7 Solving Problems and Making Decisions

GROUP SKILLS PREVIEW

In this chapter, you will learn to do the following:

- Describe the task, relational, and procedural skills group members need for effective decision making
- Describe the critical functions needed for effective decision making
- Explain why and when groups are better than individuals at making decisions
- Explain why groups should consider using a decision-making procedure
- Select the best procedure for a group decision-making situation
- Lead your group through the use of several decision-making procedures

Decision making in groups is fundamental to many different types of groups. Family groups make decisions about where to spend their vacation or how to organize a garage sale. Groups of friends make decisions about where they are going on Friday night or how to surprise one member with a birthday party. At work, groups and teams make decisions in developing new products and enhancing customer service. Some of these decisions are more straightforward than others. Still, for any of these decisions, a group needs to engage in two processes: problem solving and decision making. Problem solving represents the group's attempts to analyze a problem in detail so that good decisions can be made. This includes generating alternatives for the group to consider. Once these are developed, the group can turn to a decision-making procedure to make a choice between alternatives. Before we look at procedures groups can use in decision making, let's turn our attention to the skills group members need to effectively make decisions in groups.

Decision-Making Skills

Across the range of decisions that groups make, group members need task, relational, and procedural skills (Gouran, 2003). In fact, the quality of group members' contributions and a group's ability to make effective decisions depends on these skills. Different decision-making tasks place different demands on members and the group. Some decisions require a great deal of discussion and deliberation,

and, as a result, require a higher degree of skill and a greater variety of skills. Simple decisions require little discussion and fewer skills, as group members make a choice from known alternatives, each of which is agreeable to them. Although we identified the skills college students used to describe an ideal group member in Chapter 5, these three sets of skills are specific to group decision making.

Task Skills for Decision Making

Group members need task-related skills to manage the content or substance of the decisions made in the group. First, group members must have skills with **problem recognition and framing**. A group cannot make a decision if its members cannot identify the decision that needs to be made or if they frame a decision inaccurately or inappropriately. In other words, group members have to agree upon what the decision is really about. For example, the mayor and council members of one town debated vigorously through one entire meeting when to schedule subsequent city council meetings. The issue, of course, wasn't really about scheduling meetings, but about who had the power to control what the council did (Barge & Keyton, 1994). Clearly this group misframed the problem as one of scheduling. The council failed to recognize the problem as one of authority. The group needed to make a decision about who had authority to set council meetings. This example demonstrates how difficult it can be for group members to recognize or articulate the issue before the group.

Inference drawing is another task-related decision-making skill. As group members solve problems or make decisions, they will be required to use analysis and reasoning and then communicate that analysis and reasoning as judgments or claims that go beyond the available information. Inferences can be drawn by using analogy or cause-to-effect reasoning. For example, a human resources task force draws a conclusion about the effectiveness of a sexual harassment policy they are ready to submit to the employees' union because the discrimination policy they submitted earlier was well received. Inferences drawn using analogy are based on the similarities of different objects or situations that are believed to have the same qualities. Members of the task force also draw inferences with cause-to-effect reasoning as they argue that having a discrimination policy in place (the cause) will influence employees to behave more respectfully (the immediate effect) and thereby decrease the number of complaints (a longer-term effect).

The third task-related decision-making skill is **idea generation**. To make effective decisions, groups must have adequate alternatives from which to select. When groups limit themselves to a few obvious choices, they unnecessarily restrict their opportunity to make an effective decision. For example, a policy team was created for the purpose of generating ideas for stimulating regional economic growth. As soon as introductions were completed, Charles, a member with high status in the community and a vice-president of a large organization, went to the podium and began a slide presentation that described his idea. The group, whose members had not worked together before, were impressed with his preparation. When he was finished, group members asked Charles questions for about an

hour; then they took a vote to pursue his idea. The problem: All of the group members were high-status members of the community and had the potential to generate a number of useful ideas for economic development. While Charles's idea was sound, the policy team did not consider other alternatives that may have proven to be better than the only idea discussed. Brainstorming, a group technique for generating ideas, could have helped this group create additional proposals to consider; it will be described in detail later in this chapter.

