

## **An Alternative Model for Decision-Making**

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Academic decisions are typically made at meetings, by committees, or through taskforces. In these settings, highly educated, talented, interested, and dedicated individuals convene to make decisions vital to themselves, their peers, and the institutions they represent. Unfortunately, some of these decisions are made hastily, without in-depth consideration, lacking full information for decision-makers, and without the benefit of having adequate time to carefully consider implications and costs of suggested new policies, policy changes, or other decisions before finalizing their implementation. This essay suggests a revised paradigm for making decisions; one that requires a greater investment of time and personal involvement by those making decisions and which hopefully will avoid or reduce many of the drawbacks of our present decision-making paradigm.

Making quality decisions involves critical thinking; critical thinking has been defined as “involving the ability to explore a problem, question, or situation; integrate all the available information about it; arrive at a solution or hypothesis; and justify one’s position.”<sup>1</sup> Critical thinking thus requires: (a) that matters to be discussed be clearly and fully disclosed to discussants prior to deliberations. It is too common for issues at meetings to arise without everyone being informed of the agenda and given access to available information relevant to the topic so participants can be fully prepared. A quality agenda is a blueprint for effective group management and leadership. In terms of group management, creating an agenda “establishes detailed steps and timetables for achieving needed results, and then allocating the resources necessary to make that happen.” In terms of group leadership, creating an effective agenda “establishes direction ... develops a vision of the future ... and strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision.”<sup>2</sup> It is also frequently the case that meetings have artificial time constraints that inhibit full consideration of facts, support or opposition to proposals, and careful consideration of consequences and costs of decisions made. Members’ ability and willingness to attend meetings and their ability to pay close attention to the matters at hand depend on careful time planning;<sup>3</sup> (b) time must be available between the announcement of issues and their discussion to gather available data relevant to the impending discussion; and (c) decision makers need to construct, in addition to the decisions rendered, sensible, believable, and clear defenses/rationales for the decisions they make. Decisions need to be

defended against complaints of bias, consistency, costs, ethicality, fairness, practicality, and utility. Open, honest, and logical defenses to challenged decisions usually make such decisions more palatable to those challenging decisions. Quality decision defenses demonstrate decision-maker cognizance to potential challenges; this generally adds to decision acceptance and agreement.

Meetings ought not be called [except in dire emergencies] without a detailed agenda being given to all attendees; without plenty of time being set aside for deliberations; and without relevant research materials being made universally available to all participants.<sup>4</sup> All people involved in the decision and its aftermath ought be involved in the process and need to be strongly encouraged to come to the decision-making process fully prepared, devoid of hidden agendas, with an open mind, and ready and willing to engage in civil, relevant discussion to arrive at a quality decision.

Academic decisions involve multiple concentric constituencies; these typically include: faculty instructional interests, administrative constraints, student learning outcomes, departmental and discipline political considerations, and institutional public relations implications which may affect student recruiting and retention, grant funding, graduate employment, and alumni support. These multiple spheres require that decisions be seen in a wider scope than just the immediate and direct impact of rendered decisions. This requires time and effort to reconcile. Individuals representing all relevant constituencies ought be personally consulted and invited to take part in the decision-making process whenever possible. Decisions affecting others ought not be rendered with affected parties in the dark.

Too frequently, proposals are forwarded to change long-standing decisions or in-place policies with little consideration about how those decisions and policies came to be in force. Just as frequently, careful analyses of how, why, and when the status quo was put into place is not known or is not overtly articulated; and groups sometimes end up proposing a return to past visited failure as a result of not carefully determining how the present system came to be the way it is. It ought be established that no rule or policy change be proposed or implemented until and unless it is understood how the status quo was established and it is agreed upon that proposed changes will not be a repeat of past problems.

Decision-making is frequently contentious involving: deciding among multiple favored choices, allocation of and surrender of resources, affirmed or deflated egos and reputations, expenditure of time and energy, and the agreement, support, and respect of others or the disagreement, mistrust, anger, and

dismissal of others typically result from decision-making. Decision-making groups need to agree that consensus will be exercised after decisions are reached. Consensus, here, means that even though all participants in the decision-making process are not in total agreement or sympathy with the decisions made, they will not sabotage, bad mouth, diminish, or contradict the decision outside the group.<sup>5</sup> Failure to live by consensus dooms most decisions to ridicule, doubt, evasion, or question.<sup>6</sup>

Not all decisions remain relevant, in force, or useful forever. Most decisions need to be revisited periodically. This need for review ought to be discussed prior to a decision being implemented. The review determination should be publicly announced along with the decision itself. There ought to be a formal procedure, a predetermined time for review, and a procedure for decision review put in place. Appropriate decision review adds to the legitimacy of decisions and helps reduce the likelihood that decisions do not become outdated. Decision review aids in keeping academic rules and procedures up-to-date and consistent with other academic policies and procedures. Review ought to be done by impartial groups; this is suggested to avoid conflicts of interest.

Group, committee, or task force memberships are often determined by (a) soliciting volunteers; (b) seeking stratified members by categories such as departments, divisions, colleges, etc.; and (c) by gender, age, and tenure status. These methods of membership determination, while all having noble goals, typically ignore the most vital characteristics of successful group membership: affinity, cooperation, dedication, expertise, and cohesiveness.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes volunteers offer their services for reasons not related to quality decision-making; these reasons include padding one's vita, external pressure for committee involvement, and hidden agendas. Groups are rarely well served when individuals who openly dislike each other serve together on groups. While stratified membership has well-intended motives, employing that strategy for selecting group membership frequently ignores Frey's selection criteria.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes members from the same unit, gender, age, or tenure status are the best qualified for the task. Care needs to be taken, of course, not to allow the same individuals to monopolize memberships; but artificial disqualification seems counter-productive.

The suggestions proffered in this article are time consuming, require more effort and thought than is sometimes expended on group selection, management, and decision-making; however the effort seems likely to produce quality academic decisions. Better decisions make everyone's task easier, defensible,

and legitimate. Quality decisions validate positive decision-maker reputations, increase receptiveness to serve on future decision-making groups, and heighten confidence that positive results will emanate from such decisions.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Warnick, Barbara and Edward S. Inch. (1994). *Critical Thinking and Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.. Macmillan, p. 11.
- <sup>2</sup> Hackman, Michael Z. and Craig E. Johnson. (2000). *Leadership: A Communication Perspective*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Waveland Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Wilson, Gerald L. (1999). *Groups in Context: Leadership and Participation in Small Groups*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. McGraw-Hill.
- <sup>4</sup> Beebe, Steven A. and John T. Mastertson. (2000). *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Longman.
- <sup>5</sup> Harris, Thomas E. and John C. Sherblom. (2002). *Small Group and Team Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Allyn and Bacon.
- <sup>6</sup> Toulmin, Stephen, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik. (1984). *An Introduction to Reasoning*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Macmillan, pp. 254-255.
- <sup>7</sup> Frey, Lawrence. (1995, July 25-29). Communication Faculty Teaching Development Conference; Hope College; Holland, MI.
- <sup>8</sup> Frey.