



How to facilitate discussions for effective collective decision making

The challenge

Different viewpoints must often be taken into account when making decisions for projects involving multiple players, diversified teams, or complex issues. Such discussions, if poorly led, are at great risk of degenerating into a battle between opposing positions, resulting in a stalemate or a situation in which qualified opinions are ignored. How, then, can one create a dynamic for the constructive exchange of ideas?

Three key stages of expression

To arrive at a decision emanating from the ideas of the whole group, all initial viewpoints must be laid out clearly and discussed to ensure full and accurate understanding, before one manages the transition to constructive dialogue.

	ASSERTION People express their respective viewpoints	DISCUSSION People defend their respective viewpoints relative to other opinions	DIALOGUE People build on all the ideas expressed by the group
CHALLENGES	• Identify all respective viewpoints. • Clarify respective positions. • Measure the extent of disagreements.	• Deepen the group's understanding of the issue. • Collectively test the validity of the arguments supporting the various positions. • Start to identify possible alternatives.	• Develop the range of reasonable solutions. • Choose a solution. • Confirm that each of the participants accepts the chosen solution.
DO'S AND DON'TS	• Don't attempt to squelch disagreements at this stage; they must be aired in order to progress to the following stages. • Clear up ambiguities; a decision based on a misunderstanding probably won't be implemented. • Don't halt discussion by simply agreeing to disagree.	• Don't allow the conversation to degenerate into a battle between fixed positions. • Take all opinions into account, including minority views. • Listen to respective arguments carefully to avoid having the chosen solution challenged late in the game.	• Don't get too attached to initial ideas; help people put their initial views into perspective. • Try to reduce tension to keep people from falling into a confrontational mindset. • Persevere until a decision has been clearly formulated and validated by the group.
TIPS	• Give everyone a chance to speak, even if this may momentarily frustrate some members of the group. e.g., "Thank you, X. I would still like to hear from everyone before going deeper into your proposal." • Cool down the emotions elicited by the debate by reminding people of the purpose of this phase. e.g., "The important thing at this stage is to gather the various viewpoints before coming to a decision." • Keep people talking until all the respective positions are clear to everyone. e.g., "So, Mr. X from accounting, what do you think?" or "Mrs. Y, with your experience in Asia, what is your take on this issue?"	• Reframe presented viewpoints to be sure that everyone shares the same understanding. e.g., "If I understand you correctly, you are more concerned about the image we project to customers than about the quality of the product itself?" • Ask the group for thoughts on the arguments just put forward. e.g., "Are you having the same problem? – or – "Has anyone had the opposite experience?" • Dig deeper until you are sure you are dealing with the real issue at hand. e.g., "Is this really the root of the problem?" or "Will your proposal completely solve the problem?" • Note possible compromises as the discussion progresses.	• Mark the transition to a more collaborative phase. e.g., "OK, now that we have heard and understood the various viewpoints, we must find a solution." • Give a fact-based summary of arguments that have been put forward, by treating them as data on the problem. e.g., "In sum, we are trying to reconcile the need to update the product range with the need to provide continuity for our customers." • Get people to project themselves into solutions under consideration. e.g., "If we go with this solution, will you feel comfortable presenting it to your subordinates?" • Verify one last time that everyone agrees before closing the debate. e.g., "Does everyone agree? Mr. X? Mrs. Y?"