

Coalition Decision Making

“An open, credible process...”

Begin by asking these questions of the coalition...

- How is the coalition governed – who makes decisions and what authority do they have to make them?
- How will governing responsibilities be rotated over time?
- How will governance reflect and respect the coalition’s diversity?

By choosing the most appropriate styles for decision making, the coalition achieves a balance of ownership and productivity. We achieve the greatest ownership when everyone is aware of all the information and participates in all decisions.

Productivity may be enhanced when the coalition empowers individuals and small groups to act together to make decisions. The coalition can empower the small groups to make decisions on their behalf, as long as a clear and open reporting mechanism is employed.

Coalitions can offer members full responsibility for achieving change. By enhancing members’ roles in governance and decision making, buy-in to outcomes, and implementation itself, will be strengthened.

Decision Making Methods – Some Distinctions

Consensus: The goal of consensus decision making is to find common ground, probing issues until everyone’s opinions are voiced and understood by the group. Groups choose this method when the decision made will impact those who will implement or be affected by it, and will require the commitment of those affected by it. There are no “winners” or “losers” in this process, as discussion continues until consensus is achieved. Discussion closes by restating agreements made and “next steps” in implementing decisions are made

Democratic: Options are discussed fully so that members are informed as to the decision’s consequences. The important ground rule here is that the “losing” side agrees to support the decision, even though it was not their choice. Decisions are made by majority vote.

Delegation: The coalition may agree to delegate certain decisions to small groups, committees, or ad hoc groups. A small group may have the

specialized knowledge, skills, or resources required to make certain decisions. When delegating decision making, the group must clarify any constraints on the authority to act, and institute mechanisms for reporting back to the large group.

Decision Making Methods: How to Choose

Peter Senge, in “The Dance of Change,” offers a decision styles list. Coalition leaders need to be clear about WHO makes decisions and HOW. What’s your style?

1. **Telling:** “Here’s the problem; here’s the solution. Do it.” The coalition leader takes the power position and makes the decision single-handedly.

When to use:

- No other group in the community has another solution
- There is a high level of trust among groups/members
- The consequences affect only the coalition leader and his/her organization
- The solution or action is non-negotiable, for example, a grant requirement
- You are the pilot of an airplane telling your inexperienced co-pilot how to fly the plane

NEVER use this method if a leader needs the support of the community or other coalition member to implement a solution or program.

2. **Selling:** “Here’s the problem, here’s the solution; this is how I came to it. Do it.” The coalition leader “sells” the decision to the team, still without any buy-in from the team.

When to use:

- See “Telling” above

3. **Testing:** “Here’s the problem; here’s my solution; what do you think?” Coalition members have an opportunity to react to the decision, thereby having some potential influence over whether or not it is implemented.

When to use:

- The coalition leader, or a committee, has been authorized to recommend a solution to the coalition
- Community input is not necessary

- All those affected by the decision are allowed final decision making power
 - You want to go “back to the drawing board” and start all over if your idea is shot down.
4. **Consulting:** “Here’s the problem; I have no solution; I have some ideas but I’d like to hear from you.” The coalition offers alternate solutions via thorough discussion. The coalition leader still has decision making power.

When to use:

- Participation of coalition members is vital
 - Coalition members have agreed that the coalition leader is the ultimate decision maker
 - The coalition leader is assured of buy-in and implementation action within the group upon announcement of the decision.
 - You really have no solution (or ideas)
5. **Co-creating (Consensus):** “Here’s the problem; Let’s make a decision together.” The consensus process allows the entire group to be heard and to participate in the decision making process.

When to use:

- Issues are complex
- Many parties are involved
- No one agency or organization has decision making power
- Issues are negotiable
- Parties are willing to participate

The Consensus Process Or “Creative Joint Problem Solving

Advantages of Using a Consensus Process

1. Education and Awareness

A consensus process provides learning opportunities for all involved. Shared perceptions and experiences provide a deeper, richer understanding of the issue being discussed. This increased understanding provides the basis for selecting appropriate solutions.

2. Better Decisions

Decisions using a consensus process reflect the concerns of all the parties involved at the same time drawing on the creativity and breadth of ideas of the group.

3. Embracing the Result

Those who have been engaged in creating a solution or making a decision will be more likely to embrace the result instead of to challenge it. Another way of thinking of this result is that “buy-in” of parties is enhanced.

4. Faster Implementation

Consensus results in less challenge to the implementation of a solution. The more that concerned parties are involved in a decision making process, the less resistance will be experienced when the decision is acted upon.

5. Creation of New Partnerships

New relationships are potentially formed as a result of sharing of common values, interests, and strategies.

6 Steps to Creating Consensus

1. **Frame the issue**

Groups participating in consensus must know what it is they are discussing. A common understanding of the problem – the extent, the impacts – is necessary before proceeding. It's helpful to frame the issue in terms of a question to start discussion: "What strategies can we use to support youth development in our community?"

2. **Establish agreements**

Group agreements are essential. Agreements or ground rules will be both process and task oriented. Examples of process agreements include how group members will behave toward one another. Task oriented agreements will include how information will be shared, when decisions will be made, and who will participate in decision making.

3. **Gather information**

Group members will identify key issues, interests, and other information related to the issue. Task groups can be formed to investigate different aspects of an issue and then report back to the entire group. The goal of the information gathering stage is to gain a group understanding of an issue and to begin building common ground.

4. **Generate options**

Members generate options or alternate solutions to a problem or issue. Again, the community may be invited to participate at this stage and task groups may be formed to generate alternate solutions to a particular aspect of an issue. As possible solutions are presented, it may be helpful to use criteria to evaluate those solutions. Some criteria may be: is it doable? Are there enough resources available? Is there community support? What is the impact on community? Your coalition will determine the criteria by which to evaluate options.

5. Reach agreements

Members reach agreement by combining, synthesizing, and compromising. The final solution(s) is one that “everyone can live with.” The outcome should feel like a “win-win.” This is the time to focus on common ground and seeking “interests”, not “positions.” While it’s possible that no one member will leave with all their interests met, it is essential that each participant conclude the decision making process with at least some interests met and with a sense of shared values and common ground within the group.

6. Implement and monitor solutions

Time for the group to “walk its talk!” The coalition is responsible for acting on the decisions made including agreements with all involved parties and a plan for monitoring progress and outcomes.

Tips for Focusing on Shared Interests

Seek not to be understood, but to understand

Although coalition members may share a common vision, it's important to recognize that members also have differences in thought and opinion. However, behind opposing positions lies common ground. The challenge is in maintaining the focus on shared interests. The following are tips for facilitating dialogue in order to find common ground.

Interests define the issue:

- Interests are desires and concerns, needs, fears
- Behind opposed positions lie shared and compatible interests
- A position is something one has decided on; an interest represents the motivation behind the decision

How to identify interests:

- Ask questions that allow members to hear different perspectives on sensitive issues. For example:
Why do you think (or not think) that _____ is the best strategy?"
Why do you agree (or not agree) with _____?"
- Realize that there are multiple interests and priorities
- The most powerful interests are basic human needs: security, economic well-being, belonging, recognition, a sense of control over one's life. Ask: "What is your basic concern...?"

Talking about interests:

- To explore interests, ask questions to clarify positions and to make them more specific
- Acknowledge all interests
- Try to keep the discussion focused on interests at first, not solutions