

Group decisions



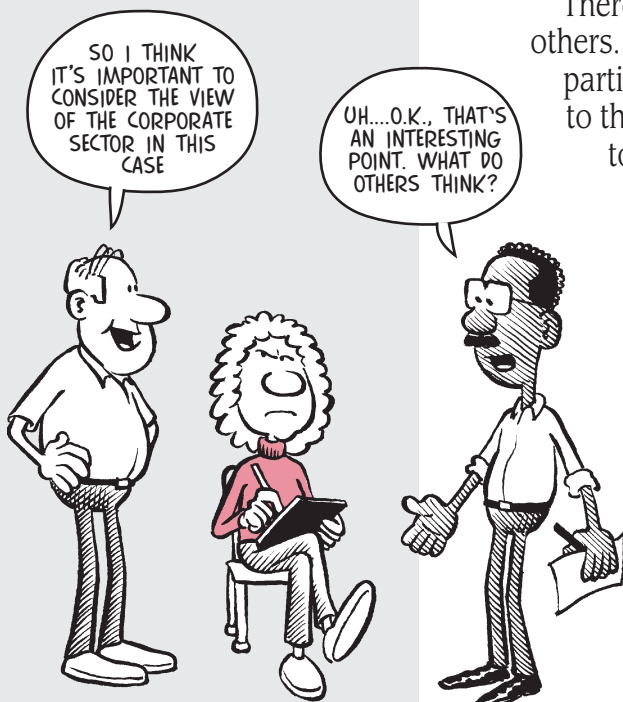
Making a decision as a group is a challenge. But a decision made by a group is often better than one made by an individual because, if the group is facilitated well, it is a decision that comes after input from diverse views and fruitful discussion. It is not easy to facilitate a group to come to a consensus, but it is possible. The facilitator's four main functions are to:

- encourage full participation
- promote mutual understanding
- foster inclusive solutions
- teach new thinking skills

It starts with discussion

Before a group can reach a decision together, they must discuss the issue at hand. Facilitating a good group **discussion** is the first step to facilitating a good group decision. What makes a good discussion? A good discussion is one in which all members of the group have a chance to participate, and to feel that their ideas are valued by the group.

There will always be group members who speak less than others. Speaking less doesn't mean that someone isn't actively participating—they might be listening and thinking. But it is up to the facilitator to give the less vocal members an opportunity to share their thoughts. Here are a few techniques.



Encouraging

After a discussion has progressed for a while, the facilitator can make space for less vocal members to speak by saying something like, "Is there anyone who hasn't said something who would like to?"

Balancing

Sometimes group members will seem to disagree with something another member says, but they end up staying silent. The facilitator can lend support to these people by saying something like: "That's an interesting point. What do others think?"

Making space

Much of a facilitator's job relies on her/his intuition. Sometimes a group member may appear, through facial expressions or body language, to want to say something but, again, remains silent. The facilitator can say to the individual something like, "Susan, you look like you want to say something—do you?" However, the facilitator has to be able to sense when a person isn't comfortable with being singled out like this. Being aware of body language can help.

Using the clock

When a discussion has been going on for some time and it is nearing its end, the facilitator can say something like, "We have about ten minutes left. Is there anything that anyone wants to say that they haven't?" This gives a chance before the end of the discussion for all group members to be heard.



TEN MINUTES LEFT, FOLKS, DOES ANYBODY WANT TO SAY SOMETHING THAT THEY HAVEN'T YET BEFORE WE START WRAPPING UP?



When everyone is heard in a group discussion, the final decision that is reached will be "owned" by all members of the group. No one will feel that they weren't part of the process, and the decision will be more **sustainable**.

Sustainable decisions

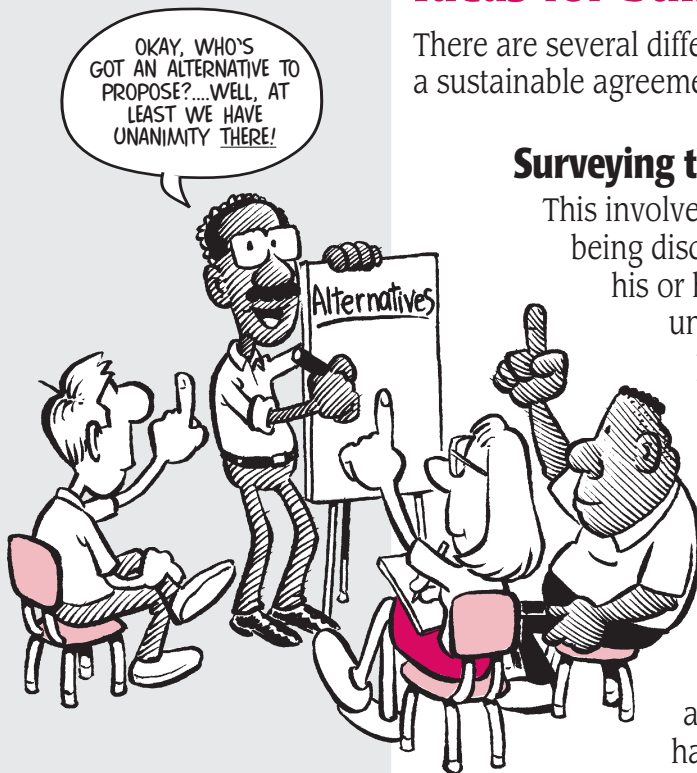
A sustainable decision is one that works, and lasts! Many decisions that a group makes are straightforward and sustainable. The challenge arises when decisions get complicated or difficult. But it's possible to make even difficult decisions as a group. All it takes is some clear planning and good facilitation.

