

Collaborative Decision-making Methods

Last week, the following continuum of decision-making methods was introduced and the first two methods were briefly discussed. Today, the Informal Straw Vote and Majority Voting methods will be briefly described and the benefits and challenges of using them identified. Next week, the use of consensus decision-making methods will be addressed.

- Leader Decides
- Leader Consults and Then Decides
- Informal Straw Vote
- Majority Voting
- Consensus Decision-making
- Consensus Decision-making with Timeline

The above continuum of collaborative decision-making methods reflects an increasing amount of input from colleagues or stakeholders in the decision-making process. Moreover, as more opportunity and responsibility is given to a group to make a decision, there is also a concomitant increase in the degree of competence required of the group to make such decisions. As noted above, an essential skill that formal and informal leaders need to acquire is the ability to evaluate the readiness of a group to take on increasing responsibility for making a given decision.

Before considering the above group decision-making methods, it is important to reinforce the point that at times leaders need to make decisions with relatively little or no input from colleagues; however, in many situations it is very important for leaders to involve colleagues in the decision-making process. Using some of the following methods, or adaptations of them, may prove useful in a variety of such situations.

Informal Straw Vote

The informal straw vote involves presenting a potential decision to the group and calling for a show of hands to assess the degree of support for it. In some situations, such quick polling methods can be quite effective; however, if there is minimal discussion or people are not clear on exactly what they are supporting, difficulties can arise when implementing the decision. The pros and cons of using this method are:

Benefits: Quite fast and allows for some group input that can quickly indicate the degree of support for a decision.

Challenges: At times, the process may be too fast and it may cut off group input or thoughtful discussion of an issue.

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Straw Vote with Hand Signals: Using the following set of hand signals can help facilitate the straw vote process by adding the opportunity for people to explain their reasons for voting against or withholding opinion on a proposed decision.

Hand Signal Method

Churchillian “V” – Strongly agree

Thumbs up – Agree

Thumbs sideways – Not sure or neutral

Thumbs down – Against

Fist down – Strongly against

The Churchillian “V” is the hand signal that the late British Prime Minister, Winston S. Churchill, often used. It clearly indicates strong support for the idea or decision under consideration. The other hand signals are simple methods for indicating the degree to which a person supports a proposed decision. The hand signals can be used on their own or to increase discussion by asking those who vote thumbs sideways, thumbs down or fist down to explain their reasons for doing so. Listening to such explanations can provide more information for the group as a whole about the decision. In doing so, people may become more fully informed about the factors impacting on the decision, which may lead to a more informed decision being made. In fact, one of the decisions may be to take more time to discuss the most appropriate decision-making method to use in making a final decision.

Majority Voting

Majority Voting: A very common misunderstanding is that majority voting is the fairest and most effective decision-making method. This traditional method has considerable value for it can result in a clear decision if it is conducted in an appropriate manner. Unfortunately, in some situations, an open vote can be biased by some people “influencing” the vote of others in the group. Hence, at times it may be better to hold a ballot vote, where people are less likely to be influenced in this manner.

One of the most serious concerns about using the majority vote method is related to the degree to which people feel that there are “winners and losers” created after the vote. In some situations, this result may not be of major concern; but in others, such as in educational institutions, where professional colleagues need to work together in a

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collaborative manner, it can have quite serious detrimental effects. This is especially true when everyone in the organization is expected to implement the decision.

If majority voting is to be used people should have an opportunity to state their positions and be given the time to explain the reasons why they have taken them. Prior to the vote, people should understand clearly what they are voting for or against. Very often, after an important decision is made, people holding a minority position feel that they were not given enough time to make their case. Thus, making sure that there is sufficient time for discussion is an important factor when using the majority vote method.

In summary, the benefits and challenges of the “majority vote” method are:

Benefits: There is a clear outcome and after adequate discussion quality decisions can be made.

Challenges: The result of the vote may be the creation of win-lose camps, especially if the vote is a close one. People can feel that the process was unfair, especially if insufficient time for discussion was provided.

Using the acronym, VOTING, can remind leaders and group members of some of the key aspects of effectively using the majority voting method:

VOTING

- Voice – try to ensure everyone is heard
- Openly share pros and cons of different positions
- Test whether people are ready to vote
- Indicate clearly the motion – preferably in writing
- Note clearly the results of the vote
- Generate appropriate next steps

Selected References

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