Tools for Making Team Decisions

Decisions must be made at practically every meeting of the team. Anyone who has experience working on a team will appreciate how difficult it is to elicit ideas and then discard many to select the best. The following techniques are useful in this process:

- Brainstorming
- Multivoting
- Nominal Group Technique

We will discuss each technique.

Brainstorming

Before making a decision, the team must make sure that they have examined as broad a range of options as possible. A successful brainstorm lets people be as creative as possible. The free-form approach to brainstorming generates excitement in the group, equalizes involvement, and often results in original solutions to problems.

Most of you are probably familiar with brainstorming, but did you realize that brainstorming is a formal decision making technique? Brainstorming is a group creativity technique where a team tries to find a solution for a specific problem by having the team member spontaneously gather a list of ideas. Alex Faickney Osborn popularized the term in 1953 in his book, Applied Imagination.

Osborn claimed two principles contribute to "ideative efficacy:" to "defer judgment" and to "reach for quantity." Following these principles, Osborn created four general rules for brainstorming which were established with the intention to reduce social inhibitions among group members, stimulate and generate ideas, and increase overall creativity of the group.

1. Focus on quantity
2. Withhold criticism
3. Welcome unusual ideas
4. Combine and improve ideas

As a result, the ground rules to brainstorming are to:

- Encourage everyone to participate
- Allow no discussion during the brainstorm
- Ascribe no judgment, not even a chuckle, moan, or grimace!
- Let team members hitchhike or build upon the ideas already generated by others
- Record **ALL** ideas so they can be scanned by the group

The process is to:

- Review the topic
- Define the subject of the brainstorm using "why," "how," or "what" questions
- Give everyone a brief period of time to think about the question
- The meeting facilitator enforces the ground rules and invites everyone to call out their ideas in an orderly manner
- One team member records all ideas, pausing only to check accuracy
- Once all ideas are presented, discussion begins and the list is pared down to reach a consensus decision.

Consensus is making a decision that all members can support and no member opposes. It requires time; active participation by all group members; communication skills including listening, conflict resolution, and discussion facilitation; creative thinking; and open-mindedness.

Consensus is not a unanimous vote. Consensus may not represent everyone's first priorities. It is not the majority vote where only those in the majority get what they want and those in the minority get something they do not want. In consensus, everyone may not be totally satisfied, but each team member can support the decision.

Multivoting

Multivoting is a decision making technique that reduces a large set of possible decisions to a final list. It is a way to conduct a straw poll or vote to select the most important or popular items from a list with limited discussion and difficulty. Multivoting allows an idea that may not the top vote of any team member to rise to the top.

Multivoting is accomplished by a series of votes, each cutting the list in down usually by half. Even a list of 40 to 50 items can be reduced to a workable number in four (4) or five (5) votes. Multivoting often follows a brainstorming session to identify a few items worthy of immediate attention.

The multivoting process is to:

- Generate a list of items and number each item
- Combine those items which are very similar and renumber
- Have all members choose the items they would like to proceed with by allowing each member to select 1/3 of the total number of items on the list
- Tally the votes and eliminate those items with the fewest votes
- Repeat the voting and tally process until only a few items remain

Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

NGT is a more structured approach than either brainstorming or multivoting for generating a list of options and narrowing it down. It is a decision making method used in teams of various sizes, where the team

makes decisions quickly using voting, but want everyone's opinions taken into account, as opposed to traditional voting, where only the largest group is considered. It is called nominal because during the session the group does not engage in the usual amount of interaction typical of a mature team. Because of the relatively low level of interaction, NGT is especially effective when the team members are new to each other. NGT is also very effective for highly controversial issues or when the team is stuck in disagreement.

