

6.8: Group Decision-Making

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the advantages and disadvantages of group decision-making, and how managers can improve the quality of group decision-making.

Involving more people in the decision-making process can greatly improve the quality of a manager's decisions and outcomes. However, involving more people can also increase conflict and generate other challenges. We turn now to the advantages and disadvantages of group decision-making.

Advantages of Group Decisions

An advantage to involving groups in decision-making is that you can incorporate different perspectives and ideas. For this advantage to be realized, however, you need a diverse group. In a diverse group, the different group members will each tend to have different preferences, opinions, biases, and stereotypes. Because a variety of viewpoints must be negotiated and worked through, group decision-making creates additional work for a manager, but (provided the group members reflect different perspectives) it also tends to reduce the effects of bias on the outcome. For example, a hiring committee made up of all men might end up hiring a larger proportion of male applicants (simply because they tend to prefer people who are more similar to themselves). But with a hiring committee made up of an equal number of men and women, the bias should be cancelled out, resulting in more applicants being hired based on their qualifications rather than their physical attributes.

Having more people involved in decision-making is also beneficial because each individual brings unique information or knowledge to the group, as well as different perspectives on the problem. Additionally, having the participation of multiple people will often lead to more options being generated and to greater intellectual stimulation as group members discuss the available options. **Brainstorming** is a process of generating as many solutions or options as possible and is a popular technique associated with group decision-making.

All of these factors can lead to superior outcomes when groups are involved in decision-making. Furthermore, involving people who will be affected by a decision in the decision-making process will allow those individuals to have a greater understanding of the issues or problems and a greater commitment to the solutions.

Disadvantages of Group Decisions

Group decision-making is not without challenges. Some groups get bogged down by conflict, while others go to the opposite extreme and push for agreement at the expense of quality discussions. **Groupthink** occurs when group members choose not to voice their concerns or objections because they would rather keep the peace and not annoy or antagonize others. Sometimes groupthink occurs because the group has a positive team spirit and camaraderie, and individual group members don't want that to change by introducing conflict. It can also occur because past successes have made the team complacent.

Often, one individual in the group has more power or exerts more influence than others and discourages those with differing opinions from speaking up (**suppression of dissent**) to ensure that only their own ideas are implemented. If members of the group are not really contributing their ideas and perspectives, however, then the group is not getting the benefits of group decision-making.

How to Form a Quality Group

Effective managers will try to ensure quality group decision-making by forming groups with diverse members so that a variety of perspectives will contribute to the process. They will also encourage everyone to speak up and voice their opinions and thoughts prior to the group reaching a decision. Sometimes groups will also assign a member to play the **devil's advocate** in order to reduce groupthink. The devil's advocate intentionally takes on the role of critic. Their job is to point out flawed logic, to challenge the group's evaluations of various alternatives, and to identify weaknesses in proposed solutions. This pushes the other group members to think more deeply about the advantages and disadvantages of proposed solutions before reaching and implementing a decision.



Exhibit 6.7 The Devils Advocate. At a meeting of McDonald’s franchise owners, attorney Brian Schnell was placed in the audience as a devil’s advocate and often strongly disagreed with franchisee attorney Bob Zarco that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)’s joint employer ruling on McDonald’s is a boon for franchisees. He would raise his hand often and vehemently, which Zarco had asked him to do before the meeting. In that way, the franchisors’ articulate arguments could be heard by all franchisee leaders in attendance and rebutted. Credit (Mr. Blue MauMau/ flickr/ Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0))

The methods we’ve just described can all help ensure that groups reach good decisions, but what can a manager do when there is too much conflict within a group? In this situation, managers need to help group members reduce conflict by finding some common ground—areas in which they can agree, such as common interests, values, beliefs, experiences, or goals. Keeping a group focused on a common goal can be a very worthwhile tactic to keep group members working with rather than against one another. Table 6.3 summarizes the techniques to improve group decision-making.

Table 6.3

Type of Decision	Technique	Benefit
Group decisions	Have diverse members in the group.	Improves quality: generates more options, reduces bias
	Assign a devil’s advocate.	Improves quality: reduces groupthink
	Encourage everyone to speak up and contribute.	Improves quality: generates more options, prevents suppression of dissent
	Help group members find common ground.	Improves quality: reduces personality conflict

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Conclusion

Decision-making is a crucial daily activity for managers. Decisions range from small and simple, with straightforward answers, to big and complex, with little clarity about what the best choice will be. Being an effective manager requires learning how to successfully navigate all kinds of decisions. Expertise, which develops gradually through learning and experience, generally improves managerial decision-making, but managers rarely rely solely on their own expertise. They also conduct research and collect information from others; they pay attention to ethical implication and their own biases; and they think critically about the information that they have received to make decisions that will benefit the organization and its stakeholders.

? Concept Check

1. Explain why group decision-making can be more effective than individual decision-making.
2. What are some things that can prevent groups from making good decisions?
3. As a manager, what can you do to enhance the quality of group decision-making?

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