A decision will most likely be sustainable if the solution reflects everyone's point of view. Of course, this takes time and persistence (see *Striving for unanimity* on page 19). Members of the group must be willing to face and overcome conflict. They must be willing to look at the problem from another's perspective. They must push themselves to challenge their own assumptions and search for imaginative solutions. Finally, they must share responsibility for reaching a solution that works for the whole group, not just part of it.



Ideas for building sustainable agreements

There are several different ways that a facilitator can help bring a group to a sustainable agreement. A few of these methods are outlined below.



Surveying the territory

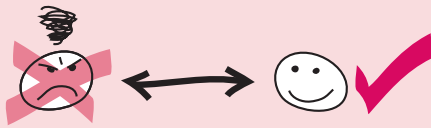
This involves identifying all the pieces of the problem that is being discussed. Every group member takes a turn at stating his or her position. This allows everyone in the group to understand the complexity of the issue. Everyone's point of view is heard, and the group then works toward a decision that takes the different views into account.

Searching for alternatives

This can be done as a brainstorm. Together the group makes a list of possible ideas. Some ideas will prove to be realistic, while many may not. The important thing is that alternatives are generated by the group as a whole, and everyone gets to have their say.

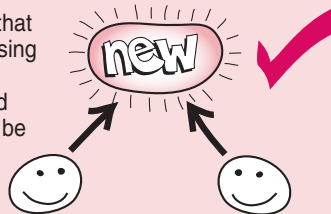
2 approaches to problem solving

In North America, we tend to tackle problems from an "either/or" mind set. We think that to solve a conflict we must choose either solution "A", or solution "B", or solution "C", and so on. Using the either/or mind set means that someone wins and someone loses.



Another approach to problem solving is using the "both/and" mind set.

In this mind set, people believe that instead of choosing one option over another, a brand new option can be found that will satisfy everyone.



The either/or approach is faster in the short run, but often decisions made with this approach end up falling apart. The both/and approach often takes longer at the outset, but the decisions made are usually sustainable.

Raising difficult issues

When a member of a group raises a difficult issue, sometimes the tendency is to try to silence him or her. But if members of a group are encouraged to speak freely and reveal their own personal views on difficult issues, a very rich discussion will often take place.

Striving for unanimity

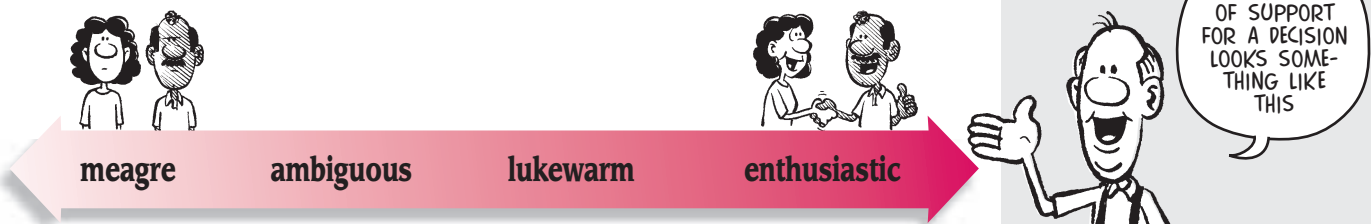
A decision that's made by **consensus** is more likely to be sustainable than one that's arrived at by a vote. When you try to build consensus in your group, you are striving to reach **unanimity**—that is, when everyone agrees.

According to the *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, the word "unanimous" comes from two Latin words: *unus*, meaning "one" and *animus*, meaning "spirit." "Consensus" also has Latin origins. Its root word is *consentire*, which is a combination of two Latin words: *con*, meaning "with" or "together with" and *sintire*, meaning "to think and feel." So *consentire* translates as "to think and feel together." And "consensus" is the participatory **process** by which a group thinks and feels together en route to their decision. Unanimity is the point at which the group reaches closure.

Many groups who make decisions by consensus only arrive at a final decision when they have unanimity. Reaching unanimity is their **rule for closure**. Other groups make

decisions by consensus without using full unanimity as their rule for closure. For example, some groups use “unanimity minus one.” In this case, the idea of “thinking and feeling together” is honoured, but the group also accepts that they might not always reach a point where all members are of “one spirit.” As a group, you must figure out what your rule for closure will be—and that is a decision you should reach by consensus too!

Levels of support



Getting enthusiastic support for a decision takes time and effort, and the group has to feel strongly enough to put the energy into achieving it. Some decisions can be made when there is lukewarm support. But if there is only ambiguous or meagre support, the group would probably do best to hang in there and keep looking for solutions that will satisfy more members.

When to aim for enthusiastic support

- ➔ When the stakes are so high that the consequences of failure would be severe.
- ➔ When a decision is going to be irreversible, so it's important to get it right.
- ➔ When a problem is hard to solve because it's complex or involves intense conflict. The group should spend more time and effort on it than they would on a simple problem.
- ➔ When many people have a stake in the outcome of a decision. It is worth spending time and effort to include everyone's ideas in the problem solving.
- ➔ Don't forget that the process of seeking an enthusiastic level of support can actually help empower group members. It can encourage people to use their own judgement and creativity to find a decision that is acceptable to all.



A good source on making group decisions

The ideas in this chapter were adapted from the *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* by Sam Kaner, published by New Society Publishers, 1996. Please refer to it for more information.