

# Group Decision Making

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## ABSTRACT

**A great deal of decision making in school organizations is achieved through committees, teams, task forces, and other types of groups. In this article, I discuss the importance of developing a culture for group decision making and consider some of the advantages, disadvantages, and effective practices in group decision making.**

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In most school districts and schools, a great deal of decision making is achieved through committees, task forces, site-based councils, and other kinds of groups (Bonito, 2011). This is because the increased complexity of many decisions requires specialized knowledge in numerous areas, usually not possessed by one person. This requirement, together with the reality that the decisions made eventually must be accepted and implemented by many units throughout the school district or school, has increased the use of the collaborative approach to decision making (Zarate, 2009). In this article, I consider some of the potential advantages, disadvantages, and effective practices in group decision making. I begin first by discussing the development of a culture for group decision making.

## Developing a Culture for Group Decision Making

It takes time to develop a comfort level for both the school leader and followers concerning group decision making. Some scholars have proposed a four-phase process to involve followers in the school's decisions and offer some strategies school leaders can use to help followers participate more fully in school district and school decision making (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Eisenfuhr, 2011).

### Phase One: Readiness

In this initial phase, school leaders plan for and begin to move toward group decision making. While maintaining control over all phases of the process, they establish the school culture in which the process can begin to develop. They determine what decisions will be shared, who will participate in the process, and the extent of involvement.

### **Phase Two: Experimentation**

This phase focuses on building comfort and familiarity with followers' involvement in decisions. Because group members and school leaders are experimenting with shared decision making, the emphasis is on the evolving process rather than on the decisions themselves. The extent of involvement is the option of the followers. In most cases, some followers commit to the concept of group decision making and work with the school leader to begin defining the process for the school or school district.

### **Phase Three: Refinement**

In the third phase, school leaders begin to share with the followers the process for decision making as well as the decisions themselves. Followers assist in determining what will be decided in a shared manner and who will be involved. They also assist in refining the process by which decisions are made.

### **Phase Four: Institutionalization**

At this point, group decision making becomes the norm in the school or school district. Based on the school's/school district's history, the process of group decision making may be formal or informal. The group members and school leader determine jointly which decisions will be shared and what process will be used to make decisions. The group members assume the responsibility for their decisions and monitor their decision-making process.

Group decision making has both advantages and disadvantages. A thorough understanding of these benefits and problems can help a school leader determine when to encourage or discourage group decision making and how to improve the quality of group decisions.

## **Advantages of Group Decision Making**

What advantages do groups have over individuals in making decisions? Some advantages of group decision making include the following: greater sum total of knowledge, greater number of approaches to the problem, greater number of alternatives, increased acceptance of a decision, and better comprehension of a problem and decision (Gunnarsson, 2010; Proctor, 2011).

### **Greater Sum Total of Knowledge**

When many people are involved in decision making, they apply a greater accumulation of information and experience to the decision than that possessed by any one member alone. Gaps in knowledge of one person can be filled by another.

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### **Greater Number of Approaches to the Problem**

Most people develop familiar patterns for decision making. If each individual possesses her unique way of searching for information, analyzing problems, and the like, participatory decision processes provide more angles of attack at each stage of the decision-making process.

### **Greater Number of Alternatives**

Partly as a result of increased information and the use of varied decision-making patterns, groups typically can identify and evaluate more alternatives than one individual could. In listening to each other's ideas, group members may combine information to develop unique solutions that no single member could conceive.

### **Increased Acceptance of a Decision**

Shared decision making breeds ego involvement. That is, people tend to accept and support decisions that they make rather than those others make. The more people, who accept a decision and are committed to it, the more likely the decision is to be implemented successfully.

### **Better Comprehension of a Problem and Decision**

More people understand a decision when it is reached by a group. This factor is particularly important when group members are to be involved in executing the decision.

## **Disadvantages of Group Decision Making**

Group decision making has certain advantages over individual decision making, particularly when the decisions are complex; require the acquisition and processing of a variety or large amounts of information; and require acceptance and successful implementation of decisions by others. But there are also disadvantages to group decision making including: social pressure toward conformity, individual domination, conflicting secondary goals, undesirable compromises, ambiguous responsibility, and time (Gunnarsson, 2010; Schoenfeld, 2011).

### **Social Pressure Toward Conformity**

This phenomenon, known as *groupthink*, has received considerable attention. Irving Janis first coined the term in 1972 to describe a paradox that he observed in group decision making: Sometimes groups of highly qualified and experienced people make very poor decisions (Janis, 1982). Groupthink occurs when the desire for cohesiveness and consensus becomes stronger than the desire to reach the best possible decisions (Schafer, 2011). Because individuals fear being labeled uncooperative by other group members, they conform to the direction the group is taking even if they disagree with the

group's position.

### **Individual Domination**

Often one person will dominate the group because of difference in status or rank from other members or through force of personality. This can cause resentment among other group members who are prevented from participating fully. The problem is that what appears to emerge as a group decision may actually be the decision of one person.

