

# Facilitation Resources

**5**

**Volume 5.  
Making Group Decisions**

IN PARTNERSHIP ...

**Hubert H. Humphrey  
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## Introduction to Facilitation Resources

During the 1990s there has been a renewed interest in citizen involvement in community decisions. While many issues are still decided by powerful and financially strong networks, the ability of the average citizen to collect relevant information, address issues with intelligence, and initiate public meetings has made the public influence greater.

Those who work with organizations have learned the need for effective facilitation skills. In the Foreword to *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making* by Sam Kaner, Michael Doyle presents two important lessons learned. "Lesson one: if people don't participate in and 'own' the solution to the problems or agree to the decision, implementation will be half-hearted at best, probably misunderstood, and, more likely than not, fail. The second lesson is that the key differentiating factor in the success of an organization is not just the products and services, not just its technology or market share, but the organization's ability to elicit, harness, and focus the vast intellectual capital and goodwill in their members, employees, and stakeholders. When these get energized and focused, the organization becomes a powerful force for positive change in today's business and societal environments."

*Facilitation Resources*, available as a set of eight volumes, is an effort to enhance volunteers' group facilitation techniques. The participants will be able to use the skills in facilitating nonprofit groups and organizations through important discussions vital to the organization and to the community.

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# Overview: Making Group Decisions

Facilitators often need to select processes for group decision making. Decision making includes both consideration of who is making the decisions and the selection of processes or techniques to make decisions.

## Who Makes Decisions

It is important to pay attention to who makes decisions to be able to come to a good decision. People are more likely to implement decisions when they have had an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Decisions are made in three major ways: through professionalism, democratic process, and communitarian democracy. Professionalism focuses on expertise and competence. Democratic processes focus on equal representation. Communitarian democracy focuses on participation and discussion by individuals who are affected by the decision.

## How to Make Decisions

Utilizing appropriate processes and techniques will enable groups to make better and faster decisions. People will feel good about their involvement, and the overall effectiveness of the group will be enhanced. There is no magic technique that fits all situations. Matching processes to the style and preference of a group is one of the arts of facilitation. Process techniques should be carefully selected before a group meeting, but the facilitator and group need to have flexibility if the process does not seem to be working well. Having a facilitator kit with supplies needed for a variety of techniques will enable a facilitator to customize a process if the planned process is not working.

Many decisions made in community groups are arrived at through consensus. Consensus means that a good faith attempt has been made to hear everyone's views and reach a decision that everyone can support. Examples of strategies to make decisions with consensus include: affinity mapping, brainstorming, criterion listing, data dump, envision worst/best case scenario, and nominal group process.

## Tips for Facilitating

As a facilitator, managing the process of making group decisions is an important task. You will find these ideas useful.

- Plan ahead so that you as a facilitator are very familiar with the processes you intend to use.
- Explain the purpose of the process you use in addition to giving specific instructions. Written instructions (handout or on a flipchart) are helpful, especially when a technique has several steps.
- If people in the group are to serve in certain roles, such as timekeeper or recorder; be sure that those tasks are clear.
- If possible, demonstrate or provide a visual of what you expect from the group for each step of a process.
- When a process is complete, restate the intended goals of the process so that the participants understand what they did and what they gained from it.

# 5





# Decision-Making Models

Sovereignty, or the authority or right to decide, can be established in three common ways. These are professionalism, democratic representation process, or communitarian democracy. It is important to understand which philosophy is being used to determine who has the right to be involved in the decision-making process. The “who” involved in decisions is just as important as the “data” of decisions. Needless conflict or role confusion can be avoided if a thoughtful decision is made in regard to sovereignty.

## Professionalism

Professionalism focuses on expertise and competence. It assumes that authority should be vested in those who are most capable of making the best decisions. Often, in the professionalism model, professional staff are viewed as having this responsibility. In community situations, common expertise groups form to focus on an area of concern/interest.

An example of professionalism in practice is a Beef Producers Commodity group. This group of beef producers decides what professional education to offer its members and what portion of beef sales money should be used for promotion and marketing. The group agenda and budget are controlled by beef producers. The criterion for group membership is being a beef producer. Someone who loves animals and has a thirst for knowledge about beef might be allowed in the group, but would not be a voting member.

## Democratic Representation Process

Democratic processes focus on equal representation of the citizenry. Often committees that reflect the population are created to represent the various interests of the group. Majority rule is typically used to choose one option over another one. Once policy is made, the final authority is enforced through a hierarchy appealing back to the democratic process used to support the policy.

