



UNIT 4 Making Good Group Decisions

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Create a plan for implementing, evaluating, and following up on decisions
- ✓ Avoid common decision-making mistakes

Unit 4

Making Good Group Decisions

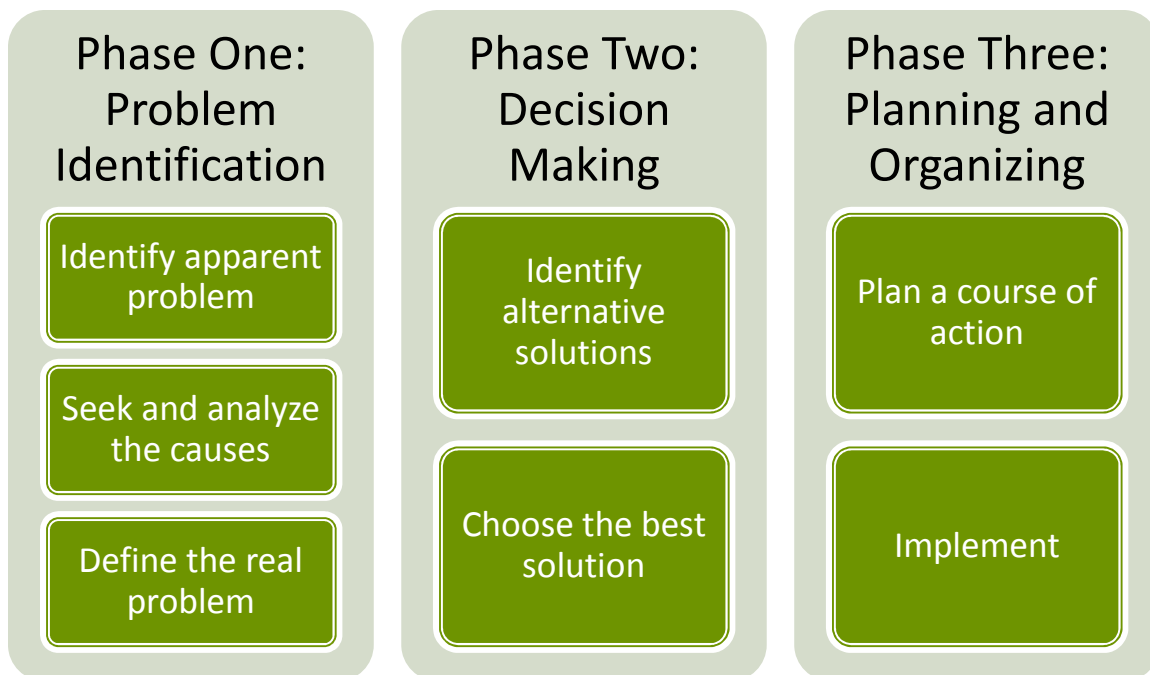
Working toward the Decision

There are several tools that you can use that will help strengthen group decision making.

In your workday you deal with two kinds of decisions: the routine and the strategic. In a **routine decision**, the conditions of the situation which the solution has to satisfy are known, and the job is simply to choose between a few obvious alternatives. The routine decision is often governed by which alternative will accomplish the goal with the minimum effort and disturbance.

Not so for the strategic. **Strategic decisions** are more complex. They involve either finding out what the situation is or changing it. The ramifications of strategic decisions are broader; they can affect productivity, organization, capital expenditures, and so forth.

Remember the tools we have talked about so far, including the three-phase model we introduced in Session Five. These tools can be used for both types of decisions.



Decision Frames

There are many formats for decision frames, and lots of names. Essentially, this is a graphic representation of the decisions that the group is making. It provides a format for thinking through the process and allows decision makers to consider the likelihood of each possibility. Sometimes these decisions make use of formal shapes involved in flowcharting, although for shorter decisions a series of drawings on a flip chart will suffice.