The fourth task-related decision-making skill is **argument**. Group members need to be capable of generating and presenting reasons for a position they support or reject. Novel arguments, or arguments not considered by group members prior to discussion, can be especially influential in decision making (Meyers & Brashers, 1999). In the policy team example earlier, Charles was skilled at presenting arguments with sufficient evidence, which influenced the group. Moreover, his arguments were novel, as the other group members could not have possibly considered them before the meeting since they had no idea what Charles would propose. Although in the minority, Charles skillfully used argument to convince the majority of the group into accepting his proposal. The obvious tension between the policy group's failure to generate other ideas and Charles's skill in presenting arguments demonstrates why multiple skills are required when groups make decisions.

Relational Skills for Decision Making

While problem recognition and framing, inference drawing, idea generation, and argument are required for group decision making to occur, relational skills—or skills that focus on members rather than the task—can enhance decision-making effectiveness. **Leadership** is a skill that can counteract the cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric constraints that can arise in group interaction (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996; Janis, 1989).

Cognitive constraints, or difficulties and inadequacies in processing information, occur when there is little information available or limited time for making a decision, or when the decision is more difficult than group members can comfortably or normally handle. When decision making occurs under these conditions, group members believe they have limited capacity or motivation to make an effective decision.

The second type of constraint is **affiliative constraints**—those that are based on the relationships among members of the group. When relationships, or the fear that relationships will deteriorate, are the dominant concern, some group members exert undue influence on other group members.

The third type of decision-making constraint is **egocentric constraints**, which occur when one group member has a high need for control over the group or its activities or has a personal or hidden agenda.

A leader with effective communication skills can help group members reduce the impact of these constraints by refocusing the group's relational energy and shifting the group's focus back to decision making. Facilitating discussion among

all group members, assisting the group in information gathering, helping members to verbalize unstated positions, and focusing conversation on the group's goal are three techniques anyone in the group can use to provide leadership for the group and minimize the negative influence of cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric constraints. Leadership is described in detail in Chapter 10.

The second relational skill needed for decision making is **climate building**. As described in Chapter 6, a positive or supportive climate develops when group members communicate with equality, spontaneity, and empathy, and avoid evaluation, control, and certainty. To help build a supportive climate for decision making, group members should be friendly with and respectful of others. Doing so helps group members to feel valued and that their input is welcomed. Climate building is as easy to accomplish as it is to overlook. Members of a project team who do not know each other well will meet each Friday until their marketing plan is developed. To help members become comfortable in the team, each meeting begins with members providing a brief update of what they accomplished during the week in their respective departments. By sharing this type of information, team members get to know one another better because they learn about the skills each member possesses, as well as getting a feel for how the team's output will influence activities across the organization. Most importantly, this opening procedure ensures that everyone has talked, which deemphasizes role and status differences among group members.

Conflict management is the third relational skill needed for decision making. It's not conflict per se that creates a problem for group decision making. Conflict about ideas can actually help groups make better decisions. But when conflict about issues is not managed or when conflict is focused on personal differences, then the struggle between group members takes precedence over the decision-making task. To help manage conflict, group members can steer the conversation from personal issues back to task issues and to helping those who are experiencing conflict find common ground. Other skills for managing group conflict can be found in Chapter 9.

Procedural Skills for Decision Making

Finally, there are two procedural skills, or skills that help the group move from discussion to decision making. The first procedural skill is **planning**. Members with this skill help the group by communicating what needs to be first, second, and so on, and by suggesting a decision-making procedure to use. Planning, of course, can only be based on a goal, so group members engaged in planning need to remind others about the goal and help them reach agreement on it. The second procedural decision-making skill is **process enactment**, or helping the group through the decision-making process. Even with the best planning, a decision-making group will have to address unforeseen circumstances. Thus members with process-enactment skills can help the group manage these difficulties and stay on track. A group member might set up procedures for the group (for example, concluding each meeting with a review of assignments or creating mechanisms to

help the group track its work, like posting information on the group's website). These skills are not difficult; any group member can contribute to the group's decision making by using planning and process enactment skills.

While we consider decision making one type of group task or activity, effective decision making is only accomplished when skilled group members engage in a number of different tasks or activities throughout the decision-making process. The types of decisions that most groups make are either ones that are fairly complex (for example, managing a program for evicting drug dealers from rental property; see Keyton & Stallworth, 2003) or ones in which group members are personally involved (for example, an activist group developing plans for a protest; see Meyers & Brashers, 2003). Reviewing these task, relational, and procedural skills reminds us why some groups have difficulty with their decision making, but also how group members can use their skills to help their group through the decision process.