An example of the democratic representation process is a 4-H Board of Directors, which is composed of representatives of each geographic region of the county. At county meetings, the Northeast representative would be expected to know the issues/views of 4-Hers in that area. Voting on decisions is the way policy is made. A 4-H member who does not like a county policy needs to go through the elected regional director in order to try to change the policy. The hierarchy of 4-H leaders, staff, and volunteers enforces policies.

## Communitarian Democracy

Communitarian democracy focuses on participation and discussion by stakeholders, citizens, and/or participants who are in a group a decision affects. Discussion and rational deliberation are key to decision making. The process is based on consensus and tries to avoid circumstances in which majorities enforce their will on minorities. It assumes that decisions are legitimate when they are products of uncoerced discussion and consensus among members. Stakeholders are self-enforcers of the process. Communitarian democracy is based upon the following assumptions:



- Participants cannot have been coerced into participating or deceived about the role and authority they have for decision making.
- All the relevant citizens are included in the discussion.
- Everyone in the group is on an equal footing. If some people who are participating normally have more authority, this must be purposefully set aside for this process.
- The decision(s) will be fully aired, with no relevant considerations repressed and no arguments excluded.
- Individual participants are able and willing to project themselves into the perspectives of other citizens in the discussion and can find any decision reasonable from a number of perspectives, not only their own.
- Individuals are respected for the content of their contributions, regardless of age, gender, economic level, employment status, or other characteristic.

An example of communitarian democracy in action is a citywide planning process. Each individual in the city may respond to a poll asking them about what they would like to see the city do. A highly advertised public meeting to which all interested citizens are invited is held to review the citizen input. Dialogues and discussions are held in hundreds of places in the city, including the schools. Other public meetings are held until a consensus emerges about what the city should do. Widespread commitment is made to these plans, and individuals, civic groups, schools, service agencies, and others move toward the direction of the plans.



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# Consensus Building

## A Decision-Making Process

Your seven-member team is at odds. Two members favor purchasing a commercial refrigerator for the church kitchen, and five are against it. It's tempting to take a quick vote to get on to the next project.

**Don't do it!** A "majority rules" approach will lead, at best, to a win/lose situation. Someone wins, someone loses. Somebody promotes the idea, somebody stonewalls it. The purpose and the challenge of the team process are to go beyond traditional win/lose situations to find a better solution. To try to get consensus means that every member of the team accepts the decisions. You will hear responses like: "It isn't the answer I like best, but I'll support it."

*Definition of Consensus: "A state of affairs where communications have been sufficiently open, and the group climate sufficiently supportive, to make everyone in the group feel that they had a fair chance to influence the decision, and those who do not agree with the majority alternative, nevertheless understand it clearly and are prepared to support it."*

—James Trent

## What consensus decision making is and is not

Consensus decision making is:

- general agreement
- a way to build trust and team spirit
- a way to secure ownership and commitment
- a way to carefully think through alternatives
- a way to avoid destructive, unresolved conflict and hard feelings
- a way to make more creative decisions
- a way to build self-esteem

Consensus decision making is NOT:

- unanimity
- majority rule (win/lose )
- voting—votes do not guarantee commitment

## How does a group arrive at consensus?

The group has worked together in positive ways to achieve a workable level of mutual trust and understanding.

The group is presented with a problem. Possible solutions are brainstormed. The ideas are then considered, one by one, and those that are clearly unworkable are discarded. The remaining ideas are considered, and arguments, pro and con, are given. During this process some group members may change their minds bringing the group closer to consensus. Another possibility is that group members may suggest modifications of an idea that will satisfy those who did not approve of the idea in its original form. The group works within itself to agree on the two or three best (most workable, under the circumstances) solutions.

The jury system is a good example of a form of decision making.



### Skills that are helpful in reaching consensus:

- seeking input from all members
- defining terms
- changing focus (e.g., change from most desirable to least desirable)
- active listening
- knowing when to take a break
- seeking similarities and combinations
- moving to higher levels of generality
- using quiet time to think

Time and patience are required. Consensus can be tricky, but it's always worth the effort. Teams learn that group decisions are almost always an improvement over the individual points of view team members held before entering the group. Here are some guidelines:

1. Avoid arguing for your view. State your case clearly and concisely, and then listen and carefully consider comments and other options discussed.
2. Don't surrender to the win/lose option when the group is stuck. Make a real effort to find the next most acceptable alternative for all concerned.
3. Don't be wishy-washy and change your mind just to avoid conflict. Yield only to positions that are genuinely better than yours. If agreement comes too easily, be suspicious. Make sure everyone's reason for accepting the solution is similar.
4. Don't avoid conflict by using binding votes, flipping a coin, or cutting deals: "I'll give in on this point if you'll give in on that." Consensus isn't compromise.

