

HOW TO MAKE DECISIONS DEMOCRATICALLY!

Time: Varies

Age: All

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Group decision-making is one way your group practices democracy. Not only is it important for you to make a good decision, but to make it democratically. The process of making decisions is a great learning opportunity—make sure to discuss the process both during and after making the decision.

There are a variety of methods depending on the dynamics of your decision—a choice between two alternatives, a choice between many alternatives, when conflicts between students are present, etc. Below you will find three different methods—consensus, majority rule, ranking preferences. In reality, you need to be flexible because you may have to try a number of different methods to make the decision, often changing “on the fly.”

WHEN IS THIS USEFUL?

Anytime your group needs to make a decision

MATERIALS: Varies, though nothing more than a flip chart / black board, or paper and pencils.

CONCEPTS: power, politics, interests, diversity

SKILLS: consensus building, constructive criticism, deliberating, exercising public judgment, having an open mind (suspending pre-judgment), public speaking, teamwork.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

In all decision making, regardless of method, it is important to discuss with your group the following elements of decision making:

1. Do we have enough information to make a decision?

When there is a lack of information, decisions tend to be made on the basis of individual personalities, friendships or, whatever idea is the flashiest. Make sure to have the group take some time to think through, research, and articulate their positions. After listing ideas or options, take some time to have group members individually or in pairs groups to discuss / research their preferences according to agreed upon criteria. This may mean having students think, write, or research their issue between sessions and then come back to the decision at the next meeting.

2. What are the criteria for making our decision?

This can be done by the coach or the students identify the criteria themselves.

Criteria will frame the discussion, research, and will end in a better decision.

Examples: How is this project public? What change do we hope to bring about?

What are we excited about doing? Is this project “do-able” and “winnable”?

3. What are the ground-rules for our deliberations?

- a. Everyone will try to listen to and respect each others views.
- b. Everyone will have a chance to voice their opinions.
- c. Everyone will try to separate the people from the problem. Often the personalities of the group become part of the decision making process. Reinforce the need to separate ideas from people (e.g. It is okay to criticize ideas, but not people).
- d. Everyone will try to focus on interests, not positions. When negotiating, often people will establish their “bargaining position” (e.g. How much do you want? How about \$50.00? I can give you \$25.00. How about \$35? etc.). Instead of focusing on positions, try to keep in mind what each party’s self-interests are in their proposals. This allows for greater possibilities of reaching a decision that benefits everyone.

METHOD #1: CONSENSUS

Consensus is the process in which every member of the group agrees on the decision (unanimous). This is typically a process of talking about the issue until a consensus is reached.

Positives:

- Everyone agrees on the decision, has ownership
- Allows minority views to be heard
- May improve group dynamics
- Can teach the art of compromising

Negatives:

- Takes a long time
- Sometimes decisions are made to appease stubborn members who “hold out” the longest
- May hurt group dynamics if people feel like they were forced to agree

STEPS/TIPS:

- With all decision making, it is best to discuss / go over ground rules before you start.
 - Additional ground rules for consensus:
 1. The goal is to make a unanimous decision (everyone agrees)
 2. We recognize that there may be a deadlock. If we are forced due to time limits to make a decision, dissenters can register their views without blocking consensus.
- After an idea or possible decision has been proposed, give everyone a chance to state their opinion, ask questions about the proposal, and/or offer their own proposal.
- Identify disagreements
- Ask for possible ways to compromise on disagreements, negotiate differences
- Look for alternative ways to resolve conflict, or alternative choices that “side-step” the conflict. If alternatives are found, make sure that everyone agrees.
- If there is deadlock and you are forced to make a decision because of time constraints, allow dissenters to register their dissent.

EVALUATION:

- What was it like to be part of this process?
- If disagreements, ask students to reflect on how they addressed them.
- Did people change their views? Why?
- How was power exercised in this process?
- Was the process fair?
- Are there better ways to make a decision?

METHOD #2: MAJORITY RULE

Majority rule is the system that many people are used to in institutional politics. It typically involves voting, with the majority vote determining the decision.

Positives:

- Efficient way to make a decision
- Speaking opportunities are equal
- Can teach the art of compromising
- Group can determine the procedures of debate, decision

Negatives:

- “Losers” may feel left out
- Speaking opportunities may be limited
- Procedures can be manipulated
- Can be experienced as zero-sum game

STEPS/TIPS:

- With all decision making, it is best to describe ground rules before you start.
 - Additional ground rules for majority rule:
 1. There may be a time-limit on discussion. This can be determined by group (again by majority) or facilitator. Groups can also vote to extend discussion.
 2. The decision will be made on the basis of majority vote.
 3. Group decides how to count votes—secret ballot, hands, voice, etc.
- Try to alternate opposing views, try to allow for as many voices as possible within time limits
- Identify disagreements
- Amendments or alternatives can be proposed, group can vote if they want to decide on amended or alternative proposals

EVALUATION:

- What was it like to be part of this process?
- What was it like to be on the winning side? What was it like to be on the losing side?
- Who had power in this decision?
- Was the process fair?
- Are there better ways to make a decision?

ALTERNATIVES:

- Divide the work: Sometimes there may be three distinct blocks of preferences (i.e. three people want option #1, four people want option #2, and four people want option #3. Sometimes it is best to move ahead with different sub-groups working on different mini-projects.
- Do the second choice later: If the two top choices are related, sometimes it makes sense to do them sequentially.

METHOD #3: RANKING PREFERENCES

Ranking preferences is a process when groups are trying to decide among many different alternatives. This is a good way to narrow choices among many different alternatives.

Positives:

- Is a good way to narrow choices among multiple alternatives
- Avoids direct conflict

Negatives:

- Sometimes there are sub-optimal outcomes: i.e. the final choice is everyone's second or third choice.
- Avoids direct conflict
- Avoids direct compromise

STEPS/STEPS/TIPS:

- With all decision making, it is best to describe ground rules before you start.
 - Additional ground rules for majority rule:
 1. We will list all possible options.
 2. Members will then rank their first choice, second choice, and one choice that they find unacceptable.
 3. The decision will be made on the basis which option gets the most points.
- Allow members to brainstorm list of possible choices, write on flip chart or board
- Allow members to discuss / ask questions about each others proposals
- Members will vote on their first preference, second preference, and any option they think is unacceptable.
- Give 2 points for every first preference, one point for every second preference.
- You can either take the top option, or have a "run-off" between the top 2-3 options.
- Fun off: List top two or three options. If someone found a top option unacceptable, give them a chance to express their reasons
- Group can then decide among narrow options using majority or consensus.

EVALUATION:

- What was it like to be part of this process?
- What do students think of the decision that was made? Was it the best decision? Was it fair?
- Are there better ways to make a decision?
- How was power exercised in this decision?