Decision-Making Principles

Regardless of the procedure or process your group uses, four principles seem to fit most group problem-solving and decision-making situations (Hirokawa & Johnston, 1989). First, group decision making is an evolutionary process. The final decision of the group emerges over time as a result of the clarification, modification, and integration of ideas that group members express in their interaction. A student government group may know that it needs to make a decision about how to provide child care for university students, but the final decision results from the group bringing new information to meetings and other group members asking for clarification and development of proposed ideas. Thus, a group will have a general idea about a decision that needs to be made, but not necessarily its specifics.

Relatedly, the second principle is that group decision making is a circular rather than a linear process. Even when they try, it is difficult for group members to follow a step-by-step approach to group decision making. Group decision making is circular because group members seldom bring all the needed information into the group's discussion at the same time. Let's say that your group decides to hold the fund-raiser on June 3, close to the end of the spring semester. Your group needs to make this decision first to secure a date on your university's student activities calendar. Now that the date is settled, your group can concentrate on what type of fund-raiser might be best. But you have to take into consideration that it is late in the semester. Not only will students have limited time because of term papers and final exams, but their funds likely will be depleted. That information will affect the type of fund-raiser you will plan. But wait! At that point in the semester, students really enjoy having coffee and doughnuts available in the early morning, after all-night study sessions. And your group can sell lots of coffee and doughnuts to many students for very little money. In this way, group members move information about the date and type of event back and forth to integrate into a final fund-raising decision.

The third principle is that many different types of influences affect a group's decision making. Group members' moods, motivations, competencies, and communication skills are individual-level variables that affect the group's final decision. These are individual-level variables because each member brings a unique set of influences to the group. The dynamics of the interpersonal relationships that result in group member cohesiveness and satisfaction also affect a group's decision making. Finally, the communication structure or network, developed in the group impacts information flows among group members. The quality of information exchanged by group members affects a group's decision outcomes. And forces outside a group also generate influences. An example of this type of external influence is the generally accepted societal rule about making decisions quickly and cost-efficiently.

The fourth principle of group decision making is that decisions are made within a system of external and internal constraints. Few groups have as much freedom of choice as they would like. Groups are constrained by external forces such as deadlines or budgets imposed by outsiders and the preferences of the people who will evaluate or use the group's decision. Internal constraints are the values, morals, and ethics that individual members bring to the group setting. These values guide what the group does and how it does it.

These four principles reveal that decision making may be part of a larger problem-solving process. Problem solving is the communication group members engage in when there is a need to address an unsatisfactory situation or overcome some obstacle. Decision making and problem solving are often used interchangeably, but they are different. Decision making involves a choice between alternatives; problem solving represents the group's attempts to analyze a problem in detail so that effective decisions can be made (Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999). Hence, this problem: Groups often make decisions without engaging in the analysis associated with problem solving. For anything but the simplest matters, groups are more likely to make faulty decisions when they do not take advantage of the problem-solving process to address the contextual details or do the thoughtful analysis good decisions require.

Why Groups Are Better at Making Decisions

Why are groups better at decision making than individuals? For complex decisions or problems, it is unlikely that any individual will possess or have access to all the knowledge and resources necessary to make a good decision. Second, groups generally bring a greater diversity of perspectives to the situation, so it is more difficult to become locked onto an idea that lacks merit. Third, and probably most importantly, when more people are involved in decision making, the group has the opportunity to check out ideas before one is selected and implemented. This opportunity to try out ideas allows groups to be more confident than individuals in making decisions (Sniezek, 1992).

Groups produce better decisions through communication. The quality of communication among and the full participation of group members are central to

their ability to work together to select high-quality solutions (Mayer, 1998; Salazar, Hirokawa, Propp, Julian, & Leatham, 1994). Even when group members have high potential (are highly skilled or highly knowledgeable), communication is the process that allows the group to do its best. Groups that spend their time on goal-directed communication to evaluate task-relevant issues and generate ideas create superior group outcomes.

