

1.5.14: Decision Making In Groups

Learning Objectives

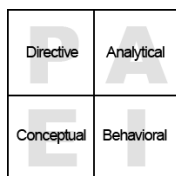
- Discuss different styles of decision making in groups

Up to this point, we have argued that teams create better outcomes than individuals. While those individuals come with a multitude of skills and experiences, the input of several individuals working in concert leads to more creative, better considered decisions. Group work and group success leads to higher morale. Another benefit is that with more members of the business involved in the decision, there will be better understanding of the decision, and thus, a greater buy-in or endorsement. This is why teams are used in the workplace.

We have pointed out how arguing occurs as we discussed conflict in teams. That conflict frequently is the result of the team working to reach a decision. Decision making in teams is complicated by many issues. Some of those issues relate to content, as discussed in the conflict section of this module. Difficulties may arise from negative member roles, such as social loafing. This can cost time as well as potentially harming the output. Another problem with team decision making may relate to the general difficulty of team communication. Remember the networks laid out earlier in this module that displayed how adding one or two members created a much more complex network? Such complexity may complicate the full sharing of relevant content. It definitely slows decision making as all members engage.

Decision Style Theory

Any decision is made in the context of its situation. The Rowe and Boulgarides Decision Style Theory examines the context for decisions across two continua. One side relates to the decision-makers tolerance of uncertainty (high tolerance to low) and the other relates to whether the individual is more oriented to the completing the task or to social accomplishment. These two continua form the axes for the model below. The four quadrants represent four decision-making styles.



Rowe and Boulgarides^[1] suggest this largely determines how we will respond in decision-making situations.

The dimensions of variance in this decision style theory are cognitive complexity (ambiguity tolerance vs. need for structure) and value orientation (social/human vs. instrumental/task-centered). Crossing these dimensions yields four decision making styles: (1) directive (2) analytical, (3) conceptual, and (4) behavioral, described below in PAEI order.

P: Directive (Low ambiguity tolerance, Task focus)

Directive individuals need and value structure. They prefer to make decisions based on clear, undisputed facts and impersonal rules and procedures. They trust their own senses and short, focused reports from others.

The Directive style might do well with leading a group to meet Tuesdays versus Wednesdays. "Let's meet Tuesday, unless someone has an objection." However, the Directive style might not do as well in leading a group in conflict to reach conflict resolution: "Please stop your bickering, we need to move on." In both examples, the leader of the group desires clear resolution that accomplishes the task.

A: Analytical (High ambiguity tolerance, Task focus)

Analytically-minded people can process ambiguity given enough time and information. They rely heavily on abstractions and instrumental logic, and they tend to go over all aspects of a problem with a fine-toothed comb, carefully acquiring and organizing large amounts of data. They consider every aspect of a given problem, acquiring information by careful analysis. When presented, their solutions are comprehensive, detailed and very thorough. They may also be innovative if the analysis turned up novel information or supported novel reasoning.

Analytical team members or leaders want information that leads to a conclusion. They are willing to invest the time and effort to reach the optimal solution. "Let's each take a quarter from last year and dig in to see which model, by color, sold best in each state to that we can prepare our best forecast for next year," seems well suited to this style. This decision appears to take some time. This style may not work well with determining which benefits to include to the health care plan next year along with a hiring plan designed to expand diversity. The Analytical style will look toward the data and may overlook the more human-focused issues presented with the new hiring plan.

E: Conceptual (High ambiguity tolerance, Social focus)

Conceptual decision makers are creative, exploratory, interested in novelty and comfortable taking risks. They are big-picture, creative thinkers who like to consider many different options and possibilities. They gather and evaluate information from many different perspectives, integrating diverse cues and passing intuitive judgments as they work to identify emerging patterns.

The Conceptual decision style may work well for determining how to provide maintenance support to customers living in six different countries with varying cultures and laws. A great deal of data and consideration of culture will be needed. This will not be a data-only decision that occurs in a short period of time.

I: Behavioral (Low ambiguity tolerance, Social focus)

Behavioral decision-makers focus on the feelings and welfare of group members and other social aspects of work. They look to others for information, both explicit information in what others say and implicit information sensed during interactions with them. They evaluate information emotionally and intuitively.

Behavioral decision making will focus almost exclusively on relationship, rather than on task. The decision-making process will take as long as is required for the Behavioral style to interact with most individuals impacted.

The purpose in understanding this model is to understand how individuals have conflicting desires and how situations must be considered against that preference.

How to Make Decisions

There are group decision-making mechanics aligned to team development and the styles listed above. They need a method to implement the atmosphere each style invokes. The styles above do not directly relate to the methods below, but you can see how, in an effort to keep conflict low, the style may align to the method.