### **Conflicting Secondary Goals**

Many times, participants in group decisions have their own personal axes to grind or their own turf to protect. Winning an issue becomes more important than making a quality decision. Too much energy is devoted to political maneuvering and infighting and too little to reaching a quality decision.

### **Undesirable Compromises**

Groups often make decisions that are simply compromises resulting from differing points of view of individual members. This is likely when a group must make a decision on a controversial issue. Controversial issues, by definition, result in opposing views. After a brief discussion, the group may conclude that a decision favoring either side is unacceptable, so a compromise solution is chosen. Such an approach may result in a low-quality decision.

### **Ambiguous Responsibility**

Group members share responsibility, but who is actually accountable for the final outcome? In individual decision making, it is clear who is responsible. In a group decision, the responsibility of any single member is diffused across the group participants. Furthermore, research has shown that group decisions are more risky than the average of the individual decisions. This phenomenon, known as *risky shift*, was coined by James Stoner in 1968 (Stoner, 1968). The phenomenon is somewhat surprising because group pressures tend to inhibit the members. One possible explanation is that people feel less responsible for the outcome of a group decision than when they act alone. Risky decisions may be desirable in some situations, and in others the costs of risk may be too high.

Subsequent research refutes the conclusion that groups consistently take greater risk than individuals (Bordley, 1983). For some groups and some decisions, cautious shifts were observed; that is, groups arrived at decisions that were less risky than those of individuals. Thus, both risky and cautious decisions are possible in groups. A key factor in determining which kind of shift occurs – more risky or more cautious – is the position assumed by the members before group interaction occurs. If the members lean initially toward risk, group discussion results in a shift toward greater risk; and if members lean initially toward caution, discussion leads to a cautious shift. Group discussion tends to

polarize the initial position of the group (Bonito, 2011; Bordley, 1983).

### **Time**

Groups often require more time to reach a final decision than do individuals. It takes time to assemble a group, and the interaction that takes place once the group is installed is frequently inefficient. This can limit a school leader's ability to act quickly and decisively when necessary. It is also more costly because groups use more human resources.

The arguments for and against shared decision making suggests that choosing this approach requires careful thought. School leaders must evaluate whether, for a particular situation, the assets outweigh the liabilities and whether they can simultaneously take advantage of the assets and control the liabilities (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). Nevertheless, if school leaders intend to operate as learning organizations, they must involve followers in the decision-making process (Senge, 2006).

### **Effective Practices in Group Decision Making**

Following are some suggestions for preparing organization members to engage in group decision making. Although not exhaustive, the list following represents the critical skills school leaders in the field have identified as essential to implementing more effective group decision making (Corey, 2011; Isaksen, 2011; Jonassen, 2011; Schoenfeld, 2011).

- **School leaders need to begin with a common vocabulary.**  
Coach team members in the predictable phases of group decision making.
- **School leaders need to put unwritten norms on paper.**  
Spend some time in the beginning establishing the norms of the group; then review the norms to make sure they are working.
- **School leaders need to get to know the demographics of the group.**  
Model acceptance and respect for a diversity of opinion. Provide interpreters for the full involvement of multilingual and multiethnic group members.
- **School leaders need to determine the strengths and future training needs of the group members.**  
Then provide training in those areas in which the group has the least ability and the greatest need.
- **School leaders need to avoid pushing for premature solutions.**  
Use brainstorming techniques to keep the dialogue open.

- **School leaders need to set the boundaries.**  
Seek agreement on the rules for a fair fight. Recognize cultural differences in conflict resolution.
- **School leaders need to recognize roadblocks to action.**  
Identify the ways groups can sabotage ideas.
- **School leaders need to look at the various methods groups use to solve problems.**  
Deal with conflict as it arises.
- **School leaders need to accept the notion that conflict can be a healthy change tool.**  
Use the consensus model to resolve conflicts.
- **School leaders need to keep the focus on practical problems.**  
Engage the group in substantive discussions to enhance their ability to move forward as a team of problem solvers.
- **School leaders need to make results visible.**  
Increase the group's commitment to action by setting high expectations for each group member. Ask group members to evaluate their progress in communicating results.
- **School leaders need to look at ways the group decision-making team can involve other agencies outside of the school.**  
Seek coalitions that can work for you.

### **Conclusion**

A great deal of decision making in school organizations is achieved through committees, teams, task forces, and other types of groups. There are both advantages and disadvantages to involving groups in the decision making process. On the one hand, the advantages of group decision making include: greater sum total of knowledge, greater number of approaches, more alternatives, increased acceptance of a decision, and better comprehension of a problem. On the other hand, groups create pressures to conform, can be dominated by one member, result in conflicting secondary goals and undesirable consequences, cloud responsibility, and take more time. Specific suggestions for improving group decision making were provided.

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