



Deciding how to Decide

It is possible for a new group to go for many meetings without a clear decision-making process, but it is important to recognize that this is a risky situation. It may be assumed that your group decides to stick with majority rule, which is the most familiar form of democracy for most people. But there are many ways that decisions can be made, and in the long run it is essential that everyone share an understanding of how decisions are made. Otherwise, you may experience a breakdown in your decision-making process.

These problems can sneak up on you, and cause serious problems. Your group's members may be like-minded enough that discussions tend to reach an informal consensus; agreement becomes obvious and the group moves on without formally confirming that agreement. This happy state of affairs can continue for a time without a clear agreement about what constitutes a decision. However, it can also mask disagreement, as it puts the burden on the person with concerns. More seriously, that deceptive calm may also end in abrupt and unpleasant ways.

Unless you agree how you make decisions, you may encounter several kinds of problems:

- **Lack of unity** if members disagree but are afraid to openly break the unanimity.
- **Loss of participation** among newcomers who may be confused by a fuzzy process.
- **Division of the group** if a decision's legitimacy is challenged.
- **Disintegration or stalemate** if a decision cannot be established at all.

The first two problems tend to remain under the surface, and are generally not acknowledged in meetings. People may vent their frustration privately, or may not even be able to consciously recognize or describe the problem. However, it may still undermine their interest and participation, and thereby weaken the organization.

The final two problems are more obvious when they happen, and much more severe. Suddenly, in the midst of making a decision, a challenge erupts: One person expresses dissent to the consensus, and claims that really it is only necessary to get a majority, since that is the cultural norm. Or perhaps someone is outvoted but claims that a certain decision is important enough that consensus is needed. At this point, everyone's assumptions are revealed, and they may not be compatible.

There are now two decisions to be made simultaneously, with one dependent on the other. In this situation it becomes very difficult to calmly discuss what is in the long-term best interest of the group, because a certain decision about your general process will affect the outcome of the specific issue at hand. Further complicating things, there may be frustration about the process challenge or an urgency to the first decision, which makes it more difficult to take the time to have an open conversation about overlapping issues.

How to decide how to decide

In order to avoid problems stemming from an unclear decision-making process, it is important to take the time to decide how to decide, before you really need to make a serious decision. This may seem like an unpalatable – or even absurd – way to spend meeting time, and it is often neglected because it competes with more urgent matters.

However, process is an important part of creating any democratic group. Difficult issues are most likely to reveal process shortcomings, so it is best to set up your process early, and practice with it before you need it to negotiate a serious conflict. Having a clear process will save time in the long run, and may make the difference between whether your group reaches its objectives, muddles along or falls apart.

Decision-making processes actually form a continuum, and any attempt at classification will require arbitrary distinctions. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider some points along the spectrum. This provides some common language and a shared understanding of each method's advantages and disadvantages:

- **Autocracy:** very quick and easy, not much buy-in, requires much enforcement.
- **Consultative:** a bit more inclusive than autocracy, and less error-prone.
- **Majority:** Most familiar and quite inclusive, but more competitive than cooperative.
- **Supermajority:** Provides stronger legitimacy than majority, but still competitive.
- **Consensus:** Seeks a solution that is agreeable to everyone, but can be slow.
- **Unanimity:** Great when it happens, but not a viable decision-making process.

Some of these are not really democratic methods. However, they may help frame issue and you might find it appropriate to use them when delegating certain minor decisions to an individual or small group.

In order to maximize the chances that a decision-making process will work well, it is important to start with a commonly understood method. Most often, this is majority voting, which is largely viewed as synonymous with democracy. However, once the group has had a chance to discuss its options, it may wish to move to supermajority or consensus. If that is the case, a good rule of thumb is: *the decision to use a certain decision-making process must be possible using that process.*

Put another way, there must be a consensus to use consensus. Three quarters of your group must be willing to use a 75% supermajority. A majority must accept majority rule. (If you can't reach that threshold, you wonder whether your group should be together.) If you have trouble reaching an agreement, it may be helpful to try out the higher threshold process for a trial period, and then revisit the decision. You can also agree to try again later at a specific date.

If you are considering using consensus, you should be sure that everyone in your group has had some education about this process. Someone should prepare a short presentation on what consensus is, and then use the process that you are suggesting to check for consensus.

Consensus decision-making is covered in detail in a related document, Cooperative Starter Series #8, "Consensus Decision-Making."