

11

Sorry to interrupt, but ...

AIMS

- The structure of decision-making
- Stating and asking for opinion
- Interrupting and handling interruptions

1 The structure of decision-making



1 Read the following extract and answer these questions.

- a) What kind of meetings is the text about?
- b) What *structure* does the text describe?
- c) What key point is made about communication?

2 Read the text again. Do you agree with:

- a) the first sentence? Give reasons for your answer.
- b) Haynes's suggestions for the steps involved in decision-making?
- c) the view that communication must be a two-way process?
- d) what the writer says about consensus in the final paragraph?

The reason for having a meeting is to make a decision. Information may be given in a presentation followed by questions or discussion, but it is to get a consensus that the meeting has been arranged in the first place. Achieving this in the most time- and cost-effective manner possible is a goal that everyone attending (the meeting) must share.

- 5 Marion Haynes (1988) maintains that decision-making meetings need to follow a specific structure. The rational decision process includes the following steps:

- study / discuss / analyse the situation
- define the problem
- set an objective
- 10 • state imperatives and desirables
- generate alternatives
- establish evaluation criteria
- evaluate alternatives
- choose among alternatives.

- 15 One other aspect of decision-making is the necessity for participants in the meeting to be aware of one another's needs and perceptions. If these are not effectively communicated, if there is an insufficient degree of understanding of one another's requirements, then an acceptable conclusion is unlikely to be reached. There are four essential elements in decision-making: awareness, understanding, empathy and perception.

- 20 It is only when we accept that communications are a two-way process that any form of communication, including decision-making, will become genuinely successful and effective.

Decision-making is not always an identifiable activity. Frequently the discussion can evolve into a consensus which can be recognised and verbalised by the leader without the need to 'put things to the vote'.

Adapted from Bernice Hurst *The Handbook of Communication Skills* (London: Kogan Page, 1991).

3 Find words or phrases in the text which mean the same as the following:

- a) common agreement
- b) economical use of resources
- c) aim
- d) fix a goal
- e) what one must have
- f) what one would like to have
- g) consider other options
- h) way of seeing things
- i) seeing things as others see them
- j) develop
- k) express through speaking.

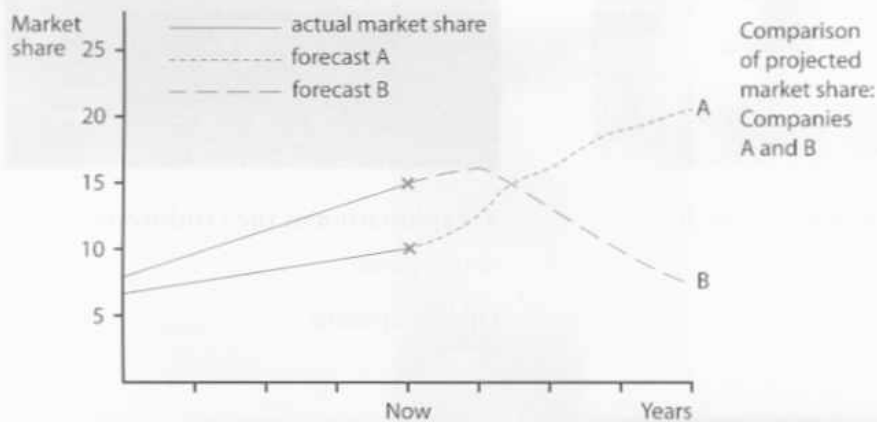
2 Stating and asking for opinion

- 1 Quickly suggest as many ways of asking for opinion and stating opinion as you can. Two examples are given here:

What do you think about ... ? – I think ...

Do you have any opinion on ... ? – In my experience ...

- 2 Listen to a recording of directors of a pharmaceuticals company discussing buying new production control equipment. They have to choose between two alternative suppliers, A and B. As you listen, refer to the graph below which shows the market share development of suppliers A and B.



- In technical terms, which system is better?
- Which is the cheapest?
- Which system seems to be the best choice? Why?

- 3 Listen again. Identify examples of language used to:
- ask for opinion
 - state opinion.

Did you think of these in Exercise 1?

