



Rethinking Group Decision Making

By David A. O'Brien, WorkChoice Solutions

The value of effective group decision making has been known for a long time. Yet with few exceptions, most leaders and teams today fall short of recognizing the full range of benefits associated with participatory decision making. All too often, the fastest thinkers or most vocal among the team drive to a decision point that at the least leaves many valuable insights or perspectives off the table. At its most damaging level, others are left wondering why they even attempted to offer their opinion. To be sure, these scenarios play-out countless times every day and in their wake are capable team members whose motivation may well be diminished.

To a large degree, the barriers that exist within effective group decision making can be linked to the *do-more-with less* cultural dynamics that are prevalent in today's workplace. With high productivity a daily expectation,

most leaders (and teams) put more emphasis on reaching a conclusion or "getting it done" than they do on making meaningful and inclusive decisions. Despite good intentions, some team members make biased judgments that inhibit a free flow of ideas while also discouraging others from sharing how they really feel or think about an issue.

Another bi-product of today's workplace cultural dynamic is the unwritten norms that allow mixed messages to further dilute the group decision making process. "Tell it like it is, but don't hurt anyone's feelings", "Be well prepared but don't ask too many questions" and perhaps my favorite, "Everyone deserves our attention but it's okay to check your Blackberry while someone else is speaking".

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While much of the above is true for many leaders and teams today, the good news is that with deliberate effort, the full benefit of participatory decision-making can be realized. As a beginning point, it helps to acknowledge that the best decisions are those that reflect the diverse perspectives of the entire group and ultimately the best outcome for all involved. Acknowledging that people often support what they help to create is another important guidepost for leaders and teams.

In addition to being mindful of these group decision making truths, leaders are well served by also considering the core tenets of participatory decision making. Not surprisingly, full participation and mutual understanding are the foundational building blocks of effective group decision making. Inclusiveness where decisions reflect everyone's perspective and truth is another important building block. While these building blocks go a long way in ensuring optimum decisions, shared responsibility for long term success is paramount. Absent this level of ownership in long term success, even the best decisions can fall short on the road to implementation.

Five More Things You Can Do Now

1. Invest the time to consider the effectiveness level of group decision-making within your team and organization. Could it be more effective?
2. Solicit input from your peers and team regarding what they view as the biggest impediments to participatory decision making.
3. Invest 15 minutes in your next staff meeting to explore the four core tenets of participatory decision making and ask your team to define the behaviors that support each tenet.
4. Focus on your short-term goals and small steps toward improving group decision making with your team and peer group. Remember, small steps are better than no steps.
5. Monitor progress by seeking team feedback following key decisions to ensure that the participatory decision making process is evolving to a more effective level.

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About David A. O'Brien

David is President of CT based WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness consulting services that was founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate and nonprofit clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. He is also an in-demand keynote speaker on the topic of leadership excellence. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. Additionally, his many articles have appeared in a variety of local, regional and national publications. To learn more, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at www.workchoicesolutions.com or contact him directly at 860.242.1070.

