

PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISION MAKING

TAC committees make lots of decisions, and the way that stakeholders are involved in these decisions often determines the success or failure of an initiative. The chart below indicates some of the advantages and disadvantages of the various decision-making methods.

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
<u>Autocratic</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast • Few resources required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low commitment of group members
<u>Minority</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficient use of resources • Experts assume ownership of the decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority may ignore, micro-manage, or not participate in implementation
<u>Majority</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional • Accepted • Fast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divisive, win-lose • Can lead to conflict, lack of commitment
<u>Unanimous</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High member commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to achieve • May suppress some issues
<u>Consensus</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High degree of member involvement • Leads to quality decisions • High probability of implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming • Requires facilitation skills • May cause frustration

The autocratic method involves a decision being made by a Chair or other meeting participant with little consultation with other participants other than to ask questions for clarification. This can be an appropriate method to use in an emergency situation, when a short time frame exists, when the decision falls within a person's specialized expertise, or when a decision is already a "fait accompli" and participant involvement would not have any influence.

Minority decision making occurs when a decision is entrusted to a small group or sub-committee. This makes good use of member expertise, but difficulties can arise when a sub-group brings a recommendation back to the meeting table and other participants do not accept it or insist on revisiting the entire process. This can sometimes be avoided by asking a group to only develop a partial solution - such as analysing options - and then leaving the final decision to the main group.

Majority decision making (taking a vote) is a simple and well understood method of making a decision and is frequently used in meetings. Unfortunately it can also be very divisive and lead to hostility and resistance by participants who are outvoted.

Unanimous decision making will develop high member commitment. However, achieving unanimity is difficult and time consuming and may result in weak or watered down decisions as issues are suppressed in the interests of unanimity. Many decisions made by TAC committees do turn out to be unanimous, but unanimity is not always necessary and should not be pursued for its own sake.

Consensus decision making leads to the highest level of compliance and commitment to implementation. However, it can be time consuming and frustrating and should only be used for key decisions. The approach works best when the problem to be solved is not structured and when several “right” answers are acceptable. Consensus should only be sought when each group member will be strongly affected by the decision and when high commitment to action is important. Working to achieve consensus on unimportant or arbitrary decisions is a waste of committee time.

Regardless of the method of decision making employed, it is important that participants are aware of it and have agreed on it in advance.

Consensus Model

The term “consensus” is frequently used as a synonym for other forms of decision making. (“The ayes have it so we have consensus” or “Everyone supports this idea so we have consensus”). However, consensus has a very specific meaning.

A consensus based decision is one in which every participant either agrees with the decision, or disagrees but is prepared to go along with it. A decision based on 60% consensus may be more likely to be successfully implemented than a decision passed by a 90% majority vote. In the former case the 40% not in favour of the decision will be prepared to live with it, whereas the 10% who were outvoted in the latter case may (consciously or unconsciously) undermine the decision or sabotage its implementation.

To achieve consensus in a TAC meeting, Chairs need to ensure the following:

- Each committee member understands the issue
- Each participant has an opportunity to contribute to the process
- All contributions are heard and understood
- Each participant accepts the decision, or members who continue to have doubts express their willingness to try the decision for a stated period of time
- Each committee member commits to the necessary implementation action

Agreeing to Disagree

Sometimes it is not possible to achieve consensus on an item and further efforts to do so will risk disrupting the meeting. In these cases the best approach is to “agree to disagree” and “park” the item until later in the meeting. The issue can be revisited later in the meeting when progress has been or deferred to a subsequent meeting. If possible, participants should at least agree on the resolution strategy to be used to address the area of disagreement.