

Wiser Group Decision Making

If ‘two heads are better than one’ why do so many committees make bad decisions?



Good group decision-making involves an open discussion among members of a group, each with their own skills, experience, ideas and information, leading to an informed decision. Members actively listen¹ to each other, ask constructive questions, and then based on the various ideas and inputs, jointly develop a solution combining the best elements from the overall discussion.

So why does this approach fail in so many situations? Unfortunately, in every group there are always two types of influence on its members: informational signals and social pressures. These influences can distort the deliberations of the group by suppressing

information if the facilitator or chair of the meeting is not careful:

- Informational signals can cause people to keep information to themselves when it contradicts information from others, especially leaders.
- Social pressures can cause people to keep information to themselves to avoid punishment, for example, the disapproval of leaders who are contradicted.

Unchecked, these influences can lead to four problems:

1. Instead of correcting the errors of their members, groups actually amplify those errors (e.g., the leader’s mistaken conclusion is validated by the group);
2. Cascade effects take over when the group follows whomever spoke first or loudest;
3. Groups become more polarised, as each person’s perception of the discussion reinforces their predisposed position²; and/or
4. Groups focus on shared information (what most people know) instead of unshared information, the information known only by a few individuals.

These negative influences that can lead to poor decisions due to the effects of either a ‘tyranny of the majority’, ‘groupthink³’ or the ‘Adeline Paradox⁴’; overcoming them to create an effective decision making group requires specific tactics from the group leader. Effective leaders need to:

- Keep quiet and convince group members that they sincerely want to hear all ideas;
- Rewarding group success (not individual success);

¹ For more on **active listening** see:

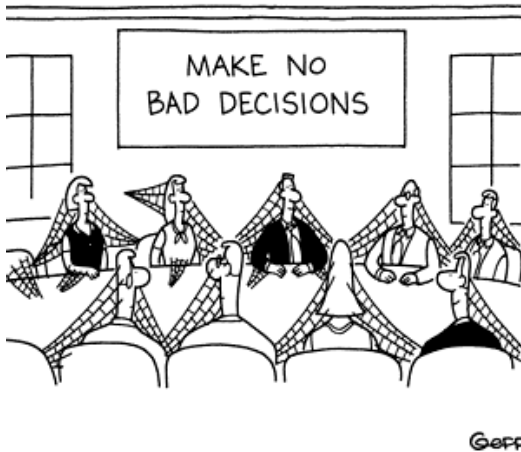
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1012_Active_Listening.pdf

² This is known as ‘confirmation bias’ - people only hear things that support their view and discount information that contradicts what they ‘know’.

³ Group think: where the desire for harmony or conformity in the group results in a dysfunctional decision-making outcome, see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groupthink>

⁴ Abilene Paradox: a group of people collectively decide on a course of action that is counter to the preferences of many (or all) of the individuals in the group, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abilene_paradox

- Ensure group members understand that if the group is right, everyone benefits and encourage everyone to find the ‘right answer’ rather than pushing their own ideas;
- Assign specific roles to each group member to ensure everyone contributes (for example, one person is the scheduling expert, another the cost expert);
- Avoid relying on the exclusive opinion of one ‘expert’, the wisdom of crowds (making decisions based on the average or majority opinion of ‘large crowds’ of people) will often lead to a better answer provided a majority of the crowd know their material;
- Task individuals or assigned teams (known as red teams) with acting as devil’s advocates; and/or
- Ask everyone is to put on a ‘black hat’⁵ at an appropriate time and critique the emerging decision.



- Recognise the only person who has never made a bad decision is a person who has never made a decision! The objective for the group is to make the best decision possible, within the optimum timeframe based on the resources and information available.

Process management is important; the leader and the group needs to distinguish between the ‘information gathering’ early rounds of the discussion in which ideas must be encouraged and ‘everything’ allowed on the table, and the final rounds of deliberations, in which groups must be tight and analytical as they seek to move to the precise solution. Successful groups will deliberately separate the two processes. Finally, the group needs to focus on making the right type of decision, in the right timeframe. No amount of data gathering will lead to the ‘right

answer’ if the issue being confronted by the group is a dilemma⁶. Similarly, the right decision, too late to make a difference is probably worse than no decision.

In summary, groups can add value to a decision, but only if the group decision making process is managed so that the group avoids the issues discussed above and reaches its decision in a timely way.

This article is part of Mosaic’s **Project Knowledge Index** to view and download a wide range of published papers and articles see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/PM-Knowledge_Index.html

⁵ For more on how ‘black hat’ thinking fits into group discussions see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/PMP_Sup/PMP_Mod09_HR.html#6hats

⁶ for more on the **different types of decision** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1053_Decision_Making.pdf