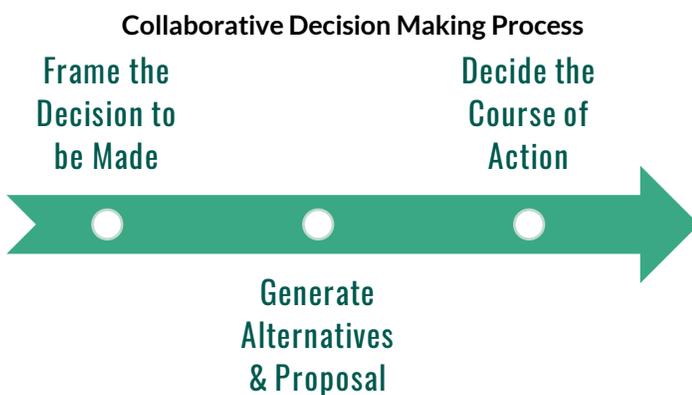


Introduction

Many organizations do not have a comprehensive framework for decision making, which can lead to inefficiencies, lack of transparency, and poor-quality decisions. Further, leaders without a formal process for decision making can fall victim to a biased perception that they are making the right choice without a complete understanding of the context or potential outcomes.¹ As organizations and decisions grow increasingly complex and happen via digital communication, decision makers can become disengaged, paralyzed by too much information, and overly anxious due to perceived high stakes.²

School and district leaders, in particular, are frequently tasked with making decisions on complex issues with incomplete or imperfect information.³ Leaders can use structured decision making processes to improve the quality and outcomes of their decisions.⁴ While leaders should not take a rigid approach to decision making for all questions and challenges, a collaborative decision making framework can be used to ensure that decision making is effective across a wide range of potential topics and areas.⁵ Collaborative decision making comprises three broad steps, illustrated below. While there are several processes that should occur within each step, this framework illustrates the main objectives. This report provides details and suggested reflection questions for each step in the process.



Source: Project Management Institute⁶

Recommendations

- **Develop standard decision making processes and routines for common decision types**, but allow for flexibility based on individual contexts. Standardization may be most relevant for developing decision statements, facilitating discussion and proposal

development, establishing evaluation criteria, and setting decision rules.

- **Ensure that meetings have a clear purpose and agenda** that support the larger decision making process.
- **Allow time and opportunity for all group members to participate in separate divergent and convergent thinking processes.** This process is at the core of collaborative decision making as it allows space for both creativity and innovation as well as consensus building.

Conditions for Collaborative Decision Making

Collaborative decision making cannot be successful without organizational or team culture that allows for the process to take place. The closely related concept of consensus building, or the process of achieving common agreement on the best solution to a problem or question, highlights conditions that support group decision making. Key aspects of effective consensus building include cooperation between equals, confronting and understanding differences, and building a clear and common understanding of the resulting decision.⁷ Consensus decision making should strive to be:⁸

- Inclusive,
- Participatory,
- Collaborative,
- Agreement Seeking, and
- Cooperative.

The success of any group decision relies on strong facilitation to guide and manage the work and ensure conditions that support collaboration. Facilitation in this context is defined as “the person [or persons] responsible for ‘setting the stage’ and leading the group in dialogue.”⁹ Highly effective facilitators are able to stay neutral while helping committee members to communicate with each other, overcome conflict, and achieve their collective goals.¹⁰

Decisions are often made during the course of a meeting or series of meetings. As such, **meetings have the ability to either facilitate or inhibit the decision making process.** While there are many best practices and strategies for conducting effective meetings, leaders and meeting facilitators should address the following key questions to ensure that meetings support a larger decision making process.¹¹

Questions for Effective Decision Making in Meetings

Should we even be meeting at all?	What is this meeting for anyway?	What is everyone's role?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a clear, non-overlapping purpose to this meeting? • Are the right people involved? • Are we meeting frequently enough or too frequently? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the goal of this meeting? • Does the structure of the meeting support this goal? (see below) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who has authority to make decision? • Who serves in advisory, analysis, and implementation support roles?

Source: McKinsey & Company¹²

As noted above, good meetings should have a clear purpose and goal within the larger decision making process. Three typical decision making-related meeting types are described in the figure below.