### Final questions:

- Have you made your best case?
- Did you feel "understood"?
- Did you feel "heard"?
- Will you support the decision?

### Phrases to use during consensus building:

- "I wonder if we could list several alternative possibilities."
- "Let's brainstorm some of the advantages and disadvantages (pros and cons) of each option."
- "Lynn, you haven't said much. Where are you on this issue?"
- "Shawn, help me understand your view better. Are you saying \_\_\_\_\_?"
- "Peter, I understand you're not in agreement with option B. Is there anything more you can say to make a case for the option you prefer?"
- "Kim, you've made several strong points for your view, but the others don't seem to be convinced. Do you feel you've really been understood and really listened to by the others?"
- "Dave, I hear you say you've made your best case and feel the others have really heard and understood it. Would you be ready now to support option B, even though it wouldn't be your personal choice?"
- "I'd like to test this. Do we have consensus? Can we all agree to support this publicly and work for it?"
- "I believe, then, we've reached consensus."



# Fist to Five: Determining Support

This process is a convenient way to determine the degree of support within a group for a given proposal.

Once a team, task force, or committee has indicated that they are moving in a clear direction, the facilitator states the proposal or direction as he or she perceives it, then asks every member of the group to indicate how they feel about that direction based on a scale of fist to five.

### **Fist**

“That is not a good idea and I am going to block you if you try to implement it.”  
(In other words, a “no” vote.)

### **One Finger**

“I do not agree, but I promise not to block it.”

### **Two Fingers**

“I do not agree, but I will work for it.”

### **Three Fingers**

“I am neutral.”

### **Four Fingers**

“It is a good idea, and I will work for it.”

### **Five Fingers**

“It is a great idea, and I will be one of the leaders in implementing it.”

In other words, Fist to Five is simply a scale from a No vote to a Yes vote with varying degrees in between.

Once all members of the group have indicated how they feel, the leader should turn to any blocker and ask, “What part of our current proposal do you object to?” There are two reasons for doing this. One is that often one individual can see a particular problem with the current decision that the rest of the group has not seen. If the person holds up a fist, it is possible for the rest of the group to “see the light,” and to compromise. Second, input is helpful because it places the responsibility or accountability where it rightfully belongs, with the person who has an objection. This forces that person to state openly to the rest of their colleagues exactly what they object to and why. This reduces the possibility that a person will object simply because they don’t feel well that day, or don’t like the person who proposed the idea.



# Guidelines for Using Consensus

## Tips for the Facilitator

1. Summarize frequently.

This means restating the sense of the discussion, including points of agreement, shared concerns, and points of disagreement.

2. Ask if your summary is accurate and captures critical issues.
3. Ask for proposals (suggestions, solutions) that take into account the shared concerns and goals of the group.

Don't invite debate at this point, but rather clarifying questions and discussion. Try to generate as many alternative approaches as possible. Encourage the group to be creative and not to assume that offered suggestions are mutually exclusive.

4. Try to summarize and articulate the sense of the group.

This is a time to try to blend and mesh the offered solutions, and to articulate any apparent conflicts among them.

5. Ask if there are objections or concerns about specific suggestions, approaches, or options.

This is the time in the discussion for debate. Try to keep the group focused on its common goals, concerns, and agreements without minimizing the significance of the differences and conflicting points of view. Try to get at underlying concerns, needs, and interests that are the basis for any particular "position."

6. Ask if there are additional approaches, suggestions, or proposals that handle the concerns and conflicts better than those already being considered.
7. If you can, offer a summary of the discussion that captures what the group consensus seems to be.

This is the place in the discussion when it is important to identify elements of the discussion and various proposals that enjoy complete or widespread agreement and to validate agreement on these points with the group. If these points can be separated from the areas of disagreement then even if consensus cannot be reached on all points, the group still has agreement on some things and can move forward.

8. Offer a summary of areas of disagreement.

It is important to try to capture the essential concerns or ideas that seem to be in conflict, articulate the best thinking of the group so far as to how to proceed, and ask if anyone feels strongly enough to block that approach if nothing better can be arrived at.



