Building Consensus

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about building consensus, helping groups come to a mutual decision. In particular, you will learn about:

1. **Decision Making Theory**
2. **Decision Making Process**

1. Decision Making Theory

In the last unit, you learned that diverse groups create better outcomes than individuals. When individuals come with a multitude of skills and experiences, their work often leads to more creative and better considered decisions. A diverse team also brings a range of perspectives that can better address a diverse world.

There are other benefits to teamwork. Working and celebrating successes as a team leads to higher morale. When people are involved in decision making, they have a better understanding of decisions and more investment in the outcome. These are some of the reasons teams are used in the workplace.

However, the very thing that gives a team its strength—diverse backgrounds and opinions—can make it difficult to reach consensus. Recall the example of a diverse team of healthcare professionals developing a curriculum; in that example the conflicting priorities of each team member made it difficult to move forward on the bigger goals. Such difficulty reaching consensus might not result in open conflict, but can result in indecision and an inability to move forward in any direction. This makes consensus building more complicated than conflict resolution. You don't just have to get everyone to agree to a compromise, but get them enthusiastic about the same plan. Delivering into the science of decision making can help explain how to be a better decision maker.

Alan Rowe and James Boulgarides researched decision making from a managerial perspective, and released a highly-influential article (1987) and book (1994) on the topic. While it is one of many models, it is a useful one for thinking about decision making in the specific context of your own team.

The Rowe and Boulgarides Decision Style Theory begins with a look at how each person makes decisions based on two continuums. The first is tolerance for uncertainty. Those with higher tolerance for uncertainty are willing to suspend making decisions; those with lower tolerance for uncertainty want the matter to be decided.

The other continuum is between logical and social approaches to decision making. The analytical approach looks for evidence, while the social approach will look to satisfy the most people.

Say some friends are planning to dine out. As they consider restaurants, Annie asks about parking, traffic, reservations for large groups, and other logistical considerations. Connie is exasperated by Annie's questions and says, "Who cares? Let's just go downtown and see what looks good!" Djamila doesn't like that suggestion, but is also impatient with Annie's questions.

"Can't someone just pick the place?" she asks.

"I don't care where we eat either, I just want to stop arguing!" Brenda says. In the terminology of decision style theory, each friend represents different points on the two continuums. Rowe and Boulgarides drew this as a quadrant with four general categories for how people come to decisions.

	Logical	Social
High tolerance for uncertainty	Analytical	Conceptual
Low tolerance for uncertainty	Directive	Behavioral

- Annie is **analytical**. She is the one looking at menus, prices, parking, and peak hours to make sure the group doesn't face any long waits, that everybody's dietary needs are met, etc. She doesn't feel pressure to make a decision, and would rather the best decision be made.
- Djamila is **directive**. She wishes somebody would take charge and name the restaurant without all the discussion. She wants it to be a good choice, of course, but doesn't need to process all the available information the way Annie does.
- Connie is **conceptual**. She is open minded about the restaurant, doesn't feel any urgency to make a decision, and may seem indifferent because she can roll with whatever decision is made. If anything, she might be reluctant to settle on a decision because she wants to try something new. She might drive Djamila crazy by suggesting new restaurants even after it seems the matter has been decided.
- Brenda is **behavioral**. She is most concerned about everybody being happy with the decision, so they can have fun as a group. She is thinking less about the food than the way everybody feels when they get there. Knowing one person might be dissatisfied will make her dissatisfied.

A	B	C	D
Annie	Brenda	Connie	Djamila
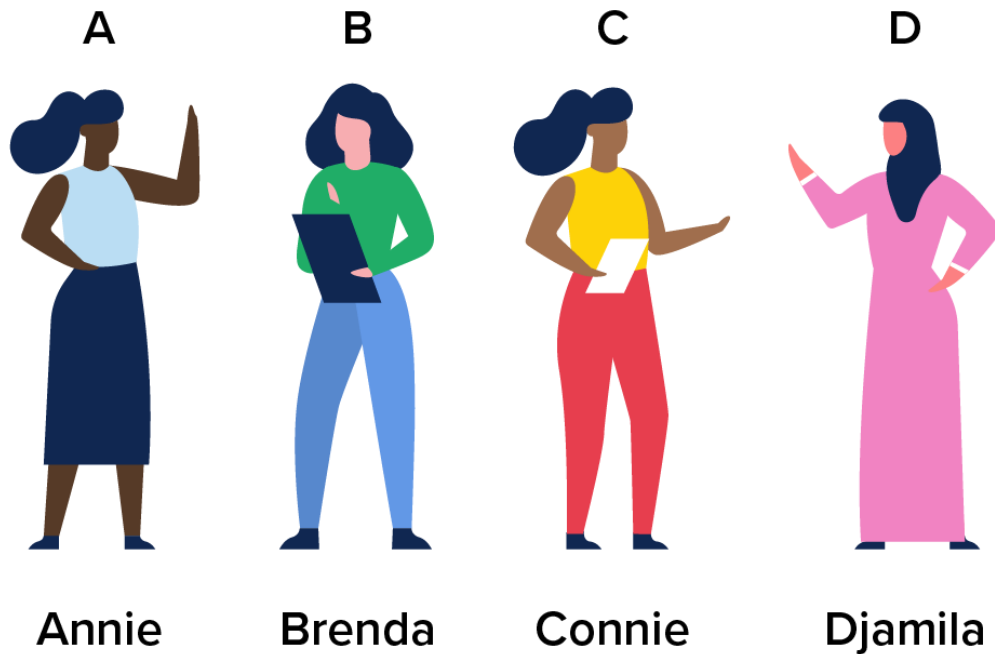
Understanding the range of personalities and how they respond to decisions can help explain why something simple like deciding where to go for dinner can be so difficult. It's not just that members of the group have different opinions; it's that they have different approaches to making decisions.

