Making Decisions: Some Approaches

AMPLIFIER

> Making decisions – about your giving circle's mission, values, funding areas, grants, even administration – is one of the most exciting and challenging parts of the giving circle experience. Groups select methods for making decisions based on the personalities and predilections of group members, how well group members know each other, the group's time constraints, and how skilled the group facilitator is. Two approaches, consensus and voting, are detailed below.

No matter what method you use for your circle's decision-making, it's important to remember that your goal should be to establish a culture of trust and respect in your circle. Members should be listening openly and actively to others' opinions, and should be willing to go along with the group's decisions, even if they sometimes differ from their own.

The Talmud offers a wonderful anecdote that can inspire your circle's approach to discussion and decision-making. The Talmud records many disputes between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, which were made up of the disciples of Hillel and Shammai, two 1st Century CE Jewish scholars. Both sets of opinions are recorded throughout the Talmud, with the House of Hillel usually "winning": its opinions were usually taken as the law. The Talmud offers an explanation for why this was the case:

Rabbi Aba said in the name of Rabbi Shmuel: For three years the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel disagreed [on a certain subject].

These said, "The Law goes according to what we say." And those said, "The Law goes according to what we say."

A Divine voice called out and said, "These and these are the words of a living God, and the Law goes according to the School of Hillel."

If both these and these are the words of a living God, why did the School of Hillel merit to determine the Law? Because they were comfortable and humble and would state their own arguments as well as those of the School of Shammai. Not only this, but they also stated the School of Shammai's before their own.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD ERUVIN 13B

Consensus

> Seeking consensus often takes longer, is more delicate interpersonally, and is often easier to do with a skilled facilitator at the helm of the discussion. Its advantages, however, are clear: all members of the group feel ownership over the final decision, and the inclusive, participatory process builds strong relationships between group members.

Consensus means overwhelming agreement – an acceptable resolution to all parties, agreement that goes as far as possible toward meeting the interests of all stakeholders. Consensus is not the same as unanimity, which means unanimous agreement – everyone wants and thinks the same thing. The key to consensus is the word "consent": everyone "consents" to the decision, they agree to live with it, even if it's no one's favorite. Personal preferences are subordinated to what the group needs to move forward. Everyone accepts that they may not get everything they want, and that the group's decision might not be what they would have decided on their own - but they're OK with it nonetheless.

For consensus to work, all members of the group must agree that consensus – not majority – rules. Everyone must be open, honest and inclusive, and willing to participate actively in the discussion.

This consensus flowchart, from Seeds for Change, helps outline what a consensus decision-making process can look like.

Seeds for Change Consensus Flowchart

1 Introduce and clarify the issue(s) to be decided. Share relevant info. What are the key questions?

2 Explore the issue and look for ideas.
- Gather initial thoughts and reactions. What are the **issues** and people's **concerns**?
- Collect **ideas** for solving the problem—write them down.
- Have a **broad ranging discussion** and debate the ideas. What are the pros and cons?

Start thinking about solutions to people's concerns. Eliminate some ideas, short list others.

3 Look for emerging proposals. Look for a proposal that weaves together the best elements of the ideas discussed. Look for a solution that addresses people's key concerns.

4 Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal. Ensure that any remaining concerns are heard and that everyone has a chance to contribute. Look for **amendments** that make the proposal even more acceptable to the group.

5 Test for an agreement. Do you have agreement? Check for the following:

> **Blocks:** I have a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal that has not been resolved. We need to look for a new proposal.
> **Stand asides:** I can't support this proposal because... But I don't want to stop the group, so I'll let the decision happen without me.
> **Reservations:** I have some reservations but am willing to let the proposal pass.
> **Agreement:** I support the proposal and am willing to implement it.
> **Consensus:** No blocks, not too many stand asides or reservations? Active agreement?

Then we have a decision!

6 Implement the decision. Who, when, how? Action point the tasks and set deadlines.

Majority Rules

> Groups whose members don't know each other very well, have limited time, or do not have a skilled facilitator at the helm might use majority rules decision-making rather than consensus. Majority rules helps groups make decisions faster, but be careful that it doesn't disenfranchise people who feel frequently outvoted and thus unrepresented.

Some questions can be answered with a simple yes/no vote: a public show of hands or a secret ballot, depending on the sensitivity of the question and the culture of the group.

1-2-3 Voting

> Many questions, however, require more nuance than a simple yes/no – such as when the group is trying to find a set of shared values, decide on a grant focus area, or rank their favorite grant applicants. For these, a "1-2-3" system often works well, where everyone votes:

1 = definitely yes
2 = maybe
3 = no

Someone averages the group's scores and ranks the items from most popular to least popular. The group decides whether the numeric ranking aligns with the general feeling in the room: Does this look like the right order for these items? Finally, depending on the distribution of scores and the number of options the group can approve, the group chooses a cutoff point between "yes" and "no" - the point on the ranked list where the group's conviction really tips from one to the other.