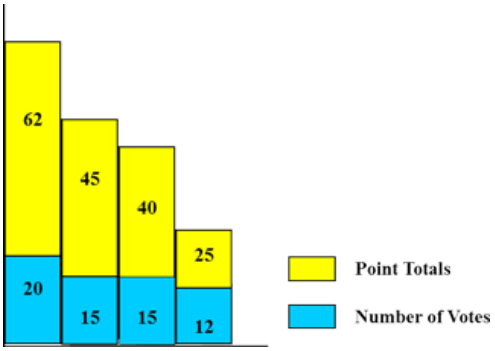
NGT has two parts. Part 1 is the formalized brainstorm and part 2 is for making the selection.

NGT Part 1: Formalized Brainstorm

The formalized brainstorm requires the team to define the task in the form of a question. At the meeting, the team leader or facilitator describes the purpose of the discussion and the procedures for this technique. He or she introduces and clarifies the question. The facilitator may read the question and should make it available in writing to all participants. The team generates ideas by having the participants write down their suggestions in silence with no distractions at this stage. There should be no joking, no moving around, and no whispering. A team member then collects the ideas and lists them on a flipchart, still with no discussions or questions at this point. Then the team clarifies, discusses, and combine ideas where the person who contributed the idea clarifies it, but others can join in to help define and focus the wording, and combine similar ideas.

NGT Part 2 - Making the selection

Making the selection requires reducing the list. If the list is more than 50 items, the team should use multivoting or simply let members withdraw the less serious items they put on the list. Each participant receives a certain number of cards to vote for his or her top preferences on the list. For example, if 20 items are on the list, then each member receives 4 cards. Each member now selects their four top ideas and writes one on each card; he or she also assigns points to each of their selected ideas where four (4) points is the first choice and highest score and one (1) is the fourth choice and puts the point value on the appropriate card. The team facilitator collects the cards and tallies the votes. The item with the highest point total is the team's decision. A pareto-like diagram can be used to display the tally.



In summary, the nominal group technique method helps with decision making by differentiating subtle distinctions among the possible selections.

Recipe for a Successful Team

No team exists without problems, but some teams — particularly those who have learned to counter negative team dynamics — are more effective at preventing typical group problems. These eight essential ingredients will help create successful teams:

- Distinct Team Goals
- Create a Plan
- Clearly Defined Roles
- Precise Communication
- Well-Defined Decision Procedures
- Balanced Participation
- Establish Ground Rules
- Use of the "Scientific Approach"

Let's discuss each goal.

1. Distinct Team Goals

A team works best when everyone understands its purpose and goals. Ideally the team agrees on its mission or works together to resolve disagreement, sees the mission as workable or narrows it to a workable size, has a clear vision and can progress steadily towards its goal, and is clear about the larger project goals.

Indicators of potential trouble are frequent switches in direction, frequent arguments about what the team should do, and frustration at lack of progress.

Recommendations to help the team have clear team goals are to seek help from management, the customer, or any other involved part to clearly specify the mission; emphasize the right of each team member to ask questions about decisions and events; and if the mission is too broad, work with management to narrow it down.

2. Create a Plan

Plans inform the team of the resources, schedules, milestones, and environment required for the task. Ideally the team creates a plan and revises it as needed during the project, refers to the plan when discussing what to do next, knows what resources and training are needed throughout the project, and plans accordingly.

Indicators of potential trouble are uncertainty about the team's direction where the team muddles through each step without a clear idea of how to get the information it needs; being "lost in the woods" or when a step is completed there is little idea of what to do next; and "fishing expeditions" where the team plunges ahead, hoping to stumble across a solution.

Recommendations are have the plan reviewed by team members and other project leaders, ensure consistency with other project plans, and remember the "who, what, where, when, why, and how" of planning.

3. Clearly Defined Roles

Teams operate most effectively if they tap everyone's talents and all members understand their responsibilities. Ideally the team has formally designated roles for leader, facilitator, technical expert, and subject matter expert; understands which roles belong to one person, which are shared, and how the shared roles are switched, for example, rotating recorder responsibilities; uses each member's talents; and involves everyone in team activities so no one feels left out and no one feels taken advantage of.