When groups need to get a job done, they should have a method in place for making decisions. The decision-making process is a norm that may be decided by a group leader or by the group members as a whole. Let's look at four common ways of making decisions in groups. To make it simple, we will again use a continuum as a way to visualize the various options groups have for making decisions. On the left side are those methods that require maximum group involvement (consensus and voting). This side is better aligned to the Conceptual and Behavioral styles. On the right are those methods that use the least amount of input from all members (compromise and authority rule). This right is better aligned to Directive or Analytical styles.

CONSENSUS VOTING COMPROMISE AUTHORITY RULE



The decision-making process that requires the most group input is called **consensus**. To reach consensus *group members must participate in the crafting of a decision and agree to adopt it*. While not all members may support the decision equally, all will agree to carry it out. In individualistic cultures like the U.S., where a great deal of value is placed on independence and freedom of choice, this option can be seen by group members as desirable since no one is forced to go along with a policy or plan of action to which they are opposed. Even though this style of decision making has many advantages, it has its limitations as well—it requires a great deal of creativity, trust, communication, and time on the part of all group members. When groups have a hard time reaching consensus, they may opt for the next strategy, which does not require buy-in from all or most of the group.

Voting by majority may be as simple as having 51% of the vote for a particular decision, or it may require a larger percentage, such as two-thirds or three-fourths, before reaching a decision. Like consensus, voting is advantageous because everyone is able to have an equal say in the decision process (as long as they vote). Unlike consensus, everyone may not be satisfied with the outcome. In a simple majority, 49% of voters may be displeased and may be resistant to abide by the majority vote. In this case, the decision or policy may be difficult to carry out and implement. For example, a college campus recently had a department vote on whether or not they wanted to hire a particular person to be a professor. Three faculty voted yes for the person while two faculty voted no. Needless to say, there was a fair amount of contention among the professors who voted. Ultimately, the person being considered for the job learned about the split vote and decided that he did not want to take the job because he felt that the two people that voted no would not treat him well.

Toward the right of our continuum is **compromise**. This method often carries a positive connotation in the U.S. because it is perceived as fair since *each member gives up something, as well as gaining something*. Nevertheless, this decision-making process may not be as fair as it seems on the surface. The main reason for this has to do with what is being given up and obtained. There is nothing in a compromise that says these two factors must be equal (that may be the ideal, but it is often not the reality). For individuals or groups that feel they have gotten the unfair end of the bargain, they may be resentful and refuse to carry out the compromise. They may also foster ill will toward others in the group or engage in self-doubt for going along with the compromise in the first place. However, if groups cannot make decisions through consensus or voting, compromise may be the next best alternative.

At the far right of our continuum is decision by **authority rule**. This decision-making process *requires essentially no input from the group, although the group's participation may be necessary for implementing the decision*. The authority in question may be a member of the group who has more power than other members, such as the leader, or a person of power outside the group. While this method is obviously efficient, members are often resentful when they feel they have to follow another's orders and feel the group process was a façade and waste of valuable time.

During the decision making process, groups must be careful not to fall victim to **groupthink**. Groupthink occurs when members strive for unanimity, resulting in self-deception, forced consent, and conformity to group values and ethics^[2]. Let's think about groupthink on a smaller, less detrimental level. Imagine you are participating in a voting process during a group meeting where everyone votes yes on a particular subject, but you want to vote no. You might feel pressured to conform to the group and vote yes for the sole purpose of unanimity, even though it goes against your individual desires.

As with leadership styles, appropriate decision making processes vary from group to group depending on context, culture, and group members. There is not a "one way fits all" approach to making group decisions. When you find yourself in a task or decision-making group, you should consider taking stock of the task at hand before deciding as a group the best ways to proceed.

Group Work and Time

By now you should recognize that working in groups and teams has many advantages. However, one issue that is of central importance to group work is time. When working in groups, time can be a source of frustration as well as a reason to work together. One obvious problem is that it takes much longer to make decisions with two or more people as opposed to just one person. Another problem is that it can be difficult to coordinate meeting times when taking into account people's busy lives of work, school, family, and other personal commitments. On the flip side, when time is limited and there are multiple tasks to accomplish, it is often more efficient to work in a group where tasks can be delegated according to resources and skills. When each member can take on certain aspects of a project, this limits the amount of work an individual would have to do if he/she were solely responsible for the project.

1. Rowe, A. J., & Boulgarides, J. D. (1992). *Managerial Decision Making*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

2. Rose, Meleady, Hopthrow, Tim, Crisp, Richard J. "The Group Decision Effect: Integrative Processes and Suggestions for Implementation." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2012). Sage. Web.

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