



CHANGING THE WAY
WE DO BUSINESS:
A MODEL FOR CONSENSUS
DECISION-MAKING

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The Total Quality Management (TQM) company often uses teams to define and improve management and work processes. Frequently, these teams include people from different functional areas in the organization as well as managers and their direct reports. Because these people may not be accustomed to conversing openly with each other, the decisions they make may reflect only the opinion of the person(s) with the most rank or expertise.

If the TQM organization is truly interested in optimizing the efforts of its teams, it needs to address how these teams make decisions. Quite often, when a company chooses to have a quality focus it decides to approach decision-making through consensus. However, it is rare to find teams that have a common definition or a clearly defined process for making consensus decision-making work for them.

This paper will describe a model which, if employed by a team, will educate the members about some decision-making strategies available for their use. This model also provides the team with a methodology for using one of these strategies to promote equal contributions by all team members, namely decision-making by consensus.

There are some prerequisites for the manager interested in the successful use of consensus in a team setting. For example:

- The manager acknowledges that decision-making by consensus is an important part of the TQM methodology and is willing to give up control of the team's decisions and become a supplier of leadership to the team.
- The manager realizes that consensus decision-making is a critical first step in building a team and is willing to take the time to develop this process. This means up to a four-hour commitment.
- The manager is willing to focus on the team's dynamics as well as on its task. An alternative the manager may choose is to engage a facilitator to address team-building issues. The use of a facilitator is recommended if the manager is not familiar with or comfortable using the group techniques that are discussed in this paper.

The four stage model presented in this paper shows how a manager (hereafter referred to as a "team leader") can guide a team through designing and testing a process for consensus decision-making. The four stages of this model are (1) the education stage, (2) the definition stage, (3) the design stage, and (4) the test and refine stage. Implementation strategies for each stage will be discussed using field-tested methodologies.

In addition, concerns, issues, and questions associated with each stage will be outlined and examples will be used to illustrate each stage of the model.

Stage One: Education (Why Consensus Decision- Making?)

The purpose of the education stage is to introduce people to a variety of decision-making strategies and the benefits and drawbacks of each. If the team members do not consider consensus decision-making a desirable way to increase team participation, the team leader should not impose it. Therefore, the purpose of the education stage and the first step towards adopting a process for consensus decision-making is to educate the team members on their choices. Table One contains decision-making strategies along a continuum of initial commitment to the outcome. (All Tables and figures appear in the Appendix to this article.)

The team leader begins the education stage by providing the group with Table One or a similar list of generic definitions for each decision-making strategy. Next, the team leader solicits examples of each of these decision-making strategies from the team's work experience. To increase the discussion, the use of brainstorming or the nominal group technique is appropriate. This discussion should yield common definitions of the decision-making processes in the continuum.

The team leader should continue using the decision-making continuum to generate a discussion of the pros and cons of each strategy (see Table Two for examples). The team leader and team members may identify the most prevalent decision-making strategy in their organization by the ease of discussion and the number of benefits and drawbacks cited.

As a result of this discussion, the team members should begin to perceive the long-term advantages of consensus decision-making, resulting in a willingness to try it for themselves. Their concerns about consensus decision-making may include:

"Why can't the boss make the decisions?" (Fear of bad results; isn't that what she/he's paid to do?)

"Won't it take us forever to do this?" (Fear of not doing anything tangible; fear that the decision-making time frame will be delayed.)

"Who has responsibility for the results of the group consensus?" (Fear of bad results, lack of personal ownership, unwillingness to trust each other and/or management.)

"What happens if somebody doesn't agree and won't budge?" (Fear of ethical or contractual problems, i.e., union issues, lack

of data-based decision-making, don't know how to use the Shewhart Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle [Deming, 1986], fear of the unknown and the unknowable.)

The education stage also provides the team leader with an early opportunity to conduct a team meeting in an open atmosphere. It is important for the team leader to practice stressing the value in any comment, no matter how negative it may be. Many of these negative comments represent the team members' testing of whether they can give a controversial opinion. (This will probably happen more than once.) If the team leader remembers that this testing is not personal, intra-team relations will improve as the opinions of the team members and leader are shared.

Once the team has expressed willingness to try the consensus decision-making process, the team and the team leader should proceed with the operational definition of this process. The purpose of the definition stage is to begin specifying the operational definition by outlining how the team will and will not use consensus decision-making in its work. The team leader may wish to employ brainstorming or the nominal group technique to generate this information (See Table Three for a typical team response). During this stage, concerns will emerge that show people resisting the use of consensus decision-making. Some of these concerns include:

Stage Two: Definition (What is Consensus Decision- Making?)

"How can we find out if we have consensus?" (Votes, polls, restating opinions.)

"What if this process we design doesn't work?"

"How long should we wait before we give up on getting consensus? How do you deal with stalemates?"

"When do you turn on this process? What types of issues signal the need for the process? Important ones? Tough ones? Small? Large?"

