

Making Group Decisions When Ideas are Abundant

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Every decision goes through two distinct stages: option generation and option selection.

The first step requires the imagination of possible action steps. The objective is to generate as many ideas as possible. Creativity is paramount. Imaginative individuals who excel at coming up with new, different, and unusual ideas are a huge asset to a team at this stage.

The second step is evaluating each of the ideas to determine the likelihood of that particular action delivering the desired outcome. Of course, no one can predict with total accuracy what will occur when a given action is taken. Sometimes, arguments arise in teams as various options are considered. People lobby with great passion for their favorite suggestion.

So, how does a leader maintain team camaraderie while at the same time generating commitment to a single course of action? Some leaders take the dictatorial route--they make the decision themselves.

Another approach is multi-voting. Team members vote for an agreed percentage of the items under consideration. Those options receiving few votes are dropped. The process is repeated once or twice more. Finally, each person votes for only one option. The selection is made by a simple majority.

I suggest a different approach, however--one that engages each individual and empowers the group to seek future collaborative opportunities. The approach is called the nominal group technique. (I don't know how this name was adopted. Andre Delbecq and Andrew van de Ven of the University of Wisconsin first described this approach in a 1971 "Journal of Applied Behavioral Science" article.)

Each option is identified as clearly as possible, combining related ideas and eliminating redundancies. Each team member offers whatever perspectives the others should consider as they make their choices.

The process is rather simple. Divide the number of options under consideration by two, rounding up if necessary. Each person receives that many votes. (Example: 9 options, each person allocates 5 votes.) Each person rates the options in preferential sequence, starting with the strongest. (Example: assign "5" to the preferred option, "4" to the next preferred, continuing down to "1." Remaining options are "0.")

If anyone in the group prefers that the vote summaries be collected privately and reported anonymously, I typically honor that request. Otherwise, the simplest presentation is to collect and tally the information on a visible board as each person announces his or her preferences verbally.

Two pieces of summed information are worth noting. First is the total number of weighted votes for each option. The second piece of information is a count of how many individuals voted for each option.

This process does not make the decision for the team. These sums represent new information, the meaning of which is not obvious. Each person makes an independent judgment about what the sums mean, sharing insights with the group. For example, what does it mean if two options are very close in weighted sum, yet one was selected by only a few individuals and the other was selected by almost everyone? Differences like this are worth further discussion, seeking what additional perceptions exist.

Sometimes, if the number of options is large, a second approach to the voting is appropriate. However, even a large number of options can be distilled down to a preferred alternative quickly.

The advantages of this process are great. First, everyone has an equal opportunity to participate. Other approaches tend to overlook the quieter members of the group. Second, the sense of ownership for the selected option is usually high. Finally, if the selected approach doesn't work, a readily available backup has already been identified.

A disadvantage is that sometimes the process can seem too mechanical. A skilled facilitator, however, can minimize this possibility by providing ample opportunity before and after the voting for individuals to share their opinions and judgments.

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