



UNIVERSITY OF
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EXTENSION

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Group Decision Making¹

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Introduction

Some groups are composed of people with similar objectives and goals, while other groups are composed of a set of people who represent diverse organizations (the latter is called complex groups in the remainder of this paper). In the first case, decision-making may be difficult, but at least the members do not start with different goals that can cause disagreement. Complex groups may include borrowers, lenders, producers, buyers, scientists and other experts, environmentalists, and real estate developers. Guidelines concerning decision processes can help all groups—especially complex groups—make decisions. Decisions that must be made include procedures, project selection and ordering, or any other of a variety of operational items. Group decision-making procedures or methods with diverse participants have six common goals: educating participants about issues, discussing potential impacts of issues, generating options to resolve disputes, agreeing to options, developing written agreements, and establishing ongoing relationships to implement and monitor agreements (Bidol, et al., 1986). Therefore, consensus building is integral to the overall process.

Consensus Building and Priorities

Consensus-building exercises are often time consuming, and can be unproductive, even destructive, without group participation. Several rules should be followed during a consensus-building exercise:

- Do not criticize one another.
- Do not interrupt one another.
- Give everyone the chance to express ideas.

The group should appoint someone who is seen as neutral by all participants to be a facilitator, to organize and manage the discussion and to make sure the rules are followed. Listing alternatives should be one of the main points of discussion, but it should not set priorities or establish a plan for action. Two major methods respond to those needs. The first depends on timeliness, and the other is a type of voting.

Timeliness

The timeliness approach does not set priorities in terms of relative importance. The approach raises and answers one of two questions:

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1. Which of the proposed issues could be resolved most quickly?
2. Which items should be resolved or accomplished first?

There are obviously variations of these questions that could be asked, but all relate to time or process rather than importance. Other approaches should be taken when time is not an issue.

Proportional Voting

Proportional voting is another approach to setting priorities for a plan of action. Voting points are established during the planning or consensus-building exercise when items or alternatives are listed. To be included as an alternative, an item only needs to be proposed. Criticism of the idea should not be allowed. Once all the alternatives are listed, those who vote are each given an equal number of votes (usually between 3 and 5). They are permitted to assign their votes in any way they choose:

- One vote for each selection.
- All their votes for any one selection.
- Any other distribution.

If group members do not vote for an item or it receives relatively few votes, the item receives a low priority. However, it is not rejected.

A Joint Approach: Experts and Consensus

There is another approach that combines aspects of each of the other methods. This method is particularly useful when a specific group (called the management group, or MG) is responsible for developing a project but seeks input from the stakeholders. Under this alternative, the MG develops its consensus alternatives and presents them to the stakeholders for discussion. The discussion has several components:

- Explanation/rationale of individual items.

- Discussion of individual items by all present.
- Addition, deletion, or modification of specific items via a consensus approach.
- Voting on all items.

The voting is based upon a Likert Scale rather than a simple “Yes” or “No”. A Likert Scale has several choices that describe attitude or agreement concerning a specific item or situation. Depending upon the Likert Scale choices, no alternative is deleted but may receive a low priority. Examples of Likert Scale choices that allow such outcomes include the following:

- (1) not important, (2) neutral, (3) important.
- (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree.

An Example

Faculty from the Center for Economic Studies of the Polytechnique School of the Coast (CIEC) in Ecuador, several other Ecuadorian institutions, and the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Florida (IFAS) have been developing a plan to diversify the agricultural base of the Santa Elena Peninsula in Ecuador. Representatives of those institutions form the design and management group (MG) of the project. The plan will be based upon a set of feasibility studies of crops and products that the team determines to have the greatest chance for successful adaptation, production, and profitable sale. Private individuals and groups of the Peninsula (i.e., stakeholders) will implement the plan. Thus their input is important to the project's successful outcome: a diversified agricultural base. Because irrigation is available to part of the Peninsula because of existing processing capacity on or near the Peninsula and because of the climate, a large array of crops and products were potential candidates. Due to preliminary research and analysis, including meetings and interviews with processing plant operators, the water resource management entity, and large- and small-scale agricultural producers, the list was shortened to less than 50 items. There were still, however, too many alternatives to analyze properly in a reasonable time frame. Based upon the preliminary

research and a series of focus group meetings and interviews, the MG developed a list of approximately 20 criteria in order to reduce the number of alternatives.

