

Skillbook

Group Decision Making

Decision Making
Skills



Mindtools

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This Skillbook is published by Mind Tools Ltd.
21 Young Street, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH2 4HU.

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Version 5.0.

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1. Introduction

Do you find making business decisions a challenge? You might have no time for doubt or hesitation – but how confident are you really? Are you aware of all the underlying issues? Do you understand the impact of your decision on your team, or co-workers in other departments? And can you be sure of your manager's support, whatever the outcome?

In our article, *How to Make Decisions*, we explore a seven-step strategy for making difficult decisions. This asks you to:

1. Create a constructive environment for decision making.
2. Investigate the situation in detail.
3. Generate good alternatives.
4. Explore options.
5. Select the best solution.
6. Evaluate your plan.
7. Take action.

This **Skillbook** will help you with the fifth step – especially when the decision is subjective, and when you need to make it within a group.

So, why should you be systematic in your decision making, and why involve other people?

None of us is perfect and we all make mistakes sometimes. And a big mistake could test your relationships, create problems across the company, and even, in extreme cases, threaten its existence.

Despite these risks, you might be worried that asking for other people's input will make you look weak or indecisive. Or, you might be tempted to take sole responsibility for making a decision, to avoid bothering your busy colleagues.

These are understandable reactions, but remember that you are part of a team! Its members are likely to have relevant expertise and experience that could improve the quality of your decisions. They will likely appreciate you consulting them, but they may be cross and uncooperative if you “steam on” regardless of their views.

Your next dilemma might be **how** to involve others. In particular, how can you manage differing opinions, and get buy-in to the process and final decision?

So, in this **Skillbook**, you’ll learn how to:

- Weigh up the pros and cons of a group decision versus an individual one.
- Guide a group through two contrasting decision-making processes.
- Look out for and avoid the damaging behavior known as “groupthink.”

2. Individual or Group?

Decisions are a fact of business life, and we make them all the time. Should we change the paper supplier? What's the best way to get my laptop fixed? Where in the world should we launch the new product? Should we go ahead and build this proposed new facility?

Some of these decisions are best made by you, based on your own judgment: "If I send my laptop to the IT department it could be three days before I get it back. Mike's really quick but also a bit unorthodox, so I can't be sure of the outcome if I give it to him." Other decisions need to be discussed with the interested parties: "Jade doesn't like flying but will be OK with enough warning – but how much warning is enough, and can we wait that long to visit the construction site?"

It's not always so clear if you should involve others. Having more people in a process might slow it down or over-complicate matters. But collaboration could lead to a more creative and better informed solution, that more people support. So, how do you make these decisions, and why?



Action:

In the boxes below, note down two decisions: one that you made with the involvement of your team, and one that you made alone. Then add your reasons for taking the approach that you did. Looking back, did you do the right thing, and is there anything you might do differently next time?

Decision with team involvement	Reason for involving team	Review
Decision without team involvement	Reason for not involving team	Review

Of course, the type of decision making you use will depend on your particular role and workplace. But there are some factors common to any decision-making situation that you should look out for and be guided by. You'd be wise to use group decision making, and **not** go it alone, if any of these factors apply:

- The outcome could be controversial.
- The decision will likely have a major impact on the team or business.
- Other people have specialized skills or experience related to your options.
- Significant support is crucial to the decision's success.

Preparation

Once you're clear that a group decision is the right option, avoid rushing on. First, you'll need to engage and prepare your group members to help you make a really good decision.

This doesn't mean steering them toward your preferred outcome! Instead, you should present the issue and its significance ahead of the decision making meeting so they can think about it individually. Also, explain why you're involving them and what they can bring to the process. They have an important role to play!

Finally, decide which approach you want the group to use to come to its decision, and how you're going to guide it through the process. In the next chapters, we'll look at two methods that are particularly suited to difficult, subjective decisions: **multi-voting** and the **Modified Borda Count**.

3. Multi-Voting Method

Multi-voting can help you and your team choose between a number of options after you've considered them carefully.

As its name implies, this method involves several rounds of voting that gradually narrow the range of options until one wins: this is the group's decision on the matter. For example, you might start with 10 options and take the top five through to the second round of voting, with the resulting top two going on to a third and final round.

The method is multiple in another sense, too, as group members have several votes to use in each round. They can allocate them across one or more options, to show the relative strength of their support for each one.