Practice 1

Below are a series of topics. Ask colleagues for their views and note if their opinions are weak, strong or neutral. If asked, give your views on the subjects – either quite strongly or fairly weakly.



1 Arms trade

Your opinion _____

Others' opinion _____



2 Testing cosmetic products on animals

Your opinion _____

Others' opinion _____



3 Expenditure on space research

Your opinion _____

Others' opinion _____



4 Exploitation of the rainforests

Your opinion _____

Others' opinion _____



5 The quality of television broadcasting

Your opinion _____

Others' opinion _____



6 Nuclear power

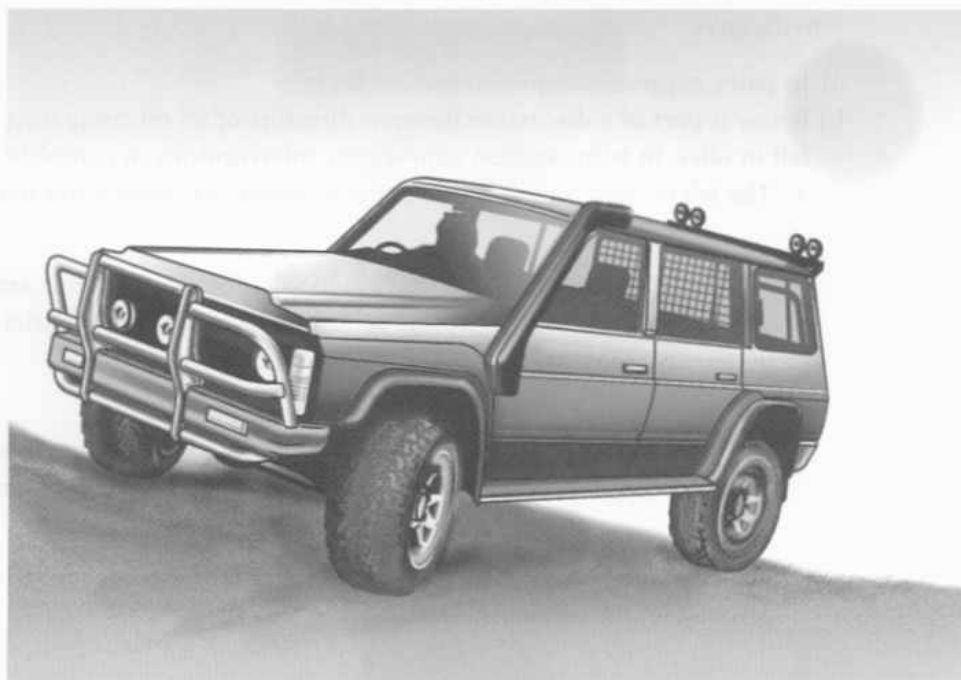
Your opinion _____

Others' opinion _____

3 Interrupting and handling interruptions



- 1 Listen to the recording of a discussion in the European sales office of an American off-road automobile manufacturer, Amass. It concerns the advertising plans for the launch of a new truck, the Rodeo 4 PLUS. The Marketing Manager, Matt Haslam, is explaining his ideas. Mark the following statements as True (T) or False (F).



- a) The truck will be sold to professional users of off-road vehicles.
- b) It is not going to be used as a mass market on-road vehicle.
- c) Matt wants to keep the same agency they have always used.
- d) Matt used his own research to help him make decisions.
- e) Changing advertising agency would cost 50% more.

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- 2 Listen again. Number the following interrupting phrases in the order in which you hear them.

- a) Yes, but Matt, if I can interrupt you again. We're talking serious money here. We've got to be careful ...
- b) Er, excuse me, Matt, just a moment. That's a big claim ...
- c) It's the most important thing ...
- d) One moment! Can we start with a few basics?
- e) Yes, so, a select, professional market first, then the mass market, an on-road vehicle.
- f) But why? CMA have been okay in the past.
- g) Let's just clarify where ... who the audience are, what's the target group?
- h) What! Most agencies charge a lot more than CMA.
- i) You plan to use our usual agency, CMA?

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- 3 a) Discuss the style of the Amass meeting.
 b) How does Matt handle the interruptions? Does his approach change at any point during the extract?
 c) Did you think the interruptions are appropriate?