However, it's important to remember that these are continuums, not absolutes. In fact, maybe a fifth friend is right smack in the middle of both continuums and trying to help the others come to a consensus. She knows about decision theory and how to meet the needs of each person.

- Assuring Annie that the restaurant they pick will take reservations and have reasonable prices, even if she can't promise parking will be a cinch. This meets her need to have some of the logistical questions answered.
- Asking Djamila if she can make the reservation, meeting her need to be in charge.
- Taking one of Connie's suggestions of new restaurants, filling her need to try new things.
- Maintaining a positive and upbeat attitude, fulfilling Brenda's need for everyone to get along.

While not all decisions will be resolved this easily, you can become skilled at building consensus by identifying what each person needs and trying to meet that need, whether it's having key information, the feeling of responsibility and ownership, the opportunity to explore possibilities, or a feeling of group buy-in.

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

It is easier to build consensus when each member of the group understands what each other person needs and is committed to meeting those needs.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Analytical

A person who looks to data to inform decisions, and is comfortable with uncertainty. Analytical thinkers like to have information available and evidence supporting the decision.

Directive

A person who looks to leaders to make firm decisions. Directive people often want to be a part of the process.

Conceptual

A person who is focused on new experiences, and may prefer the decision be left unmade so there are more possibilities. Conceptual people can get behind a decision if it promises new experiences.

Behavioral

A person who looks to the group to come to consensus and puts group satisfaction over personal preference. A behavioral person wants to be assured that everyone is amenable to the decision.

2. Decision Making Process

Knowing about decision making theory can help meet the needs of individuals for consensus building, but may not be enough for complex decisions, or processes that involve several decisions. Fortunately, there are group decision-making mechanics aligned to the model above.

First, having a structured decision making process in and of itself gives a feeling of fairness and order. If decisions are made without an established process, it may feel to some that some decisions are being rushed into or forced upon them.

Let's look at four common ways of making decisions in groups. 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).

Consensus - Majority Rules - Minority Rules - Authoritative

Consensus is the ideal process, meaning that ultimately everybody supports the decision. While not all members may support the decision equally, they all do agree to carry it out. If you've ever served on a jury, you might know how difficult it can be to reach consensus. Especially in the U.S., people put great value on individual voices and personal opinions. It may be easier for some people to simply be outvoted or overruled than to be pressured into going along with a decision. To reach consensus group members must listen carefully to other opinions and be willing to change their mind.

↪ **EXAMPLE** An organization is adopting a new conduct policy that covers a range of potential issues from a dress code to preventing unwanted employee behaviors. Because the entire staff will have to adhere to the policy, it is especially important for everyone to agree to it before it becomes officially adopted.

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. It may be difficult to make the time or find a time for everyone to participate.

🚩 HINT

One way to reach consensus in a large group is to have a process in place that gives people a chance to brainstorm and consider the example above. They may first invite all staff to name their biggest concerns about the current work environment and propose solutions. These can be collected in a single web page where people can view and vote on each proposed policy change. Administrators can gather and disseminate the most agreed upon policies to begin the discussion.

When groups have a hard time reaching consensus, they may opt for the next strategy, which does not require unanimous agreement. This is letting the **majority rule**. In the U.S. and many other countries great value is put on the simple principle that you put a question to a vote. In most cases this can simply be "half the people plus one," though some situations may require a two-thirds majority or another number that shows broader support. In most cases voting feels fair, even if not everyone agrees with the decision. It can be effective if consensus can't be reached and the decision needs to be made.

↪ **EXAMPLE** A gardening center has to relocate to a bigger location, and the owners want staff buy-in instead of simply deciding on a new site. Two sites are proposed, one close to the old site and big enough for their current needs but with minimal room for further expansion. The other is further away and has much more room for growth. There are pros and cons to both locations, and the staff has discussed it at length and simply can't come to consensus. But everybody does agree that they need to make the choice, and also agree that whatever the site, they will give their best effort to making the store successful. In this situation a vote will put the matter to rest.

The downside of majority rule is that while the minority may agree that the process was fair, they will not have the same investment in the decision. Moreover, regularly voting on decisions may silence minority opinions. Perhaps most seriously, letting the majority rule can cancel out the advantages of diversity or allow the majority to ignore the rights and concerns of the minority.