For any specific project or set of alternatives, not all criteria are of equal importance. Stakeholders, not experts or the MG, must put the project into operation, and stakeholders should decide which criteria are more important than others. A public meeting of the representatives of the various stakeholder groups was organized to assign relative weights to the criteria. Meeting participants included representatives of public financial institutions, commercial agricultural supply companies, large producers, small producers, environmentalists, and researchers. The situation was explained to participants, and then the list of criteria was presented. Each criterion was explained. After the presentation, participants were given the opportunity to discuss specific criteria in detail in order to redefine, modify, or delete any of them. Participants were then asked to add criteria that had been discussed, further defined, and modified. All participants were then given a printed copy of the entire list, along with an attached Likert Scale. Next, the participants voted, and the votes were tabulated immediately. The criteria were assigned relative weights based upon the voting.

The MG then evaluated all the production alternatives in light of the top 10 criteria. The alternatives that did not meet most of the criteria were eliminated. The list was thus reduced to just over 20 alternatives. At present, further information is being sought for the remaining alternatives, which will be evaluated in terms of the criteria. Feasibility studies will be conducted on the 16 alternatives that best fit the criteria. Thus the stakeholders' opinions will be taken into account while technical information and expert opinion are brought to bear on the problem.

If Consensus Cannot Be Reached

None of the systems, however, guarantees that a consensus will be reached; they only increase its likelihood. If a consensus is not reached, there is still a need to avoid simple majority rule (a single vote can decide the outcome, which may leave the majority dissatisfied.)

Internal Procedures

When 100% agreement or support cannot be reached, then a favorable vote of at least 75% of all Board members present should be required for any position to be accepted. A 75% majority is strong enough that unfavorable talk by Board members outside of Board meetings would be virtually eliminated.

In the event that a position does not obtain a 75% majority through initial discussion, the issue should be passed to an appropriate committee for further position clarification. The committee should be given a specific deadline to report back to the Board with a position statement for approval. During the time allowed for clarification, the committee might have to perform further analysis or research. The time allowed should balance those needs with the need to move the discussion forward to make a decision.

Composition of a Committee

The composition of a committee is a critical aspect of the process. A committee must be composed of a good representation of the community or stakeholders. In addition, it must be active, and members must believe that it serves a purpose. In other words, the committees should not be "thrown together." If the Board, especially the committee chair, believes the committee should be expanded to deal with a specific problem by adding specific people, those people should be invited to join the committee to deal with the specific problem. Like the Board's position, the committee's position should be a consensus opinion, arrived at in the same manner that the Board reaches a consensus (described above). The Board then should vote to accept or reject the position, requiring at least a 75% majority vote of acceptance of all those Board members present.

Dealing with Controversy

In essence, a community group may act as a facilitator between diverse interests, private parties, and public agencies when dealing with controversial issues. The group or organization must ensure that its point of view is presented to the community. There must be a set of major goals or over-arching

principles to guide the attitude or stances of the organization, and those principles must be known and accepted by members of the public if the group is to be allowed to play the mediator role. At present, the organization has a principle of inclusion, and members of the public must be made aware of that principle.

Conclusion

Whichever system or process is used, the goal as stated by Taylor (1994) should be reached:

“The challenge is to provide more constructive involvement and to shape more satisfactory solutions with minimal use of third party rights and power determinations that often leave parties feeling unresolved.”

Complicated issues often require the creation of a complex group and cooperation of the group's members to resolve the issues. In order to achieve consensus and cohesion between members, the group should employ a facilitator and apply rules and guidelines of behavior. The chances that a diverse group can attain the goal of consensus are greatly increased when the group follows an established set of rules with the assistance of a facilitator.

Sources of Information

We in Florida are fortunate to have the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium. It was established to help resolve conflicts arising out of the mandated need for establishing *comprehensive plans* at the county and regional levels. The FCRC is available to assist community groups and jurisdictions to resolve conflict. It is also an excellent source of information. According to its website, “the Consortium represents the State of Florida's commitment to finding productive and cost-effective solutions to public disputes.” Since 1987, the Florida State University-based Consortium, with the support of the Florida Legislature, has taken a leadership role in promoting the informed use of consensus building and alternative dispute resolution to meet the growing demand for better and more durable solutions to Florida's public problems. Its website is <http://consensus.fsu.edu/index.html>.

The Policy Consensus Initiative (PCI) is a similar organization at the national level. To quote from its website at <http://policyconsensus.org>, “PCI is a national nonprofit program working with leaders at the state level (governors, legislators, attorneys general, and others) to establish and strengthen the use of collaborative practices in states to bring about more effective governance. To fulfill its mission, PCI provides information, consultation, technical assistance, and educational and training programs, and sponsors meetings, networks, and joint projects.”

References

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