The decision tree below is one team's consideration about whether to purchase new smartphones or tablets for the production team at a particular workplace. The first dot raises the question "smartphone or tablet." Subsequent dots will highlight the decisions made through the process, weighing out factors like usability, cost, service charges, practicality, applicability to work, etc.



Stepladder Technique

This is a useful technique that encourages individual participation within a group. This technique encourages people to contribute on an individual level before they can be influenced by anyone else. This method will encourage a wide variety of ideas and stops anyone from withdrawing or hiding within a larger group. It also avoids having some personalities overpower others because, with this technique, all members of the group are equal. People will not want to engage in this method if one person has an agenda and pushes it on the others. This technique is very effective for smaller groups (four to seven members).

There are five steps to this technique.

1. Group members are presented with the problem and given time to think about it, do some research, and form their own opinions about what could be a reasonable solution.
2. Two members of the group are assigned to discuss the problem. They meet and discuss their ideas.
3. A third member is added to the group and presents their ideas before hearing the ideas that the first two have discussed. After all three have presented their ideas, they discuss the options together.
4. The process is repeated by adding one member to the group at a time. Remember to allow discussion time as each person joins the group. Be careful here, since the first members of the group may drift off. Keep the group small enough that everyone can remain engaged.
5. Once presentations and discussions are finished, the group makes their decision.

The Delphi Technique

This technique is very useful when you have people who are considered experts on a topic and when you are looking for information to help with forecasting or resource allocation. This technique works by using cycles of anonymous, individual written discussion and argument, and is coordinated by a facilitator.

Anonymity and remoteness of the process (which could also be managed using an online survey tool) helps to avoid personality issues and groupthink. It also gives people the opportunity to think things through on their own time, to consider other arguments adequately, to gather any background information that is required, and avoid the emotional energy that can be generated during an in-person debate.

The process requires an effective and strong facilitator. One of the weaknesses to the method is that participants are not always provided with adequate background information, and sometimes when the information is made available, the experts do not access it. The facilitator has to make sure that participants are engaged and that they do not put off responding.



Nominal Group Technique

When a group meets, it can sometimes be difficult to get heard above the rallying of people who are loud or have more status in the organization. When it comes to gaining consensus on important decisions and priorities, the nominal group technique is a great help.

This is a face-to-face process often used in organizational planning where people with competing priorities need to come to agreement in order to assign resources and money.

The group must be provided with and discuss the issues before the evaluation takes place, with each group member having an equal voice. Each participant will nominate their priority issues and rank them on a scale.

As an example, the IT Development manager compiles a list of requests from different sections within the company. This includes things like updating software, creating custom programs, purchasing hardware, and fixing bugs in existing systems. Naturally, the manager has a budget that restricts the amount of work they can do each year, and dictates the resources that are available.

In order to work with her colleagues, the manager understands the value of having everyone with items on the list decide what the priorities are. She invites her colleagues to a meeting where they will discuss each item on the list, and then assign it a priority order for completion. An added benefit of these discussions is that the managers involved get a very thorough understanding of competing and complementary priorities throughout the organization.



Avoiding Fatal Mistakes

Groupthink

If you've ever been part of a group where people hesitate to speak up, or you led a team (or a meeting) where people wouldn't speak up, you may have been experiencing groupthink.

Groupthink occurs when the goal of consensus overrides people's responsibility to speak up. It can occur at the end of a workshop, where at 4:00 p.m. the trainer asks if there are any questions. Somebody may have a question, but they hesitate to ask because they know that other participants are keen to leave early that day. The question goes unasked, people leave early, and everyone but the person with the question is happy.

Fighting the Status Quo

Sometimes, despite all of our best problem solving and decision making, we run into a brick wall. Although we know change is good, inevitable, and that we have some terrific ideas that will solve our troubles and generate money, the familiar is easy. Maintaining the status quo is not going to require late night planning sessions, new processes, equipment, or money. The status quo might be ugly, but it's familiar. In a world where we are constantly required to work already, people and companies are happy to maintain the status quo. It's also not going to add work to our busy, overworked to-do lists.