If the answer is “no” (in other words, no one is willing to block the proposed approaches), ask if there is enough support to proceed now, or if the preference of the group would be to give the issue a rest to see if anyone can come up with a better alternative. (This approach is driven entirely by the urgency of the issue and how much time there is on the agenda for further consideration of this issue.)

If there is strong enough dissent to block the decision, review the areas of agreement again, remind the group of what has already been decided, and make a decision about whether to table the item for further discussion later, or to ask for another round of proposals that address the concerns of the dissenters. Remember, people cannot block decisions simply on the basis of personal preference. Dissent must be based on belief that there is a conflict based on prior agreements, values, and/or goals, or disagreement about the expected outcomes of a particular approach to a problem.

If there is not time for further discussion and it is not possible for the decision to be postponed, at least identify how the decision will be made and how the voice of dissent will be included in the outcome. Make sure there is general acceptance of the necessity and fairness of this approach to the conflict.

9. Review decisions that have been made and clarify task assignments.

This is often the place where disagreements really get handled, that is, when people have to back up their points of view with commitment to act.

## Questions and Statements for Improving the Discussion

### To Broaden Participation

“Would anyone care to offer suggestions or facts we need to better our understanding of the problem or topic?”

“Now that we have heard from a number of people, would others who have not spoken like to add their ideas?”

“How do the ideas presented thus far sound to the rest of you? What do the rest of you think about that suggestion?”

### To Limit Participation

“We appreciate your contributions. In order to keep this discussion moving, we need to hear from some of the others. Would those of you who have not spoken like to make some remarks?”

“Does anyone have any comments in addition to those already covered?”

“Thank you for your input. We have discussed this particular issue at length and to effectively come to a decision, we need to move on to the matter of . . .”



### To Focus Discussion and Gather Evidence

“Getting back to the agenda, let’s focus our discussion on defining the problem and save the discussion on possible solutions until a little later.”

“Let’s summarize what has happened thus far to ensure that we all understand what has been agreed upon.”

“What has happened, specifically, that has convinced you this is the best approach?”

“Has this solution worked for other groups or organizations?”

“Am I right in sensing agreement on these points . . . ?”

### To Help the Group Move Along

“Have we spent enough time on this phase of the problem to allow us to move on?”

“Have we discussed this issue enough so that we can take a vote and shift our attention to the next item?”

“What have we accomplished in our discussion up to this point?”

“Since we cannot reach a decision at this meeting, what are some of the points we need to take up at the next one?”

“What are some points that need further study before we convene again?”

## Tips for Group Members:

1. Make sure you understand what is needed for each agenda item.
2. Listen, stay focused, and pay attention.

Don’t berate yourself if your attention wanders, but it really helps if everyone present pays attention to what is going on, and what is being said.

3. Think about your motive and purpose before you speak.

Are you: Introducing a new idea? Raising or reinforcing a concern about the topic? Adding new facts?

4. Avoid repeating yourself.

Remember that just because someone disagrees with you, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they misunderstand your point of view. If you think you are being misunderstood, it will probably work better to ask someone else to paraphrase, rather than to get repetitive.

5. Don’t be reluctant to state preferences or to disagree, but remember that your preference alone is not sufficient to block a decision.





Your silence will be taken as consent; if you have a concern the group needs to hear it.

6. It is okay for you to attempt to articulate the group consensus if you think you are hearing one emerge.
7. Remember that even though you are smart and have good ideas, they may not work for this group, and the group may be able to generate even better ideas with your input.
8. Don't be reluctant to ask questions.

Even if it looks like something is perfectly obvious to everyone else, if it is not clear to you—ask. Chances are someone else will benefit from the clarification, and even if everyone else is completely clear, you can't bring your best thinking to the process unless you understand what is being said.

### More Tips for Facilitators

1. Make sure that everyone who wants to speak gets a chance to speak.
2. Remember that you can use pairs and threes to increase "air time" for everyone.
3. Remind people that even though they fear the consequences of a decision because there is not enough information to reliably predict the outcome, they can try something for a while to see if it works.
4. When people cannot arrive at an agreement, encourage the group to make sure that "all the cards are on the table."
5. Encourage group members to voice concerns and different points of view.
6. Make sure that the sense of the discussion is getting captured in writing in a way that everyone can see. This reduces repetition and confusion.

Source: *Guidelines for Consensus*, prepared by the National Rural Economic Development Institute, Dick Gardner



# Decision-Making Strategies

Facilitators often need to make recommendations or work with groups to select processes and strategies to make group decisions. Making sound decisions while having thoughtful team/group participation is often the goal of the group.