↪ **EXAMPLE** An organization will vote on a new health care plan. One plan has higher employee contributions but better benefits. The other plan has a lower employee contribution but higher out-of-pocket costs for doctor visits and prescriptions. A majority of staff are healthy, and prefer the cheaper plan, but the staff with chronic health conditions, or dependents with chronic health conditions, will be severely impacted.

Both consensus and voting may include **compromise** to reach unanimous or majority agreement. This method often carries a positive connotation because it is perceived as fair since each member gives up something, as well as gaining something. However, compromise might also mean that nobody is really happy or excited about the decision.

↪ EXAMPLE An office building wants to make better use of its space for staff amenities. Staff have a lot of ideas on how to use the space. Some propose a workout room, others want a quieter space for yoga and meditation. Yet others simply want a comfortable place to spend their breaks. The company proposes a compromise, a flexible space with some exercise equipment, yoga mats, and a corner with comfortable chairs, and reaches consensus. In the end, the environment is too mixed for it to be useful to anyone.

The next decision method on the spectrum is **minority rule**. The prospect of minority rule may feel at odds with the American way of life, but is actually the most common way decisions are made in organizations, whether they are public or private, for-profit or non-profit. An executive committee, board of directors, or other panel usually makes or approves major decisions. Ideally, these groups have representation from across stakeholder groups, are diverse, and comprise people who are both experts and highly ethical.

↪ EXAMPLE An organization facing budget shortfalls needs to lay off workers. In this unfortunate situation, it is unlikely that consensus will be reached, or that majority rule will lead to fair outcomes. In this case, minority rule of organizational leaders may be the best solution. However, as this group is likely to have high-ranking leaders, they may also simply protect their own interests and come to a compromised solution that doesn't look at the best way to shore up the long-term needs of the organization. The fairness and long-term impact on the organization depends on the decision makers having a reasoned discussion, listening to one another, and considering the interests of all. It is a case where transparency and accountability are of utmost importance to maintain trust within the organization.

At the far right of the continuum is authority rule, where the leader of an organization makes decisions. This may be necessary when quick decisions have to be made, such as in an emergency situation, or in situations where even a minority group cannot come to agreement. It might also be done when the leader of an organization wants to take sole responsibility for a controversial decision. In most cases, and certainly in successful cases, the decision is still preceded with extensive discussion and participation, but ultimately left to one person. Having an authority rule requires a lot of trust in the decision maker.

↪ EXAMPLE While juries are one of the best-known examples of consensus, the courtroom also provides a classic example of the other end of the spectrum. The judge has authority over the trial and the courtroom, and will make several decisions about the process when there is no time for deliberation, such as what can be admissible evidence, when to censure a lawyer or other participant for their behavior, and even when to take breaks. The judge at a criminal trial will determine the sentence if the defendant is found guilty. The trust in a judge's legal expertise and lack of material interest in the trials they preside over is paramount to the judicial system working; if the public loses trust in the judge's impartiality or legal expertise, the system fails. Similarly, any situation in which an authority rules requires confidence that they want the best decision for the organization, and that they follow a transparent and fair process. It also presumes that the authority will seek the advice of experts to guide their decisions.

As you might guess, the Directive decision-making style will lean toward the authoritative model, with a trusted leader making firm decisions, while the Behavioral style will want consensus. The Analytical style would prefer minority rule, provided that the minority here represents a group of informed experts. The Conceptual decision maker will lean toward majority rule, which balances the need for a quicker decision with the most buy-in. Whichever decision style is most dominant in your group may determine the ideal way to make decisions.

However, the best decision making processes will also depend on the context. 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.

🚩 **HINT**

One way to make all decisions feel fair to a group is to have an appropriate amount of discussion beforehand with multiple points of view represented. Another way is to have consensus on the process itself, if not on the ultimate decision. For example, while your group may be unable to agree on a direct decision, they may be agreed on "putting it to a vote," or entrusting the decision to one or more respected leaders in the group.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Consensus

Everybody in the group has a voice and agrees to the decision. Some situations require consensus for a decision to be successful, when individual buy-in is necessary.

Majority Rule

A question is put to a vote and whichever decision gets the most votes prevails. Majority rule feels fair to most people and can be useful when consensus can't be reached.

Minority Rule

A select group of people – usually experts and leaders – makes a decision on behalf of the group. This is necessary when consensus cannot be reached and voting is unlikely to lead to the best decision.

Authoritative

A single person makes a decision, often for sole accountability. Even in authoritative models, decisions should follow discussion where all voices are heard.

📋 **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you learned about **decision-making theory** and some of the more common decision-making styles. Everyone has a somewhat different approach to making decisions, often based on their tolerance for uncertainty and their degree of logical versus social orientation. You also learned about different kinds of **decision-making process**. Decision-making in groups falls along a continuum from consensus to authoritative, with the process depending on both decision styles of the members of the group and the context of the decision itself.

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