



Tools for Leading Teams

Consensus Decision-Making a Special Case

Introduction

Of the decision making alternatives, Consensus Decision-Making is by far the most difficult to accomplish (and often misunderstood). It is also the one that holds the most promise for many teams. Before electing this alternative, teams and team leaders should weigh the cost of time and difficulty against the potential benefits of a high quality outcome that is most likely to be implemented. If this is still the favored alternative, then follow these guidelines:

Steps for Success

1. Define a “consensus decision” and differentiate it from majority rule, voting, or just “going with the flow.” A consensus is one where communication has been sufficiently open to make everyone in the group feel that they have had their fair chance to influence the outcome and where each member feels heard. After a successful consensus is reached, each participant would think or say the following: *“I understand where each of you stands and what appears to be the group’s decision. I feel that my position or preference was respected and fairly considered. Even if I would not personally have chosen this alternative, I have had sufficient opportunity to sway others to my point of view and will therefore support the group’s decision and sincerely help to implement it.”*
2. Give a spot training on how to “dialogue.” This is the skill of balancing two needed behaviors: (a) advocating for one’s perspective or position and (b) listening to (and being open to) those of others.
3. Practice consensus decision-making on simple issues or use decision-making exercises designed for this purpose. Run several iterations and have the group reflect on the following factors: (a) How well did people ensure that everyone heard from? (b) How well did people advocate for a position, defend it appropriately, and sometimes concede to others? (c) How well did people ask helpful questions? (d) How well did people listen to alternative viewpoints?
4. While working towards a consensus decision, highlight and recognize team mates who are advocating, asking helpful questions, actively listening, and conceding appropriately.
5. As the facilitator, explain and model the skills of “polling the group” and “putting a stake in the ground.” Putting a stake in the ground means occasionally stating what the group appears to be concluding. Like a hypothesis, this occasional summary statement may not be the true consensus, but it allows the group to consider the possibility and move closer to a decision, faster. Polling the group is any method of hearing from each member of the team before moving forward. Whether it is a non-verbal signal or a full statement of their position, this intervention ensures that people have had the opportunity to take a stand, and it disallows the common error of assuming that silence is consent.