If you are fighting the status quo in getting decisions implemented, you need to phrase your business case in a way that presents the benefits of the change to the people who must implement it, and you need their cooperation. Time is a precious commodity. It's often not that people fear change as much as they fear the commitment that comes with it.

Change must be worthwhile if people are going to come on board, so make it worth their while. Change should not be implemented just for the sake of changing; it must somehow have a positive effect.



Making Good Group Decisions

Other Decision-making Tools

New, Appeal and Feasibility (NAF) Technique

NAF is a method to score ideas in Group Decision-making to pick out ideas worth pursuing.

The process goes as follows:

Firstly

- Identify a current work-related problem.
- Generate a number of ideas as potential solutions (through brainstorming, brainwriting, etc.).
- Write each idea on a blank file card.
- As a group, remove duplicates and merge similar ideas to end up with a set of unique file cards.

Next

- Consider one idea/card at a time.
- The group leader reads out each idea/card to the group.
- The group then votes.

Voting

- Each person writes their score for each category on a separate card which will act as their vote and passes these in to the group leader.

Sample Score Card

Idea			
	Scale (1 to 10)		Score
New	1= very old	10= brand new	
Appeal	1= not appealing	10= very appealing	
Feasibility	1= not feasible	10= very feasible	
	Total		

Scoring Ideas

- The group leader averages out the scores from the entire group vote.
- The group leader leads a discussion about the ideas with the top aggregate scores.
- The group comes to a consensus about the final decision.

Visualization

Most methods of group decision-making revolve around words. This can limit creativity for some in the group. As well, especially if the group making decisions has been bogged down by meetings, discussions, brainstorming and the like, visualization can be a great change.

By using drawings and diagrams a problem can be described in a different way. There are great examples of problems that can be helped through this method. Some examples are:

- Designing new driving paths through a parking lot
- Visualizing what a company might look like in 10 years
- Deciding on what benefits will be included in the company's benefits package.

The process goes as follows:

Firstly

- Identify a current work-related problem.
- Using large sheets of paper have each person draw the problem and visualize it.
- Remind them to be creative.

Next

- Gather the group together in small (2 or 3) groups.
- Have them share their visualizations.

Then

- Ask each group to write a short narrative explaining the problem and their potential solutions.
- Have them present this to the rest of the group.

Finally

- Have a discussion and come to a consensus about the final decision.

Benefits Possibilities Concerns (BPC) Technique

Much like NAF that we looked at earlier, BPC is a method to score ideas in Group Decision-making to pick out ideas worth pursuing.

The process goes as follows:

Firstly

- Identify a current work-related problem.
- Generate a number of ideas as potential solutions (through brainstorming, brainwriting, etc.).



- Write each idea on a blank file card.
- As a group, remove duplicates and merge similar ideas to end up with a set of unique file cards.

Next

- Consider one idea/card at a time.
- The group leader reads out each idea/card to the group.
- The group then evaluates the ideas.

Evaluating

- Each person writes their evaluation for each idea (assessing Benefits, Possibilities, and Concerns) on a separate card.

Sample Evaluation Card

Idea:			
Criteria	Your Analysis		
3 Benefits			
3 Possibilities			
3 Concerns			

Scoring Ideas

- The group leader reads out each idea and the group discusses the Benefits, Possibilities, and Concerns of each.
- After all ideas are discussed each person votes for their top three ideas.

Final Vote

- The top three ideas from the group are determined by the vote.
- The group comes to a consensus about the final decision.

Analyzing and Selecting Solutions

Selecting Criteria

Once you've generated solutions, it's time to sort them out and make those decisions. As we mentioned way back at the beginning of the course, the decision we have to make is sometimes obvious through the problem definition and solution generation phases. Other times, we have to weigh out the solutions and decide what the best decision is for right now. Here are some additional considerations to think about as you select solutions.

Deciding on Wants/Needs

Despite the work we put into defining a problem, and the effort it will take to implement decisions, sometimes the final debate is pretty close when we weigh it all out.

