Team Decision-Making

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Introduction

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, “What doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger.” If ever a quote could be used to describe team decision making, this is it. According to Merriam-Webster OnLine, a decision is a “determination arrived at after consideration” (http://www.m-w.com/home.htm). It is the consideration that will either kill a team or make it stronger.

When working well, a strong team is the embodiment of what is known as synergy—the sum of the whole team is greater than the sum of the individual parts. That, however, is when the team is working well. During the consideration portion of the decision-making process, decisiveness, derision, and even chaos can occur. When this happens, the converse of synergy—rivalry and competition—can divide or even kill the team. The end product can be inferior to what an individual member of the team could produce. The latter generally occurs when team members are not communicating and lack the proper tools for the decision-making process. To ensure that this does not happen, decisions about decisions must come first.

Sound confusing? It may sound that way, but if a team agrees upfront about how the consideration of a decision will be handled, chaos can be avoided. Decision-making processes, styles, and practices vary from person to person. The diversity of the team gives it strength, but this diversity can also result in a wide variety of approaches to problem solving within the team. Coming into the team, members need to assess their own
decision-making tools and what methods they prefer when handling the process. Members should ask themselves the following: How quickly do I make decisions? Do I prefer to take my time and gather a lot of information before I make a decision, or do I prefer to decide matters quickly? These questions should be articulated within the group and the answers considered when creating the Learning Team Charter. The Charter provides a broad outline for the decision-making process.

In this section, we will examine the specific factors that go into the decision-making process, with the goal of helping teams plan to make the best decisions possible, as expeditiously as possible.

**Making decisions as a team**

American psychologist Abraham Maslow is credited with saying, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you treat everything like a nail” (http://www.basicquotations.com). If a team member comes with only a hammer in hand, the danger exists that the rest of the team will receive a pounding. Through a well-defined, communicated team decision-making process, the hammer-bearing member should be able to learn to use other tools effectively and to interact successfully with other team members. This will result in a finished product that will meet the team’s needs and exceed the quality of what one member could accomplish.

The length and complexity of the decision-making process need to be balanced with recognition of a need to make timely decisions and proceed to implementation. That means that the team must respect and recognize the wealth of experiences and perspectives of each team member. Reaching consensus does not mean 100 percent team agreement, but that team members have been heard, the ideas considered, and that a decision all of the members can live with and support has been reached.

Chances are good that in a team of five people there will be at least two, if not three, different approaches to drafting a paper as well as various ideas on how to make decisions at each stage of the research and
drafting process. If these preferences are not addressed early in the team discussions, deadlines may be missed or stress levels within the team may reach an unhealthy point. What then, are some of the practical steps teams can take to clarify and agree upon a decision-making process?

As explained earlier, the first step the team must take is to discuss how each member prefers to work on projects. If everyone has the same work habits and preferences, then it may be easy to work together. Even if all team members are in agreement (and that is the ideal, not the norm), there are other significant issues to discuss to produce a deliverable that meets the course requirements.

These issues include project management and the details involved therein such as due dates, responsibilities, and task priorities. It is important for the team to communicate closely throughout the project, to ensure that everyone is working towards the same concept of a finished project. How and at what intervals will the team meet to discuss this? Will it be necessary to review prior decisions about certain aspects of a project? If so, when and how will the team conduct these “in-project” reviews? Ideally, a schedule will be agreed upon during the chartering process. If these details are not covered initially or if the team is not functioning properly, the team can and should address or revisit them at any time.

**Understanding the task at hand and starting in the right direction**

Sometimes working in teams causes people to not ask questions. No one wants to appear silly or stupid for not knowing the answers, interrupting the progress of the team, or not seeing a situation in the same way others appear to see it. And yet, without an environment in which each team member feels safe enough to ask questions, seek to clarify, offer insights, and ask the team to pause to look at one more perspective, there is a risk of reaching wrong results or making poor decisions. Sometimes this lack of understanding results in one member taking the
wrong route. When that happens, the team must then work together to gain lost time and get back on schedule.

