

5.2.3: Collaborative Projects

What you'll learn to do: Discuss strategies for working in collaborative projects

Now that we understand the value of teams in the workplace and the risk of conflict, let's look at how teams working collaboratively manage communication in order to be productive and healthy.

It's that old saying of "in, out, and across:" team communications come in to the team, go out of the team, and pass between team members. As with all team skills, and all communication skills, there are structures which make communication more successful. There is a special communication need in teams: decision making. There are software tools to facilitate group writing. Let's look at those.

Learning Outcomes

- Discuss different styles of decision making in groups
- Discuss digital tools for communicating with groups
- Describe the process of collaborating with others to create a business message
- Discuss digital tools for collaborative writing

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.

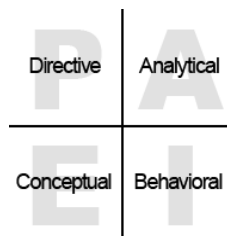


Figure 5.2.3.1: The four decision making styles

There is a wide spectrum of communication network styles in businesses

Rowe and Boulgarides (1992) 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.

Practice Question

Zoya is leading a team who can’t seem to come to an agreement. The heated battle between those who felt customers wanted easy access to the produce more than easy access to the cooler and freezer goods has been going on for the last four meetings. Zoya keeps asking for more and more data before letting the team vote. Which quadrant of the Rowe and Boulgarides Decision Style quadrant does Zoya fit into?

- Directive
- Analytical
- Behavioral
- Conceptual

Answer

Analytical

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.

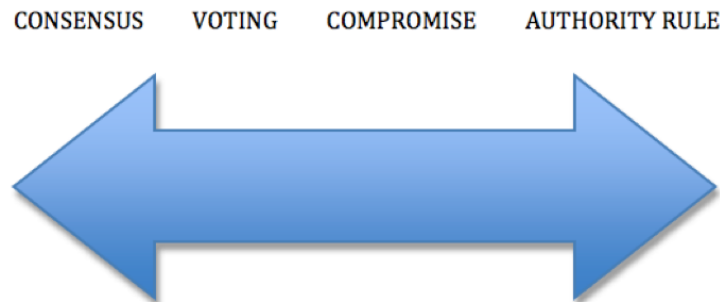


Figure 5.2.3.2: The continuum of decision making processes from consensus to authority

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 (Rose, Hopthrow & Crisp). 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.

Tools for Communicating with Groups

Technology is rapidly changing the ways we communicate in a variety of contexts, and group communication is no exception. Many organizations use computers and cell phones as a primary way to keep groups connected given their ease of use, low cost, and asynchronous nature. In today's work place, you can use Google Docs, chat online, transfer documents back and forth, and form messages to achieve the group's goals—all without ever having to meet in person. You'll likely find yourself participating in virtual groups with people who have been brought together from a variety of geographical locations.

When groups communicate through email, threads, discussion forums, text messaging, and other asynchronous methods, they lose the ability to provide immediate feedback to other members. Also, using asynchronous communication technologies takes a great deal more time for a group to achieve its goals. In this module, as we think of groups and collaboration, we think more of two-way communication and related tools.

Nevertheless, technology is changing the ways we understand groups and participate in them. We have yet to work out all of the new standards for group participation introduced by technology. Used well, technology opens the door for new avenues of working in groups to achieve goals. Used poorly, technology can add to the many frustrations people often experience working in groups and teams.

Meeting Scheduling

Have you ever watched an email addressed to more than five people rapidly fill your email box? Probably. Imagine the one with the subject line "Can you meet Tuesday at 10? or when?" This message for internal, external or a mix of meeting attendees will rapidly fill everyone's email box and possibly use more attendee time in reading and scheduling the meeting than the meeting may actually take. In Module 9: Communicating through Technology, we discussed a variety of tools available to streamline this interaction including Doodle and Calendly.

Quick Conversations

Groups may or may not be co-located. Throughout the work day, questions come up that need simple responses and may be somewhat flexible in the time the response is needed. These tools may be one-on-one tools or group tools (i.e. text, group text). This software typically provides ways for users to chat in real time, so projects can be completed faster because users don't have to wait for other users to respond by asynchronous means like email. Do check company policy on the use of these tools. There may be issues related to intellectual property, security, and customer relations. Tools that may suit this need are tools such as or similar to the following:

- Slack
- Google Hangouts
- Webex

- MicroSoft Teams

Email

Certainly email remains an excellent tool because large numbers of people may receive the same message. Make sure you check company use of these tools, particularly when sharing sensitive information. Email was discussed further in Module 3: Written Communication.

Conferencing

Conferencing has come a long way from bridged voice calls to expensive video bridges. Now most personal computers, tablets and phones offer users voice, video and text communication. This leads to richer communications through video conferences.

In Module 9: Communicating through Technology, we discussed a variety of tools available to for audio, video, and web conferencing.

Project Management

Project management is no longer for massive construction projects. Many tracking and coordination skills are used in group communication. These management tools help keep all parties involved in a project on the same page. These tools also reduce the amount of incoming and outgoing communications, since team members have access to the status of each person's work.

MS Project is a project management software product, developed and sold by Microsoft. It is designed to assist a project manager in developing a plan, assigning resources to tasks, tracking progress, managing the budget, and analyzing workloads. The price for this software may set some back, but it is the industry standard.

Here are a few other examples of project management tools. Keep in mind that each tool has its own quirks, and it may take some trial and error to figure out what works best for your team:

- BaseCamp
- Trello
- Clubhouse
- Asana
- Teamwork

Practice Question

Team communication throughout this nationwide project has been critical. What was one software the team might have first used on this project?