4 Interruptions can have different intentions:

- to ask for clarification
- to add opinion
- to ask for more details
- to change the direction of the discussion
- to disagree.

a) In pairs, suggest examples of each of these.

b) Below is part of a discussion between directors of an oil company talking about a fall in sales. In pairs, suggest appropriate interruptions to complete the dialogue.

A: The fall in sales is mainly due to the recession affecting world markets.

B: _____

A: Well, it's a general fall of around 5% in sales for most product areas. Also, specifically in the oil-processing sector, we have much lower sales, mainly because we sold our UK subsidiary, Anglo Oils.

B: _____

A: Well, no, I'd rather not go into that. We discussed that in previous meetings. I'd prefer to talk about future prospects. The outlook is very good just now ...

B: _____

A: I'm very surprised you say that. In fact, sales forecasts are much better now. Anyway, let me tell you ...

B: _____

A: New markets? Yes, but can we talk about new markets later? I have some important information on that. But first ...

B: _____

A: Take a break? We've only just started!

5 There are different ways of handling interruptions.

a) In pairs, suggest one or two appropriate phrases for the following:

- 1 promise to come back to a point later
- 2 politely disagree with an interruption
- 3 say the interruption is not relevant or that time is short
- 4 politely accept the interruption and respond to it before continuing
- 5 reject a suggestion.



b) Listen to a complete model version of the dialogue in Exercise 4 above. In pairs, match each of the five examples of handling an interruption to one of the ways listed above (1-5).

- 6 Use the skeleton outline below to recreate the entire dialogue with a partner.
Choose alternative interruptions and ways of handling interruptions.

'The fall in sales is mainly due to the recession affecting world markets.'

Interrupt:
ask for clarification.

Polite response.
(5% / most product areas / especially oil processing / also due to sale of Anglo, UK subsidiary)

Interrupt:
ask why Anglo was sold.

Reject interruption:
no time / discussed before.

Try to move on to future prospects
(good).

Interrupt: disagree.

Respond: you disagree.
Forecasts are much better.

Interrupt: you want to talk
about new markets.

Promise to discuss this later.
But first ...

Interrupt: suggest a break.

Reject the idea.

Practice 2

This task is based on a discussion about investment in public transport.
Work in pairs, A and B. Student A should look at File card 13A.
Student B should read File card 13B.

Role play

This role play consists of an internal company meeting. It is designed to cover the objectives of this unit and also chairing meetings and leading discussion from Unit 10. Work in groups of between four and six.

Introduction – for all participants

You are directors of a food processing company called Adel Passam Ltd. (APL). The company has been linked with a scandal involving a businessman and property developer called Jordi Cass. It has been revealed that six years ago Cass bought land from the local city authority at 20% of its true market value. He sold the land one year later at a 500% profit. Cass was an adviser to APL at the time as a Property Consultant. The press have suggested that directors of APL knew of the scandal, but said nothing because the company and in particular the founder and Managing Director, Mikel Adela, stood to profit from Cass's deal. Also Cass was – and still is – a friend of Mikel Adela's son, Sam Adela, a director of the company. Mikel Adela died a year ago. Another APL director, Marta Lucas, is married to the man who was leader of the ruling Democratic People's Party on the City Council when the land was originally sold to Cass.

Situation

The Board of APL meet to discuss what action they should take. They are worried that the reputation of the company will be damaged and that its excellent relationship with the local community and its employees will suffer.

In your group, each student should choose a role from the list:

Participants

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Sam Adela (Chair) | Anton Hassim (Director) |
| Jay Worthy (Legal Adviser to APL) | Pat Joyce (Director) |
| Marta Lucas (Director) | Bernie Callam (Accountant) |

The Chair of the meeting should look at File card 24. Other participants should look at File cards 25–29.

TRANSFER 1

Summarise your impressions of the Adel Passam meeting you have taken part in. Classify it according to one of the following types:

- decision-making meeting
- information-giving meeting
- discussion meeting.

How effective was the meeting?

How effective was the Chair?

How could the meeting have been better?

In what ways did the work covered in this unit help with the meeting?