Indicators of potential trouble are roles and duty assignments that result from a pecking order, confusion over who is responsible for what, and people getting stuck with the same tedious tasks.

Recommendations are the team must reach consensus about the team roles and decide how these roles will be assigned and changed. The team leader can facilitate discussion on what duties must be assigned, how they will be assigned, and how they can be changed.

4. Precise Communication

Good discussions depend on how well information is passed between team members. Ideally the team members should speak with clarity and directness and avoid using questions to disguise statements; be succinct, avoiding long anecdotes and examples; listen actively and explore rather than debate each other's ideas; and avoid interrupting and talking when others are speaking.

Indicators of potential trouble are poor speaking skills including mumbling, rambling, speaking too softly, and little eye contact; members being unable to say what they really feel; cautious, tentative or conditional statements such as "Do you think, maybe, that sometimes...?"; opinions expressed as facts or phrased as questions; "plops" or statements that receive no acknowledgment or response; and "discounts" or statements that another team member deems as "that's not important." Plops and discounts can cause team members to completely retract and become unproductive on the team.

Recommendations are to develop communication skills and learn to recognize problems resulting from poor communication, and to have observers, either team members or outsiders, watch the group and give honest feedback.

5. Well-Defined Decision Procedures

You can tell a lot about how well a team is run by watching its decision making process. A team should always be aware of the different ways it reaches decisions. Ideally the team should discuss how decisions will be made, that is, when to take a poll, when to decide by consensus, or when the team leader decides; decide important issues by consensus; test for consensus such as "This seems to be our agreement. Is there anyone who feels unsure about the choice?"; and use data as the basis of decisions.

Indicators of potential trouble are conceding to opinions that are presented as facts with no supporting data, decisions being made by one or two members of the group without other team members agreeing to defer to their expertise, and too frequent recourse to "majority rules" or other approaches that bypass consensus.

Recommendations are review the decision making approaches, and designate an outsider to watch and give the team feedback on the decision making process.

6. Balanced Participation

Since every team member has a stake in the team's achievements, everyone should participate in discussions and decisions, share commitment to the project's success, and contribute their talents. Ideally

the team should have reasonably balanced participation with all members contributing to most activities, and build on member's natural styles of participation.

Indicators of potential trouble are some team members have too much influence while others have too little; members too often contribute only at certain times in a conversation or meeting; and some members speak only about a certain topic or "hot buttons".

Recommendations are to use brainstorming and nominal group techniques to elicit input from all team members and to be aware of and deal with these common problems.

7. Establish Ground Rules

Groups invariably establish ground rules or norms for what will and will not be tolerated in the group. Ideally the team should have open discussions regarding ground rules, and openly state or acknowledge norms.

Indicators of potential trouble are certain important topics are avoided and too many subjects are taboo; no one acknowledges the norms and everyone acts as they think the group wants them to act; and there continues to be recurring differences about what is or is not acceptable behavior.

Recommendations are to discuss and agree on obvious norms when the team is formed, and from time to time review and revise these ground rules particularly when there is conflict.

8. Use of the "Scientific Approach"

Teams, that use the scientific approach and rely on good data for problem solving and decision making, have a much easier time arriving at permanent solutions. The scientific approach helps avoid many group problems and disagreements. Ideally the team should demand to see data before making decisions and question those who try to act on hunches, use analysis and statistical tools to investigate problems and gather and analyze data, dig for root causes for problems, and seek permanent solutions rather than rely on quick fixes.

Indicators of potential trouble are team members insisting they don't need data because their experience is enough, wild stabs at supposed solutions, jumping to conclusions, and shooting from the hip.

Recommendations are to talk about the importance of enforcing a scientific approach, especially when decisions or actions are needed.

Conclusion/Summary

In summary, for better or for worse, when people work together on a team, more than the technical task occupies their energies. Mastery of the people issues makes the difference between teams that **break through** to accomplish their objectives and teams that **break down** before they get there. A successful technical contributor may not be a successful team leader or supervisor because people issues are so important.