Common Meeting Types, Characteristics, and Outcomes

Information-Sharing Meeting

- 2 to 2,000+ attendees
- Agenda clarifies topics for information sharing, although additional items may arise during the meeting.
- One-way communication from speaker
- **Outcome: Awareness**

Discussion Meeting

- 8 to 20 attendees
- Structured agenda identifies discussion topics
- Active dialogue by attendees
- **Outcome: Consideration**

Decision Meeting

- 6 to 8 attendees
- Structured agenda identifies decision(s) to be made
- Decision makers have been identified and are in the room
- Active facilitation
- **Outcome: Action**

Source: McKinsey & Company¹³

Step 1: Frame the Decision to be Made

Define Decision

Groups often overlook the important first step of defining the decision to be made. This step may result in the decision *not* to continue in the decision making process, to delay decision making, or to continue. Additionally, this initial step allows the group space to determine the type of decision-making process that is needed based on the scope and scale of the decision. Not all decisions should be approached with the same process. Organizations commonly encounter four types of decisions, categorized by McKinsey & Company as the "ABCDs."¹⁴

"ABCD" Decision Categorization Matrix

	Unfamiliar, Infrequent	Familiar, Frequent
Broad	Big-Bet Decisions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • with major consequences for the organization, often involving situations with unclear right or wrong choices 	Cross-Cutting Decisions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that are frequent and require broad collaboration across the organization
Narrow	Ad Hoc Decisions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that arise episodically with variable impact on the broader organization 	Delegated Decisions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that can be assigned to individual or team accountable.

Source: McKinsey & Company¹⁵

Decisions should be categorized based on their potential scope and impact as well as the level of familiarity or frequency that they arise within a group. The decision making process should be adapted based on the type of decision at hand.¹⁶ For example, groups should anticipate a longer and more involved process for Big-Bet Decisions that may require additional data collection and stakeholder input. Conversely, there may be decisions that are immediately delegated to others within the organization.

Within the context of a school district, decisions may be further classified by task type. The approach to decision making may vary based on the task. Superintendents commonly make decisions related to the following tasks:¹⁷

- **Situational appraisal** – identifying key issues, separating them so they are clear to everyone with a responsibility for action, and then setting priorities.
- **Problem analysis** – determining why things have gone wrong.
- **Decision analysis** – selecting the best choice among alternatives.
- **Potential problem or opportunity analysis** – anticipating how to deal with future problems or opportunities.

Define Decision: Questions to Ask

- What specific question are we trying to answer/what problem are we trying to solve?
- Are we frequently discussing the same or similar questions/problems?
- Are all relevant stakeholders able to provide input in the decision making process?
- Can or should another group or individual make this decision?

Frame Decision

Collaborative decision making requires all involved in the process to understand the underlying context behind the decision. Often, this includes an understanding of the root cause or problem that is driving the need for the decision making process to take place. Without an understanding of the problem, group members will not have the necessary framework for discussing potential solutions.¹⁸

In some cases, the group's leader or facilitator may provide a brief presentation on the decision to bring others up-to-speed. This presentation should introduce the issue and provide necessary background details and history to ensure that group members have the necessary context to discuss it and how to approach the decision or problem. If possible, provide this background information in advance of group meetings to allow members time to consider and bring questions.¹⁹

If necessary, group members should create a formal decision statement to serve as a touchstone throughout the decision-making process. Decision statements should include a clear result and action to achieve that result. Some decision statements may also incorporate additional objectives, constraints, and priorities that will guide the process.²⁰ Several example decision statements from school districts are listed below.

Example School District Decision Statements

Considering enrollment projections, select the best enrollment plan for K-12 students

Choose which local funding source to pursue for facilities

Cut \$1 million from the budget

Source: AASA²¹

Frame Decision: Questions to Ask

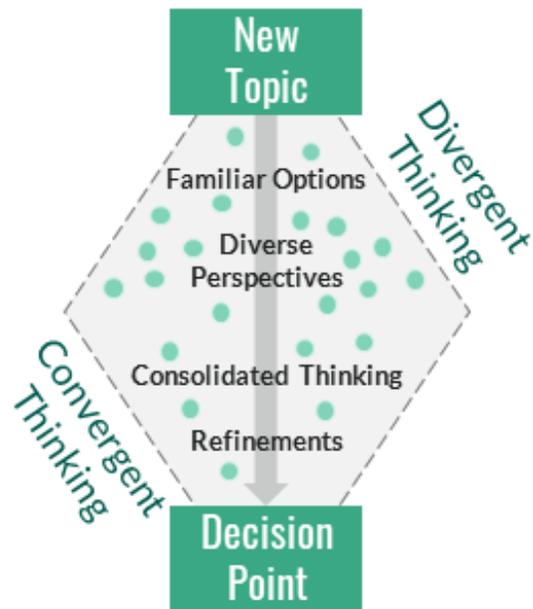
- Do we have a shared understanding of the problem and/or decision that needs to be made?
- Do we have the necessary data and background information to understand the problem?
- Do we need to answer this question now? If not, when?
- Should we break down this decision into smaller parts or several phases?

