most likely to solve the problem for the long-term?
6. **Implement the solution.** This involves identifying the resources necessary to implement the decision, as well as the potential obstacles, then taking action. Decide: What should be done? How? By whom? By when? In what order?
7. **Monitor and evaluate the outcome.** Based on the criteria identified in step 3, evaluate whether the decision was successful. If not, revisit step 4 to evaluate the other options or generate new ones.

Decision-making methods

In order to make the jump from brainstorming potential solutions for solving a problem to evaluating and selecting the best solution, group members need to make decisions. There are several possible methods of decision making that a group can use. A few of them are briefly described below, with advantages on the left and disadvantages on the right for each one:

Decision by authority

The group generates ideas and holds open discussions, but the final decision is made by one person.

* Appropriate when there is a clear expert in the topic at hand
* Very fast
* Does not maximize the strengths of the individuals in the group
* The group may not be dedicated to implementing a decision made by one person

Decision by majority

The group holds a vote on a particular issue following a period of discussion. The majority wins.

* Uses democratic participation in the process
* Fast
* Tyranny of the majority often overwhelms minority views, perhaps encouraging factions to form within the group

Decision by negative minority

The group holds a vote for the most unpopular idea and eliminates it. They repeat this process until only one idea is left.

* Democratic
* Useful when there are many ideas and few voters
* Group members may feel resentful at having their ideas voted as unpopular
* Slow

Decision by ranking

Group members individually write down the 5 (or fewer) ideas they like best, then rank each idea from 1 to 5, with 5 being the best. The votes are recorded on the board and totalled. The idea with the highest total is selected.

* Includes a voting procedure and, therefore, gives the impression that the final decision represents each person’s opinion.
* Not suitable for issues
* Takes time
* The numbers game can result in a decision that no one fully supports

Decision by unanimity

All group members must agree that the decision is the best one.

* Everyone will be on board with the decision and resulting course of action
* Unanimous agreement might be impossible to reach

Decision by consensus

The decision is discussed and negotiated until everyone affected by it understands and agrees with what will be done. Consensus in decision making means that all members genuinely agree that the decision is acceptable. After a group has identified a decision to be made, each member is asked how he/she feels about the proposed decision by selecting one of the following responses:

1. I can say an unqualified “yes” to the decision.
2. I find the decision acceptable.
3. I can live with the decision, but I’m not especially enthusiastic about it.
4. I do not fully agree with the decision, but I do not choose to block it.
5. I do not agree with the decision, and I feel we should explore other options.

If all the responses from the group members are 1, 2, 3, or 4, you have a consensus and are ready to move on.

* All members feel that they have had an equal opportunity to influence the decision and will continue to support the group
* The best way to make decisions, if you have the time
* May be difficult to reach a consensus
* May be very time consuming

Combining ideas

Instead of dropping one idea in favor of another, the group searches for possibilities of implementing both or combining them into one solution.

* Polarizing (black-and-white) decisions are avoided
* Implementation may take longer since more than one idea is being considered
* A decision that combines two solutions can sometimes be worse than either of the original solutions

Example:

1. Identify the decision to be made.

When should our group meetings be scheduled?

1. Analyze the issue under discussion.

Determine each member’s current schedule of prior commitments (e.g., classes, activities). Are weekends and nights a possibility? How much time we will need for each meeting? How often should meetings be scheduled?

1. Establish criteria.

The ideal meeting time would meet these criteria, in order of importance:

* 1. Not conflict with any member’s school or extra-curricular schedule.
  2. Be at a time that is optimal for group productivity (that is, when energy levels are highest, and when members would be most prepared to participate).
  3. Be during daytime working hours.

1. Brainstorm potential solutions.

These are the times when all group members are free from prior commitments:

* 1. Mondays 12 to 1:30 p.m.
  2. Wednesdays 6 to 7:30 p.m.
  3. Fridays 9 to 10:30 a.m.

1. Evaluate the options and select the best one.

Mondays 12:00 to 1:30 p.m.

| ***Pros:*** | ***Cons:*** |
| --- | --- |
| * 1. Would get the meeting over with early in the week.   2. Have the week-end directly beforehand to prepare for the meeting. | * 1. Since it falls during the lunch hour, group members would need to eat during the meeting. |

Wednesdays 6:00 to 7:30 p.m.

| ***Pros:*** | ***Cons:*** |
| --- | --- |
| * 1. After dinner, group members will be refreshed from their dinner break.   2. Having the meeting in the middle of the week allows for additional time before or after Wednesday to complete any necessary “last minute” project tasks. | * 1. One group member has a tutorial to attend at 7:30, so he may have to leave the meeting a few minutes early. |

Fridays 9:00 to 10:30 a.m.

| ***Pros:*** | ***Cons:*** |
| --- | --- |
| * 1. None of the group members have classes or activities scheduled until 11:00 a.m. on Fridays, so there would be ample time to conduct the meeting. | * 1. If there are social events scheduled for Thursday night, some of the group members are not in favour of having a meeting early the next morning. |

Best solution:

Wednesdays 6:00 to 7:30 is determined to be the most favourable time and chosen as the meeting time based on the criteria. The group decided -- by consensus -- that this would be the time during which they would be the most productive, having just finished their dinner break. This meeting time is not in agreement with the third criteria (that is, the ideal meeting would be during daytime working hours), but this was ranked as the least important, so a compromise was made.

1. Implement the solution.

Choose group members to:

* 1. Book the meeting room
  2. Confirm the time/location with all group members
  3. Appoint group roles for each member for meetings (see optimizing group performance tips sheet)

1. Monitor and evaluate the outcome.

The conditions for success, based on the stated criteria:

* 1. Regular attendance by all group members.
  2. All group members are active participants during meetings.
  3. If unforeseen scheduling conflicts arise, the group will have to revisit step 4 to determine a more suitable meeting time.

Resources

* [Group Roles: Maximizing Group Performance.](https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/group-roles-maximizing-group-performance) Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE) teaching tips.
* [Teamwork Skills: Being an Effective Group Member](https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/tips-students/being-part-team/teamwork-skills-being-effective-group-member). CTE teaching tips.
* [Making Group Contracts](https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/making-group-contracts). CTE teaching tips.
* Moore, C.M. (1987) *Group Techniques for Idea Building.*Newbury Park: Sage Publications
* Parker, G. (1998) *Teamwork: Action Steps for building powerful teams.* Aurora, IL: Successories
* Shalinsky, W. and S. Snider (1985) *Working in Small Groups: How to Do It Better.* University of Waterloo: TRACE
* Wilson, G.L. and M.S. Hanna (1986) *Groups in Context: Leadership and Participation in Small Groups.* New York, NY: Random House, Inc.

https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/group-decision-making