At other times this environment can foster poor decisions that result from groupthink. Groupthink occurs in part due to the melding of individual preferences into one. There is no “I” in team when groupthink occurs, but it is not because everyone has given up thoughts of “I” for the greater good of the team. Rather, when groupthink happens, it is because no one is willing or able to speak up to say, “Wait, let’s consider this point.” or “Are you sure we have all the information we need, what about . . . ?”

Assumptions are made that others know what they are doing and that a different understanding must be wrong. When groupthink emerges, unanimity and group cohesiveness are valued above all else, even above the goal of making quality decisions.

There are a number of ways a team can prevent groupthink from invading decision-making activities:

**Six Thinking Hats**

One way is to adopt the practice commonly referred to as asking questions or making comments while figuratively wearing one of Dr. Edward de Bono’s well-known “Six Thinking Hats” (Figueroa, 2000). Each hat symbolizes an approach to questioning in a distinct and different manner. The White Hat symbolizes the search for information and hard data. When the Green Hat is worn, the individual approaches the topic in a creative manner. He or she seeks alternatives and has a high tolerance for risk-taking. The Black Hat wearer judges alternatives and conducts critical analysis before offering an opinion about the best choice. The Yellow Hat symbolizes natural light (such as sunlight); the person wearing it engages in a process that emphasizes the value of exploring different ideas. The Red Hat brings heart into the process, in the form of acknowledging the value of emotion and intuition. The Blue Hat represents organization (p.1).
Team members do not literally wear these hats; rather, the different colored hats are visual images that help remind us of different perspectives and how to think critically when examining options. Ideally, each member of the team wears more than one of these hats when analyzing information and exploring options. In that way no one team member becomes known as the person who always wears the Black Hat or the Green Hat. By sharing in the responsibility to explore the different values or perspectives represented by the range of hat colors, team members support each other in efforts to separate the person from the options and issues. When all hats are worn and all members are participating, the team can prevent groupthink.

**Gray-Colored Glasses**

Some people see shades of gray or different perspectives of issues more easily and readily than others. Those who see issues as black or white (i.e., as having only one right answer or solution) and who do not see the gray tones, often find it difficult to understand a different point of view or a different perspective on a topic. When issues are viewed as either black or white, the information that can be gathered is limited. For the person who sees only black and white, approaches to decision-making can be deceptively quick and easy. Those decisions are often limited in terms of creativity or may even lead to downright wrong answers due to the failure to recognize and distinguish important details.

Genuinely listening to teammates whose views and life experiences differ is one way to bring diversity of perspectives into the decision-making process. Philosopher, writer, journalist, and professor, Emile Chartier, summed up the limits of failing to consider options this way, “Nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it is the only one you have” (http://www.creativequotations.com).
That is, what if you don’t have all the information, and there’s “the rest of the story” that has yet to be heard? Might those facts change the view as well as the conclusion? For example, imagine a Learning Team of five people is assigned the task of reviewing a recommendation that Company A’s workforce be reduced to keep the company from losing money in the upcoming fiscal year. The team is to prepare a recommendation about how to best accomplish that goal. The recommendation must also include a plan to increase employee morale during a time when everyone knows, or at least suspects, that a reduction-in-force (RIF) may be necessary. During the discussion an outline evolves as follows:

- Introduction
- Identification and discussion of the business situation leading to the recommendation to reduce the workforce
- Development of a plan for the reduction-in-force
- Development of a plan to improve morale once the reduction is announced
- Conclusion.

