



## **DECISION-MAKING STYLES AND TECHNIQUES**

### **Community Board Development – No. 5**

Marlene K. Rebori  
Community and Organizational Development Specialist

*“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”*

Albert Einstein

At some point, your board will be responsible for making decisions. Depending upon the situation and type of decision to be made, you can choose from a variety of styles and techniques. Many times, your board may only be required to provide comments to the commissioners or city council members. In an instance when you only need to provide board comments, you can apply techniques such as brainstorming or other group process skills that are outlined in preceding Community Board Development Handouts (No.'s 1-4).

In the “world of ideas,” people explore possibilities. This happens when boards discuss an issue, analyze a problem, or brainstorm alternative solutions. When discussion is still in the world of ideas, everything is kept fairly loose and safe. However, when a board moves into the decision phase, members often leave the world of ideas behind. Boards may not be sure when a decision has actually been made. This is demonstrated through phrases such as, “I don’t recall us making an actual decision on that”, or “I thought we already made this decision.” These examples remind us that boards need to understand and agree on a decision-making style. Just as long meetings, inconsistent goals, and unequal group participation can cause board ineffectiveness, a lack of understanding in decision-making procedures can also impede

board progress. To maximize board effectiveness, the board should decide which decision-making style to use for any given situation. Your board may be using one of the following decision-making styles as outlined below.

#### **Decision-Making Styles**

- **No Decision:** Some boards may consciously or unconsciously avoid making decisions and thus make the decision not to decide. The “no decision” style can be displayed by topic jumping – allowing members to shift the topic before a decision is reached and by the “plop.” The “plop” happens when one member initiates an idea, action, or decision, but the group gives no response. Essentially the plop is a board decision by omission. Avoiding or ignoring actions or decisions is a decision, it is just a decision not to decide.
- **Self-Appointed Decision-Maker:** A decision or course of action is initiated by only one member under the assumption that other members consented. One member states a decision, no one else agrees or disagrees with the decision, and so one member makes the decision for the entire board. Although this decision-making style is very efficient, decisions are not based on the board’s input

and therefore do not reflect the collective opinion of the board.

- **Minority Rule:** A minority of board members (2 to 3) agree to a course of action or make a decision while the other members remain silent. A vote is usually not taken but based on dominant members' discussion, a few people make a decision for the entire board. This style does not consider other member's opinions or values in the decision reached. Minority rule can cause frustration among silent members creating the impression their opinion does not count.
- **Majority Rule:** Requires the agreement of at least 51% (or more) of board members to reach a decision. Groups often reach majority rule through a brief and somewhat formal discussion, then a final vote is taken usually through a show of hands. When used for complex or high stake decisions this style often produces a win/lose solution and is considered a competitive style of decision-making. Although this style moves a group forward quickly, it can result in group divisiveness and frustration for those members whose opinions were not part of the majority decision.
- **Consensus:** Board members make a decision based on all members supporting the decision or action. Consensus is not a compromise because members work to seek mutual agreement on the decision. Consensus building incorporates all members' opinions and values into the decision. This style is very difficult because it builds off of the tension caused by a diversity of opinions to develop creative agreements. This style can become quite time consuming. The benefit of building consensus on complex, high stake decisions is that it fosters board empowerment, builds group cohesion, and improves interpersonal relationships and accountability.

## How to Decide on Which Style to Use?

Obviously the “no decision,” “self-appointed decision-maker,” and “minority support” are **not** recommended as organized procedures for your board to follow. These styles really refer to common situations that many boards may fall into when decision-making is required. However majority support and consensus are styles to which procedures and helpful techniques can be applied. When deciding whether to use majority support or consensus, the board should consider the following factors:

Timeliness: How much time has the board been given to make a decision. If the board has been allocated one meeting to reach a decision, they may have to choose the most timely method possible.

Appropriateness: How complex is the decision? If the decision is to take an hour or 45 minutes for lunch, you don't need to reach consensus to make a decision. However, if the board were to approve a development plan for their community, they would want to spend more time gathering concerns.

Relationship: How will the decision affect relationships among the board? If the decision-making style could jeopardize or place relationships at risk, maybe a more collective approach to decision-making should be considered.

## Techniques for Designing Majority Support Decisions

Most people typically understand procedures outlining majority support. A proposal is put forth and a vote is taken. If over 51% vote for the action the decision is made and the board can move to the next agenda item. However, there are a variety of techniques you can incorporate into the style of majority support to help reduce frustration among members and prevent group

divisiveness that often accompanies majority support decisions.