There are numerous strategies and processes one may select for making group decisions. The processes included in this section are fairly easy to use, rely on group participation, and work well with consensus decision making. A brief description of the processes included in this section is provided as an introduction.

## Affinity Mapping

This is a quick, efficient way to organize brainstormed material and start to narrow it down so the group can work with it more easily. Another title for it is "sort by category."

## Brainstorming

This is a group process that involves the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members of a group. It is a popular method for groups to identify known solutions and invent new ones that are more creative.

## Criterion Listing

This method works well when you have several options and need to decide which one is the best. You list the criteria of selection and then compare your options to the criteria. This also results in new options which may be better than those on the original list.

## Data Dump

This is an excellent way to build a shared information base about a particular topic. This tool will help the group do a quick survey of whatever people know about a particular subject.

## Envision Worst/Best Case

A group may have difficulty reaching agreement because of unspoken fears about a particular course of action. This strategy asks group members to consider an option and then name "best case," "worst case," and "most likely case." It can help a group gain momentum with selecting a course of action.

## Nominal Group Process

The nominal group process is a structured problem-solving or idea-generating strategy in which individuals' ideas are gathered and combined in a group situation. It is an effective way of gathering a lot of ideas from a group, and it guarantees input from all group members.



# Decision-Making Strategies: Affinity Mapping

This technique may also be known as “Sort by Category” or “Affinity Diagram.”

This is a quick, efficient way to organize brainstormed material and start to narrow it down so the group can work with it more easily. One version is to have the group brainstorm ideas, which are listed on flipcharts by a recorder. A variation that makes the concepts more portable is to have individuals list ideas on large note cards. Large (4 x 6) notepads with sticky strips make it easy to see, move, and sort ideas.

## How It Works

1. Once the ideas have been generated, have the group scan the brainstormed lists and identify major categories. Try to keep it between five and nine categories if possible. Use sub-categories if you must.
2. Put a clear category title or “header” at the top of fresh blank sheets of flip-chart paper. The headers should make sense standing alone.
3. Have two or three volunteers sort the listed items into the categories while the group does something else. Sorting can be done by re-listing onto note cards or by cutting up the lists with scissors and taping the ideas to new sheets. Other group members may take a break while the sorting is being done.

### Cautions:

- Don't give the sorters more than 10 minutes.
  - Avoid using a larger group to sort; it will take more than double the time.
4. Have the large group review the sorted lists and adjust. If one item seems to belong in more than one category, put it in both.
  5. Once categories are identified, they may be prioritized and put onto a meeting agenda or assigned to a work group.

## Variation

This tool is also useful in a chaotic situation when broad issues or themes must be identified. It is then called an Affinity Diagram. The Affinity Diagram allows the whole group to do the sorting. This takes more time but allows the entire group to make sense of the patterns within the specific concepts. Individual note cards are used and then posted on a large wall or white board. The group moves past the board and puts items that seem to be like others in one location. The group continues to move past the board until all concepts seem to have been clustered. Then, headings are assigned to the idea clusters.

Adapted with permission from The Facilitator's Tool Kit, Lynn Kearny.



### Decision-Making Strategies: Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a group process that involves the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members of the group. It is a popular method for groups to identify known solutions and invent new ones that are more creative.

Brainstorming is a way to get a group of people involved together in the process of generating creative ideas. Because the key ingredient in a brainstorming session is creativity, the facilitator can help by setting an optimistic and energetic tone. A group that has used brainstorming successfully and has found some new solutions or directions comes away with greater confidence in its ability to cope with challenging situations.

While it is perhaps one of the most widely used decision-making strategies, it is probably also the most abused. Here are some guidelines for brainstorming and some suggestions for its successful implementation.

#### How It Works

Brainstorming is often most productive if it has been preceded by an analysis or some sort of discussion or exercise that allows people to share their perceptions of the problem, its root causes, the barriers to change, the specifics of the present situation, a vision of the ideal situation, the parts of the problem, and perhaps an inventory of the resources available to help solve the problem.

Once the problem or issue is clear, brainstorming usually produces an inventory or listing of old, familiar ideas. It is at its best when the group begins adapting or combining old solutions into creative new ones. The facilitator can encourage the group to do that.