"What if a decision needs to be made immediately?"

"How can we be sure if we have heard everyone's opinion?"

"What if the team leader gets involved in the discussion and no one is monitoring the process?"

“How do we communicate the solidarity of the group if we have agreed to support a decision but have reservations or real concerns about the probability for its success?”

These concerns need to be recorded by team members. They are the questions that must be answered in the team’s design of its consensus decision-making process.

Stage Three: Design (How do we use consensus decision-making?)

The team’s operational definition of consensus decision-making started with the identification of how the team will and will not use consensus decision-making. The purpose of the design stage is to continue this operational definition by creating a flowchart to depict the process. It is also important for the team to develop the specifications for how to carry out the process.

A flowchart will provide the team with a diagram of the steps in the consensus decision-making process. The leader will want to begin by asking the team to construct a flowchart of how the consensus decision-making process should work. The team then modifies it to reflect the pros, cons, issues, and concerns generated in the education and definition stages. Figure One provides a generic example of a consensus decision-making process flowchart.

The team’s first flowchart will probably not look like the example in Figure One. It may be more complicated or oversimplified and may use other types of decision-making strategies as alternatives when consensus is not easily obtained. It is not important to have the team design a “perfect” process for consensus decision-making. What is important is that the team learn to design a process that can be improved upon as they use it to move forward in the team’s tasks.

Stage Four: Test and Refine (How can we check if our process is effective?)

Even a team with an excellent process design will need practice in order to use consensus decision-making in a natural manner. The team leader and members should realize that like any other process the consensus decision-making process must also be continually improved. The purpose of the test and refine stage is to complete the operational definition by providing a method for testing and improving the team’s decision-making process. This stage is best represented by the check phase of the Shewhart Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle. The following example uses the PDCA cycle to outline the four stage model for consensus decision-making.

Plan: The first three stages of the consensus decision-making model, resulting in the flowchart of the process.

Do: Use of the consensus decision-making process in regular team work.

Check: How effective is our consensus decision-making process?
Questions for the team to answer include:

Is the team reverting to other decision-making processes?
How often?

Does the process work as the team expected it to? Why or why not?

Is one part of the process harder to execute than another?
Which part? Can it be made simpler?

Is the team using the flowchart to remind it of the process?
If not, how does the team know when to improve upon it?

Act: According to the data gathered in the check phase of the PDCA cycle, the team would either continue to use its process for consensus decision-making or refine it.

The four stage model presented in this paper does more than offer the team leader a design process for consensus decision-making. With the team leader or a facilitator as a guide, the team members will also have an opportunity to practice some of the basic tenets that make the TQM company different. For example:

- Team members will see their manager (the team leader) practicing new management skills. The more comfortable the manager is in trying out these new skills, the more the team members will be willing to try them out. This is called "leading by example."
- Team members will see that the TQM effort is important to the manager because of the time and effort he or she is investing in it.
- The team members and the manager will get practice in two key concepts of a TQM approach: process definition and process improvement.
- The team will have a process which will support the equal contribution and the free exchange of ideas.

Summary

- The team will have a more pleasant and fun atmosphere in which to complete its tasks.

One final word of caution. In the early phases it is common for team members to resist the use of the process of consensus decision-making. On the one hand, the team generally sees the benefits of the consensus decision-making process. On the other hand, this process of decision-making causes members to reject decision-making processes they have used successfully in the past. This phenomenon tends to subside once the teams uses consensus decision-making in its regular team work.

In fact, approximately 80 percent of the teams that have used this four stage model for consensus decision-making felt the reduction in arguments alone justified the initial time investment. Others affected by the team's decisions also commented on the increased consistency of the team's decisions. These direct and indirect benefits should be enough for any team leader to use this process with his or her group.

Deming, W. E. Out of the Crisis. Cambridge; MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1986.

Filley, A. C. Interpersonal Conflict Resolution. IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1975.

Johnson, D. W. & Johnson F. P. Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills. NJ: Prentice-Hall., 1975.

Appendix Table 1

Decision-Making Strategies Arranged Along a Continuum of Initial Commitment to the Outcome

Level of Initial Commitment to Outcome	Strategy	Definition	Work Examples
Lowest	Autocratic	One person makes decisions for the entire team.	
	Expert	The person who knows the most about the topic makes the decision.	
	Autocratic with input from the team.	A single person makes decisions but only after asking for the opinions of others involved.	
	Majority Rule	The decision is made by selecting a solution that is satisfactory to at least 50% of the team.	
	Consensus	All team members consent to a decision; full consent means that members are willing to support the decision.	
Highest	Unanimous Consent	Everyone agrees and is completely satisfied with the decision.	