Decision making is a social process. The presence of others creates a context of social evaluation that motivates people to find the best possible solution (Kameda, 1996). For decisions that affect many individuals, involving them in the process increases their commitment to upholding the decision as it is implemented. To carry out some decisions, the cooperation of many people is needed. Including those people in the decision-making process helps to ensure their cooperation, as well as overall satisfaction with the decision. Moreover, involving them in the decision making increases their understanding of the solution so that they can perform better in the implementation stage.

To take advantage of their strengths, however, groups need some structure in the decision-making discussion (Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1971). Using a procedure to structure group discussion and decision making helps groups in three ways. First, the content of the discussion is more controlled and on task than when discussions are left unstructured. Second, group member participation in the discussion is more equal when some type of procedure is used. Alternative viewpoints from group members cannot help the group unless those viewpoints are revealed during discussion. Third, the emotional tone of a group's discussion is less likely to become negative or out of control. Think of a procedure as a map to follow or a guidebook to show you the way. You could get there from here—but it is easier with some help.

Advice from Functional Theory

Before turning to specific procedures, let's examine the characteristics group decision-making procedures need to satisfy. Obviously, the goal of any group is to find the solution best suited to solving the problem or making the decision. To do that effectively, group members need to accomplish five functions: (a) thoroughly discuss the problem, (b) examine the criteria of an acceptable solution before discussing specific solutions, (c) propose a set of realistic alternative solutions, (d) assess the positive aspects of each proposed solution, and (e) assess the negative aspects of each proposed solution. According to functional theory, these are the five critical functions in decision-making and problem-solving activities (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1983; Hirokawa, 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1988; Hirokawa & Pace, 1983; Hirokawa & Salazar, 1999; Hirokawa & Scheerhorn, 1986). A function is not just a step or a procedure, but an activity required for the group to make a decision. When the five functions are not addressed, a group diminishes its chances for identifying an effective solution or making a good decision. Your group can accomplish these functions by using one of the formal discussion procedures described later in the chapter.

First, group members need to achieve an understanding of the problem they are trying to solve. The group should deliberate until it believes all members understand the nature and seriousness of the problem, its possible causes, and the consequences that could develop if the problem is not dealt with effectively. For example, parking is generally a problem on most campuses. But a group of students, faculty, staff, and administrators addressing the parking problem without having an adequate understanding of the issue is likely to suggest solutions that will not really solve the problem. The parking problem on your campus may be that there are not enough parking spaces. Or it may be that there are not enough parking spaces where people want to park. Or perhaps the parking problem exists at only certain times of the day. Another type of parking problem exists when students do not want to pay for parking privileges and park their cars illegally on campus and in the surrounding community. Each parking problem is different and so requires different solutions. When group members address this function —understanding the nature of the problem before trying to solve it—their decision-making efforts result in higher-quality decisions (Hirokawa, 1983a).

Second, the group needs to develop an understanding of what constitutes an acceptable resolution of the problem. In this critical function, group members need to understand the objectives that must be achieved to remedy the problem or the specific standards that must be satisfied for the solution to be acceptable. This means that the group needs to develop criteria by which to evaluate each proposed alternative. Let's go back to the parking problem. In this step, group members need to consider how much students and employees will be willing to pay for parking. Group members also need to identify and discuss the type of solutions campus administrators and campus police will find acceptable. The group probably also should consider if the local police need to agree with its recommendation. In other words, the group has to decide on the objectives and standards that must be used in selecting an appropriate solution. Any evaluation of alternatives must be based on known and agreed-upon criteria (Graham, Papa, & McPherson, 1997).

Third, the group needs to seek and develop a set of realistic and acceptable alternatives. With respect to the parking problem, groups frequently stop generating alternatives when they generate a solution they like. Look at the following dialogue:

MARTY: Okay, I think we should think about building a parking garage.

LINDSEY: Where would it go?

MARTY: I don't know. But there's all kinds of empty lots around campus.

HELEN: What about parking in the church parking lots?

LINDSEY: That's an idea, but I like the idea of our own parking garage better.

TODD: I like that, too. It would be good to know that whatever time I go to campus a parking spot would be waiting for me.

MARTY: Any other ideas, besides the parking garage?

LINDSEY: No, I can't think of any. I think we need to work on the parking garage idea.

TODD: Me, too.

HELEN: Shouldn't we consider something else in case the parking garage idea falls through?

MARTY: Why? We all like the idea, don't we?

If a group gets stuck in generating alternatives, as our parking group does, a brainstorming session or nominal group technique (discussed later in the chapter) may help. A group cannot choose the best alternative if all the alternatives are not known.