Consider these scenarios:

- With all other things being equal (such as vacations, seniority, and responsibility level), would you decide to leave your job right now and take on a new one for a 5% increase in pay?
- Would you move to a new cubicle because there was 15% more sunlight?
- Would you use premium gasoline in the company vehicles if it cost 5% more in fuel, but saved 5% in maintenance costs?

Deciding what you **need** as opposed to what you **want** is an essential decision, especially if you are in a position to only get what you need.

The Cost-Benefit Analysis

This is something that can be a driving factor in your decision. If you are making a business decision, it can also be the grounds for creating a business case to implement your decision.



A cost-benefit analysis (CBA) simply weighs out the cost of your decision in a way that is clear and easy for a reader to understand. Your integrity can rest on the completeness of your CBA. People sometimes leave elements out of a CBA in order to create a more favorable impression and to bias a reader deliberately. Usually, when readers find the missing pieces, the credibility of the CBA goes out the window – and so does your chance for change.

Creating a Cost-Benefit Analysis

Case Study

Your two year old smartphone no longer holds a charge well and is not under warranty. You would really love a tablet, since the people working in sales now have them and they seem so handy. You don't really need a tablet to do your job, but you could probably make a half decent argument to get one.

Discussion Questions

Would you ask your boss for a new tablet to replace the phone (\$700) or a smartphone (\$350) like you had before?

Create a list of factors to justify the purchase of a new smartphone or tablet as mentioned above.

When the cost is added up, and then projected for a 12 month period, is it reasonable? Does it add to your work to have one item instead of the other?



What kind of business case are you most comfortable moving ahead with?

What are the benefits to the company?

How will you present your CBA to your manager as part of a request for consideration?

Planning and Organizing

Introduction

After the problem has been identified and a solution has been chosen, it's time to plan and organize your course of action and implement it. Depending on the size of the decision you've made, these tasks may take minutes, or they might require a full project team to make sure things are implemented effectively.

You've talked, planned, looked at all the options from every angle, and now it's time to put things to the test. Since you have spent the time needed to define the problem and make your decisions, this phase should be quite straightforward. Once you have developed your plan, assembled the people and supporting resources necessary, and get things started, it's all downhill! Of course, we're not quite finished yet.

Follow-Up Analysis

There is nothing like hindsight to let us know how well we have done. After your decisions are implemented, review the outcomes and determine your results.



Adapt, Close, and Celebrate

Part of the reason that we do such careful follow up is to check for the need to alter our course. Sometimes, we must adapt or evolve in some way to continue along the desired path. If, during your evaluation, you find things that need adapting, get back into the problem solving process and change what needs changing.

You might find the failure of a well-executed plan troubling, so remind yourself that you've now identified a new problem and are working things through. Then, re-implement and prepare for success.

Once the changes are finished and your evaluation is complete, make sure you close off this project with all the people involved and celebrate your success. Change may not be easy, and you may have had some struggles, but you are finished for now!

We like the way Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, describes change. In an interview with CNBC on September 7, 2007, he said: "Change is what excites people. You can't stay the same. If you're growing, you have to keep growing. If you're going down, you got [sic] to turn it around. If you're stagnant, you're dead. And so in the end, you've got to get people to embrace change and not be paralyzed by it."



Personal Action Plan

I am already doing these things well:

I want to improve these areas:

I have these resources to help me:

As a result of what I have learned in this workshop, I am going to...	My target date is...	I will know I have succeeded when...	I will follow up with myself on...

Further Reading:

- ✓ Roam, Dan. *The Back of the Napkin (Expanded Edition)*. Portfolio Hardcover, 2010.
- ✓ Sibbet, David. *Visual Meetings: How Graphics, Sticky Notes and Idea Mapping Can Transform Group Productivity*. Wiley, 2010.
- ✓ VanGundy, Arthur B. *Getting to Innovation*. AMACOM, 2007.