TRANSFER 2

If you have taken part in a decision-making meeting recently – or if the Adel Passam meeting was a decision making meeting – can you identify any clear structure to the decision-making process, which was:

- similar to that described by Hurst
- similar to the DESC model in the Skills Checklist
- of a different kind? If so, what?

Language Checklist

Discussion in meetings

Stating opinion

It seems to me ...
 I tend to think ...
 In my view ...
 We think / feel / believe ...
 There's no alternative to ...
 It's obvious that ...
 Clearly / Obviously ...

Asking for opinion

I'd like to hear from ...
 Could we hear from ... ?
 What's your view?
 What do you think about ... ?
 Do you have any strong views on ... ?
 Any comments?

Interrupting

Excuse me, may I ask for clarification on this?
 If I may interrupt, could you say ... ?
 Sorry to interrupt, but ...
 Do you think so? My impression is ...
 What? That's impossible. We / I think ...

Handling interruptions

Yes, go ahead.
 Sorry, please let me finish ...
 If I may finish this point ...
 Can I come to that later?
 That's not really relevant at this stage ...
 Can we leave that to another discussion?

Skills Checklist

Participating in meetings

Types of meeting

- Decision-making meeting
- Information-giving meeting
- Spontaneous / Emergency meeting
- Routine meeting
- Internal meeting
- Customer / Client / Supplier
 - first meeting
 - established relationship

Structure of decision-making meetings

- study / discuss / analyse the situation
- define the problem
- set an objective
- state imperatives and desirables
- generate alternatives
- establish evaluation criteria
- evaluate alternatives
- choose among alternatives

The DESC stages of a meeting

- D Describe situation
- E Express feelings
- S Suggest solutions
- C Conclude with decision

Goal of decision-making meetings

Objective: to get a consensus in a time- and cost-effective manner

Importance of communication

- Two-way process
- Participants must be aware of others' needs
- Full communication and understanding is essential
- Four elements in communication: awareness – understanding – empathy – perception

Reaching a consensus

- Discussion leads to consensus
- Consensus is recognised and verbalised by leader
- Decisions checked and confirmed

Quick Communication Check

1 Stating opinion

Complete the following phrases.

- 1 It s _____ to me that the price is too high.
- 2 I t _____ the price is too high.
- 3 I b _____ the price is too high.
- 4 In my o _____, the price is too high.
- 5 In my v _____, the price is too high.

2 Asking for opinion

Complete these exchanges.

- What's your (a) _____ on this?
- It's a (b) _____ idea.
- Do you have any particular (c) _____ on the subject?
- It's (d) _____, but I need more (e) _____.
- Mark, can we (f) _____ from you on this?
- I (g) _____ with Madeleine, she's absolutely (h) _____.
- Let's hear what others (i) _____.
- Well, I think ...

think
interesting
great
agree
hear
information
opinion (2)
right

3 Interrupting

Underline the correct word to complete these sentences.

- 1 Can I say / tell / talk something here? I think ...
- 2 Excuse me, Mr Chairman, I want to interrupt / disagree / not agree with what Mr Ancram has said. It's not the case that ...
- 3 I'm sorry, may I add / interrupt / opinion? It seems to me ...
- 4 That's not the true / true / sure!
- 5 I'm afraid / pardon / sorry but I'd like to go / move to / continue another point.

4 Handling interruptions

Replace the underlined words in the exchanges below with words or phrases in the box that mean the same.

- 1 - Can I come in here?
- Sure, say what you want to say.
- 2 - Jacques, one point ...
- Please, let me conclude what I was saying.
- 3 - But the agreement is for six months!
- Can we come back to that point later?
- 4 - Can I ask about the insurance?
- That's not really relevant to the topic.
- 5 - We should discuss the contract.
- Can we leave that today? I think that's for another meeting.

talk about not talk about interrupt
return anything to do with
finish go ahead

Key
1 seems, 2 think, 3 believe, 4 opinion, 5 view
2
(a) opinion, (b) great, (c) opinion, (d) interesting, (e) information, (f) hear, (g) agree, (h) right, (i) think
3
1 say, 2 disagree, 3 interrupt, 4 true, 5 sorry, move to
4
1 interrupt, go ahead, 2 finish, 3 return, 4 anything to do with, 5 talk about, not talk about