Fourth, group members need to assess the positive qualities of each of the alternatives they find attractive. This step helps the group recognize the relative merits of each alternative. Once again, let's turn to the parking problem. Students and employees probably will cheer for a solution to the parking problem that does not cost them money. Certainly, no-cost or low-cost parking will be attractive to everyone. But if this is the only positive quality of an alternative, it is probably not the best choice. For example, to provide no-cost or low-cost parking, your recommendation is that during the daytime students park in the parking lots of churches and that at night they park in the parking lots of office buildings. Although the group has satisfied concerns about cost, it is doubtful that those who manage church and office building properties will find this alternative attractive. This leads us to the fifth function: Group members need to assess the negative qualities of alternative choices.

When group members communicate to fulfill these five functions, they increase the chance that their decision making will be effective. This is because group members have worked together to pool their information resources, avoid errors in individual judgment, and create opportunities to persuade other group members (Gouran, Hirokawa, Julian, & Leatham, 1993). For example, the members of the parking group bring different information to the discussion because they come to school at different times of the day. Those who come early or late in the day have a harder time finding a place to park than those who come early in the afternoon. By pooling what each participant knows about the parking situation, the group avoids becoming biased or choosing a solution that will resolve only one type of parking problem.

In addition, as the group discusses the problem, members can identify and remedy errors in individual judgment. It is easy to think that parking is not a problem when you come in for one class in the early afternoon and leave immediately after. In your experience, the parking lot has some empty spaces because you come at a time when others have left for lunch. And when you leave 2 hours later, the lot is even emptier, making you wonder what the fuss is about in the first place!

Discussion also provides an opportunity to persuade others or to be persuaded. Discussion allows alternatives to be presented that might not occur to

others and allows for reevaluation of alternatives that initially seem unattractive. Let's go back to the group discussing the parking problem:

MARTY: Okay, where are we?

HELEN: Well, I think we've pretty much discussed parking alternatives. I'm not sure.

LINDSEY: What about using the bus?

TODD: You've got to be kidding.

LINDSEY: Why not? The bus line goes right by campus and the fare is only 50 cents.

MARTY: Well, it's an idea.

HELEN: Well, what if the bus doesn't have a route where I live?

LINDSEY: Well, that may be the case for you, Helen, but I bet many students and employees live on or near a bus line.

MARTY: I wonder how many?

LINDSEY: Why don't we call the bus company and get a copy of the entire routing system.

MARTY: Good idea, Lindsey. We were looking for parking alternatives and hadn't thought about other modes of transportation.

Groups that successfully achieve each of the five critical functions of decision making make higher-quality decisions than groups that do not (Hirokawa, 1988). However, the functional perspective is not a procedure for making decisions, because there is no prescribed order to the five functions. Rather, it is the failure of the group to perform one of the five functions that has a profound effect on the quality of the group's decision making. But do the five functions contribute equally to group decision-making effectiveness? An analysis across hundreds of groups indicates that the most important function is group members' assessment of the negative consequences of proposed alternatives. Next in importance were thorough discussion and analysis of the problem, and the establishment of criteria for evaluating proposals (Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001). The procedures described in the next section will help your group satisfy the five critical functions. But first, try "Identifying Decision-Making Functions" to get some practice in analyzing group decision making.

Using Decision-Making Procedures

You may think that it's natural for all groups to use some type of procedure or set of guidelines in making decisions. But many groups are unaware of procedures that can help them. Even when a group uses some procedure or structure as an aid to decision making, group members may not be aware of the rules their group uses (Johnson, 1991). Why should groups use procedures to help them generate ideas, make decisions, and solve problems? Procedures help guide a group

MASTERING GROUP SKILLS

Identifying Decision-Making Functions

Select one of your favorite television shows to record (hourlong dramas are a good choice for this exercise). First, watch the show and jot down what characters say as part of the decision-making process, paying particular attention to statements or questions you believe are important. Next, check your list for the following:

1. Statements or questions that helped the group understand the problem or decision. If there were none, how did characters know and agree upon what the problem or decision was?
2. Statements or questions that helped the group understand what might constitute an acceptable choice. Did the characters identify any criteria against which to evaluate the decision?
3. Statements or questions that identified alternatives to consider.
4. Statements or questions indicating that the group was assessing the positive qualities of the alternatives.
5. Statements or questions indicating that the group was assessing the negative qualities of the alternatives.