#### Guidelines

To begin, the facilitator writes the topic or question to be brainstormed on a flip-chart or chalk board, then asks the group to call out their ideas in short phrases that can be written down quickly. To set a creative, high-energy tone, the group should understand the following guidelines from the onset:

- No judgments - no idea or suggestion, no matter how wild, is to be shot down or edited. (There will be time to evaluate the ideas later.)
- Anything goes - offbeat, unusual, humorous, and bizarre ideas are encouraged.
- Go for quantity - the more ideas, the better the chance of coming up with a winner. It's fine to "piggyback" or build on other people's ideas.

The facilitator can keep things moving by:

- Setting a time limit (commonly 3-10 minutes, depending on the topic and the size of the group) so people will know they can't afford to sit on an idea.
- Giving a few examples to start things off.
- Praising and/or coaxing (gently).
- Asking for different sorts of examples if the group starts to develop a "one-track mind."



The conventional approach is to have one person record the group's ideas on a flipchart or chalk board, so that all can see. Sometimes two recorders work as a team, writing alternate items so the group's words can be captured and the group does not have to wait for the recorders to catch up. If you have several topics to brainstorm, a variation that is especially useful is to write each topic on individual sheets of newsprint or on separate parts of the board, and ask each participant to go up to the lists and record items "graffiti style."

Before ranking ideas the group may need to discuss the practicality and desirability of the different ideas. Since brainstorming is an expansive, divergent thinking approach that generates lots of ideas, it needs to be followed by a narrowing, focusing activity that extracts a reasonable number of promising ideas for the group to work with.

Here are some possible ways to do that:

1. Everyone votes for the three ideas they believe are most viable; the three items that score highest will be used for discussion.
2. Members try to rate the ideas from one to ten—ten is high and one is low; the three ideas with the highest combined score will be discussed further.
3. If it appears that certain ideas are most popular, the facilitator might say, "There seems to be interest in pursuing the second idea and the fifth. Are there others that we should continue to explore as well?"
4. See if any ideas can be combined or if any are redundant.

Despite its limitations, brainstorming remains a popular technique. It often provides a first clear picture of the group's potential to think creatively together and to move in new directions. It also involves everyone in providing ideas, thus setting the stage for consensus and action.

### Variations

Recent research indicates that brainstorming may not generate lots of creative idea if the group goes off on a tangent without exploring the full range of possibilities. These variations of the brainstorming process may help.

1. Instruct each group member to brainstorm individually on the topic, writing down ideas on a small piece of paper. Then share the ideas by reading off the lists, or compiling the lists later.
2. Divide the group into two or more teams, each to brainstorm on the same topics. This "parallel groups" approach has some of the advantages of the first variation, plus the sense of group cooperation, which is an important side effect of brainstorming.



### When to Use Brainstorming

- When you want to come up with ideas for solutions to a problem:  
How can we publicize our coming Community Fair?  
What can be done about rising rents and deteriorating housing in our neighborhood?"
- When you want to get ideas about how the group should spend its time:  
Which training needs should we address at the next workshop?  
Which community problems should we try to deal with during the next year?
- When you want to identify people or organizations that could be helpful to your group:  
Who could we call on to support our campaign for a community health clinic?

Adapted with permission from Making Group Decisions, University of Vermont Extension Service, 1989.



### Decision-Making Strategies: Criterion Listing

A criterion grid works well when you need to decide which of several options is the best choice for your purposes. You list the criteria for selection and then compare your options to the criteria. Your criteria are the main points you wish to use to make your best choice.

Try to have five to nine criteria: more makes the process too cumbersome and fewer gives you less data from which to make a choice.

Drawing a grid makes it easy to compare each option to all the criteria and to document it. It is also easy to see which option meets the most criteria, so the best choice can be made.

#### How It Works

1. First, list your criteria.
2. Make a grid on a large sheet of paper or a flipchart. List the criteria across the top, and draw a vertical column under each. Make a TOTAL column along the right-hand edge of the paper. List the options down the left-hand side, and draw a horizontal row beside each.
3. Take one option at a time and compare it to each criterion.
  - If it meets the criterion, make an X in the box where the columns meet.
  - If it doesn't meet the criterion, put an 0 in the box.When you've compared all the criteria, count the total Xs you marked for the option and write the number in the total column.
4. Go on to the next option and repeat the process.

The option with the greatest number of Xs is probably your best. If two or three tie, see if you can use them all, or combine them into a mega-option. This process often results in a new option that may be better than those in the original list.

Source: Adapted with permission from The Facilitator's Tool Kit, Lynn Kearny.



### Decision-Making Strategies:

## Data Dump

This is an excellent way to build a shared information base about a topic. This method will help the group do a quick survey of whatever the participants know about a particular subject.