Initial decision framing discussions should also include time for group members to reach agreement or gain an understanding of how the decision making process will take place (e.g., criteria for evaluating options, decision rules). Key aspects of the decision making process, which are discussed later in this document, should be clarified at the beginning.

Step 2: Generate Alternatives & Proposal

The second phase of the process seeks to generate potential solutions or alternatives through an open, group discussion. Collaborative decision making discussions are often organized into two parts – the first for exploring both familiar and diverse perspectives and the second for converging and refining thinking. This process is visualized in the figure below, where over time, the group discusses increasingly diverse ideas and divergent thinking before narrowing back through convergent thinking to reach a decision point.²²

Collaborative Decision Making Process



Source: Kaner²³

Initial Discussion & Alternatives

During the discussion phase of the decision making process, all group members should be free to express and explore multiple opinions and options. Rather than jumping straight to solutions, use the initial discussion to ensure that the group considers all ideas and perspectives on the issue. The initial discussion should also seek to clarify group members' understanding of varying perspectives on the issue and the collective priorities for making the decision.²⁴

Initial Discussion: Questions to Ask

- Do we have initial thoughts and reactions from each group member?
- Do we have an understanding of everyone's perspective on the issue? If not, what clarification is needed?
- Do we as a group have a shared understanding of what is important for making this decision?

While discussions should seek to generate a wide range of potential alternatives, groups may not find value in an unstructured “brainstorming” session. Depending on the type and scale of the decision, groups can utilize different approaches to identifying alternatives which may result in varying lengths of the discussion phase of the process. However, divergent thinking should at a minimum include aspects of the following three tasks:²⁵

- **Surveying the Territory** – identifying the components of the problem under discussion
- **Searching for Alternatives** – creative activity of listing unusual, innovative ideas and generating ideas
- **Raising Difficult Issues** – initial surfacing of risky subjects or potential challenges

While difficult issues and challenges may arise in the process of generating alternatives, the group should not yet begin to evaluate or judge specific options. This is the focus of the proposal development phase of the process.²⁶

Generating Alternatives: Questions to Ask

- Did we consider a range of potential solutions (or only focus in on our initial ideas)?
- Did we address all aspects of the problem or decision that we need to make?

Proposal Development

Next, the discussion should shift towards a convergent thinking mindset with the goal of evaluating and refining potential options into a single proposal. Similar to the previous phase of divergent thinking, the scope and scale of the decision may dictate the complexity and length of time spent on proposal development. For example, there may be a clear solution that simply needs further refinement or the group may need to more deliberately evaluate distinct options.²⁷

The criteria for evaluating alternatives may also vary based on the type of decision being made. Evaluation criteria should be set at the start of the decision making process and reflect the group’s previously established understanding and definition of the decision. These criteria may be more or less formal or complex based on the size and type of decision.²⁸ However, a simple approach is often best and may result in a stronger level of understanding of the evaluation criteria among group members.²⁹ Groups may use decision making models to assist with the evaluation and refinement of a proposal. Such models range from a relatively straightforward pro/con list to an in-depth cost-benefit analysis.

Proposal Development: Questions to Ask

- Do we have criteria for evaluating the alternatives? If not, do we need a more formal process for evaluating?
- Are there aspects of the decision that we already agree on?
- Where are the remaining disagreements that we need to continue to discuss?
- Do group members have any underlying concerns about the direction or decision we are moving towards?
- Are we ready to move forward with a decision at this time?