Examples of Pros and Cons of the Decision-Making Strategies

Table 2

Strategy	Definition	Pros	Cons
Autocratic	One person makes decisions for the entire team.	It's quick. Responsibility is clear.	No support solicited. No feedback on decision.
Expert	The person who knows the most about the topic makes the decision.	No team research needed. Responsibility is clear.	No feedback. No customer information included.
Autocratic with input from the team	A single person makes decisions but only after asking for the opinions of others involved.	It's quick. Some customer feedback is received. Responsibility is clear.	Frustration due to lack of follow-up.
Majority Rule	The decision is made by selecting a solution that is satisfactory to at least 50% of the team.	Democratic. It's quick.	Some members still lose. Responsibility unclear.
Consensus	All team members consent to a decision; full consent means that members are willing to support the decision.	All members give feedback. All members support decision.	May take time.
Unanimous Consent	Everyone agrees and is completely satisfied with the decision.	All members agree.	May never happen.

Examples of How Teams Will and Will Not Use Consensus Decision-Making in Their Work

We will use consensus decision-making to:

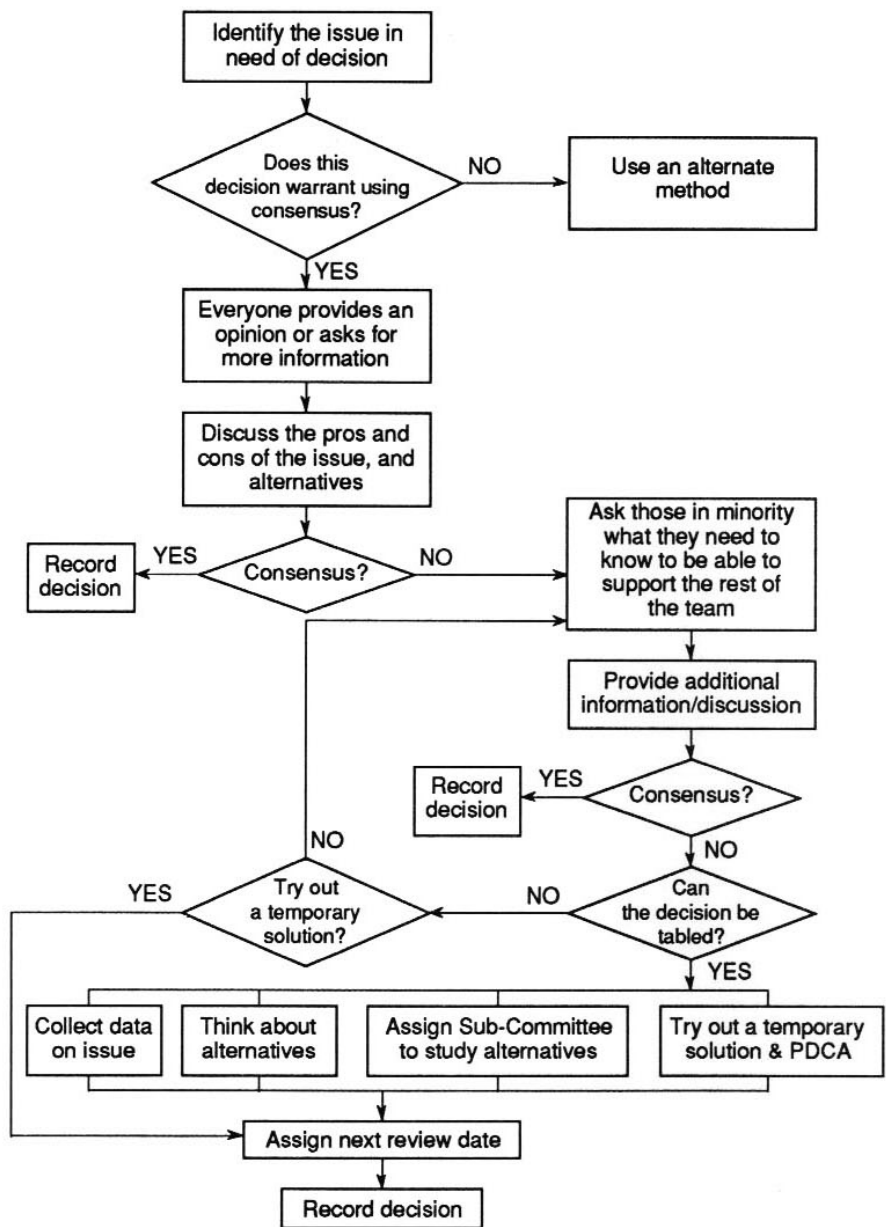
- Give all members a chance to be heard.
- Allow individuals to discuss the pros and cons of several different options before selecting one.
- Find solutions to problems which meet the needs or concerns of all team members and are acceptable to all.

We will not use consensus decision-making to:

- Focus on personal viewpoints to the exclusion of others.
- Ask people to do something they normally would not.
- Sell people outside of the meeting.
- Encourage competition among team members.

Figure 1

A Generic Process for Consensus Decision-Making



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