Here's an example in practice. Imagine a non-profit has received a donation of \$10,000 to run a community project, and there are 10 projects to choose from:

- A. Restoring the commemoration hall.
- B. Repairing the basketball court's playing surface.
- C. Running a monthly arts trip for isolated elderly people.
- D. Forming a high school students' drama club.
- E. Building a boardwalk on the beach for wheelchair users.
- F. Planting a sensory garden in the elementary school yard.
- G. Running a breakfast club for families on welfare.
- H. Installing lighting in the public park.
- I. Buying new computers for the library.
- J. Setting up a public cycle hire scheme.

Let's assume that there are seven people in the decision-making group.

A simple single-voting system could give a clear and fair result. Project E might get five votes, C and J get a vote each, and the other options have no votes, so E wins. The two people who voted for B and F might be disappointed that their choices weren't adopted, but they will likely accept such a clear majority.

However, the result could be that projects A, B, E, I, and J get one vote each, and F gets two votes. In this case, only one person tipped the balance in favor of the winner, F, so other members might not buy in to the decision wholeheartedly.

In contrast, the results of multi-voting are more emphatic, and therefore encourage more buy-in. Here's how:

The Method

Step 1: Decide how many votes each of the seven people can cast in round one. A good number is about half the number of options. So, with 10 community projects to choose from, each person would get five votes to use.

Step 2: Group members vote for the first time. In our example, this is how the 35 available votes fell: A4; B0; C4; D2; E5; F0; G8; H2; I3; J7.

Step 3: Carry forward the top five options to a second round of voting.



Action:

Look at the results from round one and fill in the first column of the table below with the letters of the five projects that should progress (leave the second column blank for now).

Projects to progress to round two	Votes in round two

Step 4: Decide how many votes each person can cast in round two, and the group votes for the second time.



Action:

Assuming, say, two votes for each person in the second round of the exercise, allocate 14 votes across the five options, writing them in the second column of the table above.

Step 5: If there's no clear winner, take forward your top two options to a third round. For this final choice, give each person just one vote. (You could ask group members whether they are prepared to accept the result of round two, and only go on to a third round if the answer is no.)

Projects to progress to round three	Votes in round three

Advantages and Disadvantages

Multi-voting is easy to understand, the process can be anonymous, and the results are clear cut.

However, someone who's had his or her preferences out-voted, round after round, might find the decision hard to accept.



Action:

Note down a decision that your group or organization has made recently. Suggest how multi-voting might have helped.

Decision you made:	
How multi-voting might have helped:	

4. The Modified Borda Count

This approach encourages group members to share and discuss ideas, and then concludes with a single round of weighted voting, which emphasizes consensus rather than winning. It's one of several variations of the Borda Count method that is sometimes used in political elections.

The Method

Step 1: Present both the issue and your suggested options to the group.

Step 2: Facilitate a discussion in which group members can suggest improvements, highlight concerns, ask questions, and suggest new options.

Step 3: Ask each person to state their preferred option. Collate this information on a flip chart or similar, so everyone can see the list. Merge any duplicate options.

Step 4: Now give each group member a set of votes to share out across the options to show their preferences. In contrast to multi-voting, they cannot leave out any options, and they must give a different number of votes to each option. For example, they'd give five votes to their favorite of five options, four points to their next choice, and so on. Their least favorite option would get just one of their votes.

Step 5: Add together everyone's votes for each option, to give a set of group votes.

Step 6: Rank the options in order of their group votes to reveal the final decision.

Action:



Imagine you're involved in the community project funding decision from the previous chapter. In the grid on the next page, enter your votes in the "You" column, from 10 (top) through one (bottom). Then calculate the results for the rest of the table to discover the group's decision.

Project code	Joe	Helen	Finn	James	You	Total Vote	Ranking Position
A.	1	3	1	9			
B.	4	2	5	4			
C.	3	9	10	5			
D.	7	5	4	6			
E.	5	1	2	7			
F.	8	10	6	10			
G.	9	7	9	3			
H.	2	8	7	8			
I.	10	4	8	2			
J.	6	6	3	1			

Advantages and Disadvantages

The group explores all possible options thoroughly before its members vote, so the quality of its final decision will likely be high. The single round of weighted voting is less time consuming than multi-voting. And the spread of votes tends to give a result with broad appeal, as almost everyone will have voted for the final option, at least to some degree. All in all, this method builds strong buy-in.

However, as with many collaborative processes, there is a risk of “groupthink” developing, which could sabotage the decision. We’ll look at this danger, and what you can do about it, in the next chapter.

5. Groupthink

Groupthink is a behavior that appears when people's desire for consensus overrides their desire to evaluate an idea critically or express an unpopular opinion. Groupthink undermines objectivity, so it drives out good decision making.