Step 3: Decide the Course of Action

Once the previous step in the decision process is completed, the group should be prepared to move forward with making a decision. While the collaborative decision making process should result in a clear decision based on careful discussion and evaluation, the group should still formally conclude the process. Without a clear decision point, group members may not realize if a topic is still being discussed or not, leading to confusion and potential conflict.³⁰

Decision rules help to clarify when a decision moves from discussion (thinking) to implementation (action). Note that decision rules should be established and agreed upon at the start of the decision making process. Decision rules often include procedures for making a final choice including those with the decision power. Several example decision rules are summarized with considerations for use in the figure below.³¹

Decision Rules and Considerations

High-Stakes Decisions	Low-Stakes Decisions
Unanimous Agreement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Takes a lot of effort and time ▪ Best chance for producing sustainable agreements ▪ May lead to watered-down compromise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participants learn to go along with proposals they can tolerate ▪ Prevents group from making a decision that is abhorrent to a small minority
Majority Vote	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Produces a win/lose solution ▪ Consider using secret ballots to avoid politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use when expedience is more important than quality ▪ Call for a quick round of pros and cons and then vote

High-Stakes Decisions	Low-Stakes Decisions
Person-in-Charge Decides After Discussion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Person-in-charge has the access, resources, authority, and credibility to act on the decision. Discussion allows the person-in-charge to expand understanding of issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides opportunity to practice giving honest, direct advice to the person-in-charge.

Source: Kaner³²

Some groups and decisions may benefit from a more detailed process for reaching the final decision point. This process – sometimes referred to as the “meta-decision” or decision about deciding – can be used to ensure that all group members are on the same page as decisions are being made.³³ Two example meta-decisions from school districts are presented below to show how groups can use and adapt meta-decision procedures during decision making.

**Meta-Decision Example:
School District Strategic Planning Team**

1) Call for closure to end discussion

2) Clarify proposal

3) Poll for preferences

4) Ask group “Is this enough agreement?”
(using gradients of agreement scale)

If No: Return to discussion, with purpose of revisiting the proposal to get higher support

If Yes: Decision is final, assuming no vetoes

Source: Kaner³⁴

**Meta-Decision Example:
School Leadership Team**

1) Close discussion:

Anyone can call for closure

Needs a second and a third

Make time for anyone who has not spoken yet to speak if they want

2) Create or clarify the proposal

3) Poll the group

4) Meta decision: The person-in-charge decides whether:

They will now make the decision

The group should discuss the issue further

Source: Kaner³⁵

Decision Point: Questions to Ask

- What are our decision rules for this decision, how will we know when the decision is made?
- Do we need a meta-decision to determine when to shift from discussion to decision making?

Process Reflection Questions

Step 1: Frame the Decision to be Made

Define Decision

- What specific question are we trying to answer/what problem are we trying to solve?
- Are we frequently discussing the same or similar questions/problems?
- Are all relevant stakeholders able to provide input in the decision making process?
- Can or should another group or individual make this decision?

Frame Decision

- Do we have a shared understanding of the problem and/or decision that needs to be made?
- Do we have the necessary data and background information to understand the problem?
- Do we need to answer this question now? If not, when?
- Should we break down this decision into smaller parts or several phases?

Step 2: Generate Alternatives & Proposal

Initial Discussion

- Do we have initial thoughts and reactions from each group member?
- Do we have an understanding of everyone's perspective on the issue? If not, what clarification is needed?
- Do we as a group have a shared understanding of what is important for making this decision?

Generating Alternatives

- Did we consider a range of potential solutions (or only focus in on our initial ideas)?
- Did we address all aspects of the problem or decision that we need to make?

Proposal Development

- Do we have criteria for evaluating the alternatives? If not, do we need a more formal process for evaluating?
- Are there aspects of the decision that we already agree on?
- Where are the remaining disagreements that we need to continue to discuss?
- Do group members have any underlying concerns about the direction or decision we are moving towards?
- Are we ready to move forward with a decision at this time?

Step 3: Decide the Course of Action

Decision Point

- What are our decision rules for this decision, how will we know when the decision is made?
- Do we need a meta-decision to determine when to shift from discussion to decision making?

Checklist

The following items may or may not require formal documentation before and during the collaborative decision making process.

- Meeting Agendas
- Pre-Meeting Background Information
- Group /Meeting Ground Rules
- Group Member Roles and Responsibilities
- Decision Statement / Definition
- Decision Context, Priorities, Guiding Principles
- Criteria for Evaluation Alternatives
- Decision Rules and Decision Power
- Meta-Decision Procedures

Caveat

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