### How It Works

1. Quickly list the categories of information the group wants to know about the subject. For example, if the subject were Electronic Town Meetings, the categories of information might be:

Technologies	Methods/Processes
Subject Matter	Participants

2. Write the name of each category at the top of a blank sheet of flipchart paper. Post the labeled sheets side-by-side on a wall and seat the group facing them. If the topic or the group is large, get some extra people to help record.
3. Have the group brainstorm what they know about each category. Ask people to keep their remarks to key words and phrases, not long and rambling explanations. Use extra sheets if you need them.
4. When the group has done a "data dump" on each category, go back through the lists and circle any words or phrases that people want clarified. When all items to be clarified are marked, go through them one by one and ask for further explanation.
5. Identify any further information the group needs: categories with little or no information, items that were doubted or hotly debated, categories that were missing that the group now wants to investigate. Put a star by each of these or create a new list.
6. Decide how to get the information that is still needed.

### Variations

Post the blank category sheets around the room and give group members 30 minutes to go around and write what they know in each category. Gather the group together again for steps 4 through 6.

Have people identify their contribution as a fact or opinion; label with "F" or "O."

**Fact:** The person can produce objective data to prove their assertion (e.g., price lists, item counts, technical specifications).

**Opinion:** No objective data can be produced within a reasonable cost and time frame to support the assertion.

Do not favor fact over opinion; simply label them so people know which is which. Not all important information is objective, and not all facts are valuable. An informed opinion is often very valuable.

Source: Adapted with permission from The Facilitator's Tool Kit, Lynn Kearny.





### Decision-Making Strategies:

# Envision Worst/Best That Can Happen

A group may have difficulty reaching agreement on an idea or course of action because of unspoken fears. One way to get a group unstuck is to confront this fear gently and get it out of the way.

## How It Works

1. Put the option(s) the group is debating at the top of a blank flipchart sheet. Use one sheet for each option. (Caution: Narrow the field to three or fewer options before trying this strategy: it's too heavy-duty to attempt more.)
2. Ask the group, "If we went ahead and implemented this, what's the worst that could happen?" Record everything they say on the chart.
3. Then ask, "If we implemented it, what's the best that could happen?" Record everything they say. Use as many sheets as you need.
4. Then ask, "What's most likely to happen?" Record their remarks on a new sheet.

Repeat this process if there are other options being considered. Each option gets the full treatment.

5. Go back to your decision-making process and now see if you can get a decision whether to implement or which option to implement.

## Variations

Use the worst case list as a trouble-shooting tool. Modify each option to reduce its risk and improve its effectiveness.

Give each "worst" and "best" item a score on two dimensions:

1. Probability (1 = unlikely, 5 = almost certain)
2. Seriousness (1 = mild annoyance, 5 = real damage to the organization)

Then figure out how to deal with items that are both probable and serious.

Source: Adapted with permission from The Facilitator's Tool Kit, Lynn Kearny.



### Decision-Making Strategies:

# Nominal Group Process

Research about group dynamics has shown that more ideas are generated by individuals working alone, but in a group environment. The nominal group process is a structured problem-solving or idea-generating strategy in which individuals' ideas are gathered and combined in a face-to-face, nonthreatening group situation. It is an effective way of gathering a lot of ideas from a group, and it guarantees input from all group members. It is an inappropriate technique for routine meetings, bargaining, negotiation, or coordination.

Nominal group process is used to maximize participation in group problem-solving. It ensures a balanced input from all participants and takes advantage of each person's knowledge and experience. It is useful for generating and clarifying ideas, reaching consensus, establishing priorities, and making decisions on proposed alternative actions. It has advantages over the usual committee approach to identifying ideas. Group consensus can be reached faster, and everyone has equal opportunity to present ideas. It requires attention to agendas.

## How It Works

### For a small group (12 or fewer participants)

The goal is to reach a group decision on a specific problem or issue. The participants are seated around a table. A facilitator provides the leadership for the process. Ideas are recorded on a flipchart.

The group facilitator asks participants to introduce themselves in a sentence or two and reviews the five-step procedure for nominal group process. The issue or concern is presented to the group.