- **70/30 Vote:** This technique requires at least 70% of members vote in agreement with the proposed decision. The 70/30 requires discussion among board members since at least 70% need to be in agreement with the decision. This technique builds critical buy-in of the decision and works to develop a shared understanding among board members.
- **Blind Vote:** This technique is recommended with complex or high stake decisions. It can be as simple as a secret ballot. This technique adds anonymity to who voted for which decision thus reducing potential group divisiveness.
- **Dots:** Although dots were discussed as a technique for prioritizing alternative ideas in Community Board Development – No. 3: Problem Solving, it can be used as a visual way of demonstrating majority support among a variety of possible actions.
- **Devil's Advocate:** This is a technique that is also very useful during brainstorming and in consensus building processes as well. One member plays the devil's advocate to the potential decision by stating all the opposite possibilities. This technique is useful in majority support because it prevents the board from falling into "groupthink." Groupthink occurs when members suppress their dissenting view because they believe no one will agree with them. By allowing someone to "play" the devil's advocate it encourages members to discuss the merits of an action or potential decision without worrying about blocking the group's momentum.

### **Techniques for Building Consensus**

As stated earlier, consensus takes time to build and it requires hard work among board members. Whereas people easily understand majority support, consensus is usually not so easily understood. There are many misconceptions

around consensus, for instance that it takes *too* long to reach consensus, or that everyone must agree unanimously on a decision. Consensus is reached when members mutually agree to a decision and feel that their concerns regarding the issue have been addressed; it is not unanimity. Many of the skills discussed in the previous Community Board Development handouts such as facilitative leadership, board empowerment, active listening, and Conflict Management Skills, are instrumental in helping a group build consensus. The following techniques may help your board to build consensus and use your time more efficiently.

- **Levels of Consensus:** When working to build consensus, it is very helpful to have 4 to 5 levels of consensus. Your board may prefer to work with fewer levels for simplicity but the following 5 levels are outlined below.
  1. I can easily accept the decision or action.
  2. I can accept the decision or action but it may not be my preference.
  3. I can accept the decision or action with minor changes.
  4. I accept the will of the board or group, but I don't necessarily agree with the decision or action.
  5. I cannot accept the decision or action.

If a member expresses a level 5 concern, the board does not have consensus. If everyone on the board has at least a level 4 or above, consensus is reached. However, the board may want to incorporate a 70/30 vote into the levels of consensus, thereby asking 70% of members to have a level 4 or above to reach consensus. Using levels of consensus helps the board to be more time efficient while still addressing concerns and building mutual agreement. Using consensus levels also highlights certain components to be singled out allowing members to discuss specific concerns. If your board does decide to use levels of consensus, it is recommended to

place these levels in the ground rules and ask for board agreement on using the levels. Ground rules are discussed in Time and Meeting Management Skills: Community Board Development – No. 1.

- **Consensus Log:** Keep a running list of the actions you reached consensus on. This may be more appropriate with groups who are working on highly complex decisions such as approving a development plan or open space area. Keeping a log prevents the question from arising, “What did we decide on X?”
- **Distill Concerns:** Since one of the reasons for building consensus is to understand member’s concerns and reach mutual agreement on a decision, boards should have some techniques for distilling concerns. As members provide their concerns regarding a potential proposal, someone should record these concerns on either a flipchart or on a chalkboard for everyone to see. Once everyone has provided their concerns, then the board should go through the list and group similar phrases or concerns. Grouping helps to give members a grasp of the real concerns that need resolving.
- **Straw Proposal:** In the event that the board is working to develop a proposal for consensus, it may be helpful for someone to draft a proposal or solution—the straw proposal and encourage members to criticize it, attack it, pull it apart, etc. Providing a straw proposal gives a starting point for the board and it helps to pull out member’s opinions and values about the potential proposal or action. Allowing the board to pick apart the straw proposal, change it, and add to it will help the board to develop ownership of it.

No matter which technique you use for building consensus remember that all members eventually should support the decision of the group, and feel as though they have had sufficient opportunities to influence the proposed decision. When these elements are present, then you have genuinely worked to build consensus.

## **References**

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Vrooman, Rona. 1994. Group Process Tools. INFO-Line Issue Number 9407. *Practical Guidelines for Training and Development Professionals*. American Society for Training and Development.

This is a handout in a series of **Community Board Development** training materials.

- “Time and Meeting Management Skills”  
Community Board Development – No. 1
- “Conflict Management Skills”  
Community Board Development – No. 2
- “Problem Solving Techniques”  
Community Board Development – No. 3
- “Goal Setting and Action Planning Skills”  
Community Board Development – No. 4
- “Decision Making Skills and Techniques”  
Community Board Development – No. 5