The situation didn’t take long to analyze. It’s a straightforward scenario. Best of all, there are five sections, so each of the team members can draft one of them! One member volunteers to write the introduction and another team member agrees to combine the sections and to provide the team with a comprehensive draft. But wait, was the quick analysis sufficient or is more information needed? Isn’t the team going to discuss the plans together, rather than assigning the major aspect of the project to two individuals who will be working in isolation? Is the recommendation based on all the pertinent and vital data? Is
anyone on the team wearing gray glasses? Should the group discuss different points and approaches to the problem? Perhaps an alternate solution, one that would not result in a reduction-in-force (RIF) (or at the very least minimize the RIF) could be worked out. By taking time to think through and discuss not only the individual pieces of the project, but how they interrelate before everyone goes off to work on his or her part, the team will be likely to produce a better thought-out plan in every respect.

5-Minute Brainstorm

Another way to prevent groupthink is to agree early on that no team decision will be made without spending at least five minutes together brainstorming the options. Five minutes may not sound like a lot of time, but it is amazing how many ideas can be generated, and more importantly, how many unspoken assumptions may be articulated, explored, or questioned during these few minutes of creative time.

During the initial phase of brainstorming, no judgments are made about the ideas presented. Rather, one of the members of the team acts as the scribe, listing each idea on a flip chart or white board as it is offered. The team can brainstorm in an unstructured manner, simply inviting each person to articulate ideas as they come, or the team can agree to a structured approach, such as having each team member speak up one-by-one in turn. Regardless of the process for articulating and recording options, what is important is that each person has an opportunity to contribute to the list and to build on the ideas presented by others.

When the idea generation phase is complete, the team needs to begin the filtering, evaluation, and selection phases to arrive at a decision that fulfills the team project goals and that can be supported by everyone in the team. One of the key benefits of brainstorming is the likelihood of discovering a creative option that was not readily
apparent to any individual team member. The Return On Investment (ROI) on these five minutes can be tremendous and the result is a better-finished product.

**Angel’s Advocate**

The most common term for the approach in which one takes an opposing viewpoint for the sake of discussion and exploration of a topic is called the Devil’s Advocate approach. Perhaps a better name for the team member engaged in this questioning process is Angel’s Advocate, however, since the questions this person asks often shed important light on an issue. Obviously questions should not be asked just for the sake of asking questions or exploring every nook and cranny, but if each member of the team is not clear about the task at hand and is not convinced that the right decisions have been made, questions must be asked. In some team environments, playing this role will take courage.

When taking on the role of Angel’s Advocate, the person speaking up is an advocate of the decision-making process that is in the best interests of the team as a whole. His or her role is to ensure that the decision-making process is complete and the best possible given the circumstances. He or she has a duty to the team to make certain that the decision-making process is neither cut short nor prolonged. The Angel’s Advocate works hard to promote the best interests of the team as a functional unit during the decision-making process.

**After techniques to analyze a task and develop options are exhausted, how will the team actually make a decision?**

**Voting**

The team can vote, agreeing to abide by a simple majority or some other ratio of yea votes to nay votes. The voting can be done aloud with everyone present or by secret ballot. Unless this vote is
unanimous, however, voting may divide the team into those who support the decision and those who oppose it. This can create the perception of winners and losers. Certainly it is possible for team members in the minority to agree to move forward with the decision of the team as a whole, but they may not give their best efforts to the task. Emotional buy-in and support of the decision are often lacking and despite efforts to go along with the decision of the majority, individuals may inadvertently or subconsciously work against the direction of the majority of the team.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to voting and agreement to act only after reaching a unanimous or majority decision.

**Consensus**

When unanimity does not appear possible, a team can seek closure in the decision-making process by consensus. Once again referencing Merriam-Webster OnLine, consensus is defined as “general agreement; … group solidarity in sentiment and belief…”(http://www.m-w.com/home.htm). In a nutshell, in the context of teamwork consensus exists when all members of the team can *live with* and *support* the preferred decision of some of the members of the group, despite lingering personal or individual questions, reservations, or preferences for a different decision.

There are various ways to determine when a team reaches a point of consensus. One way is to designate an informal team leader to periodically ask each member of the team if the option on the table is one that every person approves and can support. This method works well for teams meeting together in the same room or for virtual teams meeting by phone or in instant-messaging types of electronic forums.