Action:

Think about your team and other people in your organization – including yourself. Who displays which of the following characteristics? Note them in the table below.

Characteristics	People
Does their best to please everyone	
Tends to agree easily	
Very assertive in meetings	
Always sees the negative	
Strong self opinion	
Changes their mind easily	
Quiet in meetings	

You'll very likely have people with some of these characteristics in your team, but it's a combination of these traits that can lead to groupthink. If you're observant, and alert to the risk, you'll be able to recognize groupthink from its "symptoms."

The Symptoms of Groupthink

Rationalization: Group members convince themselves that an option is the best one, despite evidence to the contrary.

"Those other people don't agree with us because they haven't researched the problem as extensively as we have."

Peer pressure: The majority of the group works together to pressure or penalize into compliance someone who questions a decision's rationale.

"Well, if you really feel that we're making a mistake, you can always leave the team."

Or, the majority of the group wants to be so encouraging and open to contributions that it won't let anyone "shoot down" a bad idea.

"It would be unkind to say that's half baked, even though we know it is."

Complacency: After a few successes, the group begins to believe that any decision it makes is the right one.

"Our track record speaks for itself. We are unstoppable!"

Moral high ground: Members of the group believe they are moral and that, therefore, they can't make a bad decision. No one wants to be thought of as immoral so pressure to conform is high.

"We all know what is right and wrong, and this is definitely right."

Stereotyping: As the group becomes more uniform in its views, it sees outsiders as different and inferior.

"Lawyers will find any excuse to argue, even when the facts are clearly against them."

Censorship: Members keep their own opinions hidden, so as to conform with the rest of the group.

"If everyone else agrees, I must be wrong."

Or, information is filtered by the group so that it fits the chosen option.

"Don't listen to that nonsense. They don't have a clue about what is really going on."

Illusion of unanimity: Everyone in the group believes that their decision is unanimous because no one speaks out to the contrary.

"I see that we all agree, so it's decided then!"

Together, these symptoms fall into two main categories:

"Follow the strongest"

- Less confident group members follow their louder or more senior colleagues to avoid conflict.
- The group convinces itself that the idea that's expressed most loudly, or that comes from more senior group members, must be the best one, despite other members having some reservations.
- Quieter group members don't get their opinions heard, even though they have good ideas.
- The group is lulled into thinking that everyone has agreed, as only the dominant members have expressed opinions.

"Team untouchable"

- The group's made good decisions before, so this decision will be right too.
- The group believes it's the leading team on this issue, so whatever decision it makes will be the best one.
- The group assumes it knows everything there is to know about the issue, so fails to seek any fresh information.

Avoiding Groupthink

You've chosen to involve a group in your decision making, so you need to make sure it's helping, not hindering, you. It's therefore vital that you avoid groupthink:

- Encourage all members to offer their ideas and opinions freely, for discussion and full analysis.
- Allow time for the group to gather information and to check the validity of its arguments.
- Manage group dynamics carefully.

Avoiding groupthink will be a challenge, but you can succeed! Concentrate on guiding your group through the decision-making process, making sure it:

- Remembers its objectives.
- Explores all the alternatives.
- Challenges ideas without reprisal.
- Examines risks.
- Tests its assumptions.
- Re-examines alternatives that it's rejected (if necessary).
- Uses external sources for further information.
- Processes information objectively.
- Draws up a contingency plan in case of unwanted outcomes.

And if you do suspect that groupthink is developing, be sure to name it, address it, and agree on how to overcome it.



Action:

Choose three symptoms of groupthink and, in the boxes below, suggest how you might combat them.

Symptom	Avoidance Strategy

6. Key Points

Complicated, high-impact or controversial decisions benefit most from being made by a group, instead of you taking sole responsibility for them.

Plan your decision-making strategy and prepare your group members so they are aware of their responsibilities and are engaged in the process before you begin.

Subjective and hard-to-quantify decisions can benefit from multi-voting or the Modified Borda Count method, as part of a seven-step model of decision making.

Multi-voting gives more emphatic results than single-voting systems and therefore increases buy-in. It can be done anonymously, making controversial decisions easier, and is simple to understand. However, working through several rounds of voting can be time consuming and anyone who is out-voted more than once might resent the outcome.

The Modified Borda Count encourages you to discover new options, and to explore them thoroughly, before a single round of decisive, weighted voting. It can generate good-quality decisions with broad appeal and strong buy-in.

As in all collaborative processes, group decision making carries a risk of groupthink, which you must “nip in the bud” to ensure a high-quality outcome.