1. Each person silently writes down his or her ideas in a few words. Using a round-robin approach, each group member presents, but does not discuss, the first idea on his or her list. A recorder writes all ideas on a flipchart or chalk board. The facilitator then asks each person for their second idea, and so on, until all ideas are recorded. All ideas are recorded as presented.
2. The facilitator reads each idea and asks if there are questions, interpretations, or explanations. It's a good idea at this point to number the ideas.
3. The facilitator asks each person to write down, in a few minutes, the ideas that seem especially important. Some people may feel only a few items are important; others may feel all items are important. The facilitator records on the flipchart list and lists the number of people who consider each item a priority. The top 6-10 items are listed on fresh paper and posted.
4. Participants rate each of the top options as first, second, and third choices using three different-colored dots. The dots by each option are counted and totalled, thereby ranking the items on the list. First choices are weighted as a three, second choices as two, and third choices are one.



5. You may then search for solutions to the issue using the same method, starting with the issue receiving the highest ranking. Action steps may also be identified and evaluated.

### **For large groups (more than 12 participants)**

If the group is larger than 12 people, it should be divided into two or more working subgroups. Each subgroup goes through the steps 1-4. When a subgroup has voted its outcome, it shares its top five ideas with the total group. Based on the new level of information, each person in the group, privately and in writing, ranks priority items numerically. The overall group ranking of the top five ideas is based on the pooled outcome of all individual votes.

### **Using Nominal Group Process for Community Issues**

Any community advisory group or task force might consider using a nominal group process technique

- to determine what community problems are of immediate concern.
- to design improved community services or programs.
- at a community forum or town meeting where broad citizen input is needed, (e.g., on a proposed plan of land use, transportation, public service, or school expansion).

### **Advantages**

- Allows individual generation of ideas without suppression by a dominant group member.
- Motivates all participants to get involved because they sense that they are personally affected.
- Generates many ideas in a short period of time; allows for a full range of individual thoughts and concerns.
- Permits input from people of different backgrounds and experiences.
- Stimulates creative thinking and effective dialogue.
- Allows for clarification of ideas.
- Gives all participants an equal opportunity to express opinions and ideas in a nonthreatening setting; moves a group toward definite group conclusions.

### **Disadvantages**

- Requires a skilled facilitator.
- May be extremely difficult to implement with large audiences; small group facilitators must be trained in advance and participants should be divided into groups of six to ten members.
- Process may appear rigid if group facilitator does not show flexibility and respect for all ideas and concerns.
- May be some overlap of ideas due to unclear wording or inadequate group discussion.
- "Knowledgeable" individuals selected to participate may not represent all community subgroups. Assertive personalities may dominate unless leadership skills are exercised.
- May not be a sufficient source of data in itself; may require follow-up survey, observations, or documentary analysis.

Source: Adapted with permission from Making Group Decisions, University of Vermont Extension Service, 1989.





# Making Group Decisions

### Instructions:

1. Divide the group into six small groups by counting off from 1–6 with each person getting a number.
2. Assign a table in the room for each group and identify one decision-making strategy for each group.
  - a. Group 1—Affinity Mapping
  - b. Group 2—Brainstorming
  - c. Group 3—Criterion Listing
  - d. Group 4—Data Dump
  - e. Group 5—Envision Worst/Best Case
  - f. Group 6—Nominal Group Process
3. Allow 15-20 minutes for small group work. The task is for the small group to discuss how to demonstrate the decision-making strategy for the large group. The demonstration is to be 5 minutes or less.
4. Reconvene the large group.
5. Allow each group time to demonstrate their strategy and answer questions about it within the large group.
6. Brainstorm about the value of a facilitator understanding how to utilize various decision-making strategies within groups.
7. Ask individuals to reflect about which of the strategies they currently are comfortable leading as a facilitator and which they need to have additional information and practice.



## Finding More Resources

The educational and corporate community has dozens of marvelous resources available for the motivated facilitator wishing to find more resources. Also, the practical wisdom of gifted community facilitators should be tapped. This guidebook has drawn upon several excellent resources and those are listed in the following reference list.

In the search for more resources consider human resources, written resources, technology-enhanced resources, organizational resources, and other resources. Identify excellent facilitators and interview them. Practical wisdom is often not written but accessible through stories. Utilize libraries to search for materials. Search for organizations that support facilitator growth and learning, like the National Facilitators Network (has state-based groups, too). Contact your local Cooperative Extension Service for information and coaching.

Consider searching for resources under the general heading of facilitation as well as under each of the sub-topics important to facilitation (conflict, decision-making processes, etc.). Remember that the context in which facilitation is done is important—in board rooms, in community meeting rooms, in group retreat settings, etc. Evaluate the resource to see if it is more appropriate in one context than another.

Best wishes finding more resources to build upon your skills, understanding, and expertise as a facilitator.

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