Collective Decision-Making Methods

Toolbox for Empowered Teams

Unity Effect

Decision-making as a tool for empowerment

Decision-making is a key leverage point to share responsibility, decentralise power and unlock the capacity for creativity and innovation in a team. It is a core skill for leaders, yet in a team context it can also be the source of inefficiencies, bottle-necks, conflicts and unhealthy power dynamics. Effective decision-making needs clear roles, methods and processes.

How to use this toolbox

In this toolbox we have put together a number of tips and methods for collective decision-making, along with a couple of reflection questions. All the methods are ones we use in our team, which we have adapted over the years to fit our culture and structures. We suggest trying out the methods and checking what supports you and not, and adapting them to make them your own. We hope this toolbox supports you to create more efficient and empowered decisions together!

Want to dive deeper?

We warmly invite you to **join our ecosystem of purpose-driven professionals and practitioners** in supporting each other to lead change from the inside out. You can access our full **Living Library** of toolboxes, templates, databases and other resources which are designed to support and deepen your daily work. We also host two **Communities of Practice** on purpose-driven leadership & teamwork and regenerative impact evaluation, where you can connect and learn with peers and experts on a regular basis.

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Happy decision-making!
The Unity Effect Team

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Team reflection questions about decision-making

- Do you feel you are good or bad at making decisions?

- What holds you back? What fears are connected to making decisions?

- What fears are connected to empowering others to make decisions?

- How does decision-making currently work in our team?

- How do you feel about the way we make decisions?

- What supports your decision-making?

- What supports our decision-making as a team?

- Where do decisions get stuck in our team?

Decentralised Decision-Making

Have you ever had the experience where a decision which affected your work was made by someone higher up the chain of command, who had no real on the ground knowledge and experience of the issue at hand? Or where a decision reached a bottleneck and then nothing happened? This can be pretty disempowering, as well as inefficient. Decentralising decision-making means giving more decision-making power to people at different levels of the organisation. It's a way of tapping into the immense amount of ideas, creativity, knowledge and experience in a team. And making decision-making more efficient and effective.

Clear roles, goals and processes

Having an empowered team does not mean everyone has to be involved in every decision, nor does it mean everyone can make any decision. It's essential to have clarity about roles, and which kinds of decisions are associated with that role. It comes down to the question: who is responsible for making this decision, versus who should be included in the process? This does not mean everyone has to be included in every decision, nor does it mean that every decision has to be a group decision.

We need a shared understanding of:
- The team's purpose and goals
- Each person's role or roles
- Which decisions are they responsible for as part of that role
- Who else needs to be involved (either in the decision itself, to give input or feedback, or just to be informed)
- Which method to use for which kind of decision

The goal of creating this clarity is not to restrict decision-making but to open it up as much as possible without causing chaos, confusion or negative consequences.

When good intentions go wrong: what gets in the way of empowering decision-making

Giving everyone 'equal' power vs. giving everyone power

Not everyone wants to have the same level of power and responsibility, nor does it make sense for everyone. Trying to make everyone 'equally' powerful can ignore the unique strengths people bring to the table. Rather we can try to give everyone the amount of power that allows them to be as powerful as they can (and want) to be.

Disempowering ourselves to empower others

When we try to shift to more empowering leadership and teamwork styles it can lead to us to hold ourselves back to create space for others. Yet sometimes it's crucial for us to step up and lead, and to remember we are role-modelling leadership and empowered decision-making for others.

Including others too late in the decision-making process

If the goal is to involve different voices in decision-making, consider when in the process to bring them in. Otherwise a last ditch effort to include others at the point where it's too late to really influence the outcome can be disempowering.

Unclear expectations, boundaries or purpose

We need clarity about what we are doing and why, and what we can decide on or not, to be able to act and make decisions.

Lack of skills, resources and/or authority to act

We have to make sure that our team members are truly set up for success, including having the resources, experience, knowledge and authority needed to make a decision, otherwise it can be symbolic and disempowering.

Lack of psychological safety

Feeling safe to share ideas, find creative solutions and even risk making the wrong decision is essential for team members to be empowered to make decisions.

Methods: Consensus and Consent Decision-Making

Consensus

Consensus asks: 'do you agree?'

Consensus means that decisions are made when everyone agrees. If one person disagrees, a decision cannot be made. For some types of decisions (e.g. important strategic decisions) it's important to have everyone on board.

Yet consensus decision-making has some challenges, including:
- It can be very slow.
- If one person blocks a decision it can give an unbalanced amount of weight and power to one person's opinion.
- It does not create the opportunity to solve conflicts, underlying or unspoken issues which may affect the outcome of the decision.