Another consensus-building method that does not require verbal checkpoints incorporates the use of green, yellow, and red cards. This method of using signal cards is described well by P. Keith Kelly (1994)
in *Team Decision-Making* and obviously requires teams to meet in-person or at least by videoconference, so they can see what color card each team member is displaying as the discussions progress. Kelly suggests each team member tape together three cards (one green, one yellow, one red), to form a triangle. The triangle is placed in front of each team member during team discussions. As topics are discussed and options are explored, each person turns the triangle to show the color to the others. A green card signals agreement and that the team member can fully support the option. The red card indicates disagreement and that the team member cannot support it, at least not with the information currently available. At that point the concerns can be discussed and steps can be taken to uncover sufficient information to allow for agreement or to help the team work together to continue exploring other options. If a team member places the yellow side of the triangle to face others, it signals the ability to live with the option/decision and support it. Consensus is reached when no red cards are facing the group (p.59).

Consensus decision-making works well when emotional investment in the decision plays a large role. Consensus is an effective team decision-making approach when it is important for potential personal agendas or opposing positions to be discussed and resolved before moving forward with projects as a team.

**Criteria development and rating system**

Sometimes it may appear that strong personal biases or preferences influence team decision-making efforts in a way that prevents the team from reaching agreement. In this type of situation, it is often helpful to re-focus the discussions on developing and articulating the criteria that are most important for project success. In that way, team members will have objective factors to consider and to use as they weigh the alternatives. For example, suppose a classroom
team assignment is to develop an employee compensation and motivation plan that stimulates employees to achieve an organization’s goals. The team may select any employer of one of the team members, or they may select an organization for which none of the team members currently works. Several members of the team have preferences on which type of organization they should choose. In many cases, the preferences are based on team success as well as personal interests. How will the team decide on a course of action?

One approach the team can take is to look at the overall assignment again and develop criteria everyone in the team agrees are important when assessing the finished project. Some of the criteria the team identifies as crucial may include:

- Access to accurate information about the organization’s goals
- The ease of gathering information about the organization’s current compensation system
- Having a point of contact within the organization who can openly share employee views about the effectiveness of the compensation system
- Having a point of contact who will be available throughout the team’s research and drafting periods, to answer questions, confirm understandings, and share information.

After criteria are developed, the team can determine which, if any, are more important than others. If so, they can be rated by priority and listed with the highest priorities at the top. By focusing on objective criteria to make the decision, the team is able to de-personalize the process and the result. The basis for the decision is more objective and less subjective.
Common guidelines and practical steps

Regardless of the process used to arrive at decisions as a team, there are common guidelines that teams can use for effective decision-making. These include the following:

- Be open, frank, and respectful with each other about team project ideas and preferences.
- Share the responsibility to serve as an informal leader within the team. For example, someone needs to step forward and make the first move to help the group reach a decision or take the next step. Sometimes that first step can take the form of scheduling a meeting (or scheduling a teleconference if the team consists of members who are working at a distance from each other). The first step can also be an offer to draft a proposal, outline, or timeline for the team to use.
- When everyone helps move the team closer to the goal, and allows others to do the same, the team as a whole benefits.
- Teams (and people in general) should look for opportunities, not just problems, during the decision-making process.

Wrapping up

Decision-making is a process. Some team decisions will be easy to make and will take very little time. Others may be more complex and require team members to spend time to understand different perspectives. To prevent groupthink, each member of the team can take it upon himself or herself to utilize one or more of the following methods:

- Six Thinking Hats
• Gray-Colored Glasses

• 5-Minute Brainstorm

• Angel’s Advocate

When differences of opinion exist about how to proceed, teams can consider using one of the following approaches to develop alternatives and to make sure all team members have an opportunity to provide meaningful input:

• Voting

• Agreement by consensus

• Criteria development and rating
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