- WebEx
- Doodle
- MS Project
- Slack

Answer

Doodle

Collaborative Writing

The term **collaborative writing** refers to projects where written works are created by multiple people together rather than individually. Collaborative writing is also an approach for teaching novice authors to write, or for experienced writers to stretch their creative potential into modes that would be less accessible to each writer operating alone.

Using collaborative writing tools can provide substantial advantages to projects ranging from increased user commitment to easier, more effective and efficient work processes. It is often the case that when users can directly contribute to an effort and feel that they've made a difference, they become more involved with and attached to the outcome of the project. The users then feel more comfortable contributing time, effort, and personal pride into the final product, resulting in a better final outcome.

Teams may select from several methods of collaborative writing. It is important that the team discuss which style they will use for their project.

In all groups, there are those who are stronger in certain areas—such as conceptual thinking, leadership, public speaking and writing—than others. The group may elect a single individual to complete the actual composition of the document while everyone else contributes to the thinking and research that goes into it and also review, edit and possibly rewrite. This style leads to consistent voice for the document.

Teams should discuss individual team skills related to conceptual thinking, organizational structure, writing skills, subject expertise and proofreading skills. Ownership of the output belongs to all, no matter how individual work steps are completed. An example of this might be found in the parallel activity of creating sales proposals. There is a sales leader for the project, but operations team members, legal team members, and others have important input to the costs and description of the proposal.

Other projects are created using more of a divide and conquer method. In this style, each team member writes one or more assigned sections. This division of work is usually based on individual expertise. While expertise is important to each section, it may lead to some significant writing style complications. Final editing must consider these issues. Without a strong outline, there may be duplication or oversight in content when reviewing the entire document. The team may schedule some preliminary reviews to ensure the entire writing project is on track.

The outline for the document is the result of the work the team has completed first. In determining how to communicate the results, the team should robustly discuss the writing plan. There may be a need for more team work to fill in missing components. These discussions should have at least one member actively taking notes on the conversation to ensure all important components are included in the final document.

As the team gathers to structure the document's writing, team skills listed early in this module should be applied. In many situations, the team has completed much work and research already. That feeling of “that worst is over, we only have to write it down” may cause the team to let down its team-process efforts. Writing the document can cause as much—or more—stress as reaching the conclusions. Good team member skills are still needed.

As with all team activities, working in a group takes more time than working alone. With group writing, the initial drafting may go quickly, but the coordination before writing and the review after writing requires substantial effort. The output will be better with this effort, but to achieve that success takes time. There must be time for input from all relevant parties and the time to hear input on document content and structure.

Combinations of these styles are possible. How the writing takes place should be determined by the team in considering:

- Individual writing skill
- Length of time to final product
- Expertise in subject matter

Note that writing is a separate step in the document's preparation. Other steps such as outlining and editing have similar considerations.

One thing all group writers should remember: your name is on the document indicates your ownership and agreement with all content. Your reputation is on the line, so as a group member, it is your responsibility to be engaged regardless of the role.

Practice Question

The team has completed the travel and research and now it ready to write its summary for review by upper management. There was one leader, but each of the four has expertise in various topics that must be addressed by the report. Which is the best choice for writing the report?

- Gather in the conference room and knock it out together.
- Divide and conquer with each writing a section and then group review.
- Let the leader write it based on the team input and then management edits.
- Let the leader write it based on team input and then each review his 'own' section.

Answer

Divide and conquer with each writing a section and then group review.

Tools for Collaborative Writing

As mentioned earlier in the module, many groups are not physically located together. Collaborative writing would be nearly impossible for team members who are not co-located without the technology we have access to today. Social media and technology are changing the ways we communicate in groups. Even in co-located teams, this rich technology enhances teams' ability to produce well-written group documents.

In addition, collaborative writing tools have made it easier to design better work processes. These tools provide ways to monitor what users are contributing and when they contribute, so managers can quickly verify that assigned work is being completed. Since these tools typically provide revision tracking, it has also made data sharing simpler. Users won't have to keep track of what version is the current working revision since the software has automated that.

wikis

It is important to point out that to be able to do collaborative writing, we need suitable tools. Very powerful software tools in this regard include "wikis." Although the wiki software can be used in many ways, most wikis share some basic characteristics that distinguish them from other social and collaborative technologies: they are unique, highly collaborative, based on open editing and evolving.

Initially collaborative writing began with a file created by one person and then emailed to the group. Each member of the team typed in the document and shared with others. This created many confusing copies of a document each of which had modest to major modifications. With significant edits, a large team, or a large document, it could be very confusing as to which was most current.

With this method, if a group is using Microsoft Word, there are several valuable features that can help. Microsoft Word has a Track Changes feature that allows each user's changes to be highlighted and noted by other contributors. Track Changes can be coupled with the feature Compare Documents to show the original document next to the edited document. Work can then be combined into a new document with components of either revision.

If this sounds time intensive and sometimes complex, it can be.

Google Docs is software that allows multiple users to work in a single document. Like Microsoft Word, individual user contributions are collected by each user. Users can look forward and backward through revisions to select the best choice for the document.

Dropbox is a piece of software designed more for file storage than for editing. However, it also allows documents to be shared across platforms. Many companies have similar shared platforms for group document creations. SharePoint is one additional example.

With any of these choices, it is important to review organizational security and sharing protocols. Group member roles related to editing should be established.

Practice Question

Jennings is increasingly frustrated in the final steps of this project. The team is each writing part of the final report. Since they want to do it in a single format, there is one Microsoft Word document that they keep emailing to each other. Just yesterday he had to rewrite part of his corrections because he'd been working in an old copy of the file. Which of the following would help solve this problem?

- Dropbox
- Skype
- GoogleDocs Tracker
- Compare Documents feature

Answer

Compare Documents feature