Consent

Consent asks: 'do you object?'

In the consent process, objections are invited, raised and resolved and decisions are made when there are no further objections. In contrast to consensus where the focus is on each individual's personal preference, the focus of consent is choosing an outcome which can be tolerated and worked with. In other words: good enough for now and safe enough to try.

In consent, objections are welcomed as they allow a proposal to be improved, issues to be aired, and potentially harmful outcomes to be avoided.

Consent Process

The consent process is the core decision-making process used in Sociocracy 3.0, a dynamic, circular governance system for self-organised, adaptive teams. The process works in 'rounds' - as a listening circle.

Present the proposal

The first step is to get everyone on the same page and make sure everyone has up to date information

Clarifying questions

A round to ask questions if something in the proposal is not clear.

Quick reactions

A round for everyone to share a few sentences on their reactions to the proposal. This gives a first sense of the reactions of the group and creates space to raise things that might not count as objections before the consent round.

Consent round

Ask if anyone has objections (i.e. the proposal could have unintended consequences or there are worthwhile ways to improve it). If there are objections, they should be shared briefly in one sentence.

Announce decision

Accept proposal, reject proposal, or make changes to the proposal based on the objections.

More detailed information on the consent process [here](#).
More information about Sociocracy 3.0 [here.](#)

Method: Resistance and Preference Voting

For quick decisions where a consent process is not necessary, finger voting is an effective, efficient and fun method to make decisions in a group. It is called finger voting because you can do it using your hands, yet you can also do it online using a survey or document.

For Resistance

Ask people to vote based on how resistant they are to each option, from 1 (no resistance) to 5 (high resistance).

For Preference

Ask people to vote based on how much they prefer each option, from 1 (least preferred) to 5 (most preferred).

Voting Process

- Clarify the decision to be made and make sure everyone understands why the decision is being made.
- List all the options that can be decided on. This should always include the option of 'nothing/none of the suggestions'.
- Make sure that everyone understands the options and their potential impact.
- Read out the first option. Each participant puts their hand behind their back and on the count of three reveals their vote with the number of fingers. The total number for the group is then tallied up.
- Repeat the process until there is a result for each option.
- For resistance: the option with the least resistance is chosen (lowest number).
- For pull: the option with the highest pull is chosen (highest number).

Method: Advice Process

The Advice Process is a decision-making method which empowers any person to make any decision, provided they first seek advice from:

1. everyone who will be meaningfully affected, and
2. people with expertise in the matter.

This advice must be taken into consideration, yet the goal is not to make a compromised decision which seeks to include everyone's opinion. The decision-maker - who is generally the person most affected by the issue - is empowered to choose what they believe to be the best course of action, based on the advice, perspectives and collective wisdom gained through the Advice Process.

How it works

- Someone notices a problem or opportunity and takes the initiative, or alerts someone better placed to do so.
- Prior to a proposal, the decision-maker may seek input to sound out perspectives before proposing action.
- The initiator makes a proposal and seeks advice from those affected or those with expertise.
- Taking this advice into account, the decision-maker decides on an action and informs those who have given advice.

The Advice Process is the key decision-making process described in *Reinventing Organisations* by Frederic Laloux. More information on the [Reinventing Organisations Wiki here.](#)

Advice Process Benefits and Challenges

You don't have to take the advice

It is not about finding a watered down compromise in the end. You are empowered to take the best decision you can with the advice in mind.

Based on trust that you have the organisation's best interests in mind

This is a key shift from fear that employees will take advantage of the organisation if left to their own devices, towards trusting everyone is doing their best to serve the organisation.

It empowers people to take initiative

It enables issues to be addressed and decided upon by the people who hold the responsibility of living with their consequences, as well as fostering innovative ideas and solutions.

Effective for sharing information and gaining diverse perspectives:

To receive your advice I need to give you some information and context around the decision, which is a great way to share information. I also open myself up to seeing the issue from new and unexpected perspectives.

Builds positive relationships:

It feels good when you are asked for advice, especially when it goes across the different levels of authority, if e.g. a leader asks an intern for advice.

Can be challenging to define who will be affected

It can be hard to say where to draw the line here, especially in a large organisation or one with a large community.

It's helpful to set a timeline

It is also important that it doesn't become a very lengthy process to seek advice. One way to avoid this is to put a deadline on the process, e.g. ask for advice until the end of the week, and whoever chooses to respond is included.

Consider when and how to use it

It's advisable to use it in certain situations (e.g. operational decisions) yet to also use it in combination with other methods for more strategic decisions.

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