Now watch the show again to see if you can fill in any of the categories. Then answer the following questions:

1. Specifically, what was the decision or problem on which the group was working?
2. Did the characters make a final decision or resolve the problem?
3. What was the decision, or how was the problem resolved?
4. How many alternatives did the group consider?
5. To what extent did the characters apply the five functions of group decision making?
6. To what extent do you believe the group's decision making was effective?
7. In what areas does the group need to improve?
8. If the situation were replicated in real life, what recommendations would you give to the group about its decision making?

through the process of decision making and help it overcome problems or limitations that routinely arise when groups make decisions. Without procedures, a group's conversation is more likely to result in problems like the following:

- The group has trouble staying focused on what it needs to accomplish.
- The group has difficulty sticking to the meeting agenda.

- The group performs superficial rather than detailed analyses of alternatives.

- The groups' members have little motivation for working on this decision, or the group has fallen into a rut.

- The group relies on the perceived expert or the person who seems to care the most about the problem.

- Group members consider one alternative and then drop it for discussion of the next alternative without comparing alternatives.

- Group members go straight to decision making without problem solving.

- The group accepts the first solution mentioned.

- The group fails to think of a complex decision as a series of smaller decisions.

- The group does not use its time wisely.

- Group members will make a choice without evaluating its merits.

When groups do not use procedures to help them manage the decision-making process, social or relational pressures can result in pressures to conform or unnecessary conflict. Why does this happen? Without procedures, some group members will not speak up or will not have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, as the most talkative or high-status group members control the discussion. Simply, without process procedures, members have difficulty balancing the task and relational dimensions of their group (Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999).

The procedures described in the following sections—standard agenda, brainstorming, nominal group technique, consensus, voting, and ranking—vary widely in the amount of control and the type of help they provide to groups. Procedures can vary according to how group members participate in decision making (style) and according to how much group members participate (quantity). Procedures also differ according to whether participation is voluntary or forced. Some procedures are formal; others are more informal (Schweiger & Leana, 1986). Some procedures help structure a group's communication during decision making and problem solving. Other procedures provide an analytical function to help members to evaluate, question, and investigate their ideas. Some procedures help a group with its creativity. Finally, some procedures assist a group in managing conflict and developing agreement (Sunwolf & Seibold, 1998). Groups that use these procedures generally outperform groups that do not. Although the use of such procedures does not guarantee group effectiveness, using procedures maximizes opportunities for groups to achieve the results they desire. Actually, groups should be able to use a variety of decision-making procedures. Few complex decisions have a single *right* answer; thus groups may need to use several procedures to identify solutions and make the best decision.

Each of the procedures described in the following sections provides guidelines or ground rules for members to follow. One procedure that is not discussed

here is parliamentary procedure, which is a highly formalized method to help larger groups (for example, parent-teacher organizations and community groups; Weitzel & Geist, 1998) structure their discussion, decision-making, and business activities. If you are an officer in an organization that uses parliamentary procedure, you will want to become familiar with its many protocols. However, small task groups or informal groups rarely follow these procedures. We will start with the standard agenda.

Standard Agenda

The **standard agenda**, also known as reflective thinking, is a strict linear process that groups follow in considering decision alternatives. A group using this procedure passes through a series of six steps—each focusing on different aspects of the problem-solving process. The six steps are (a) identifying the problem, (b) analyzing the problem, (c) identifying the minimal criteria for the solution, (d) generating solutions, (e) evaluating solutions and selecting one as best, and (f) implementing the solution. This step-by-step process creates a structure for group members to use in thoroughly analyzing the problem it is dealing with. Each step must be completed before going on to the next.

The first step in the standard agenda is problem identification. Here the group must clarify what it wants to do or what it is being asked to do. A good way to start is to ask this question: What exactly is the problem before the group? Too frequently, groups overlook this step. When this happens, each group member can have a different idea of what constitutes the problem and assume that other group members have the same problem in mind. For example, suppose a student group is seeking a solution to the lack of food services on the north campus. All of the food outlets are at least a mile away from this part of campus. So what precisely is the problem? Is it that students, faculty, and staff do not have access to food for lunch and dinner? To be sure, the group members canvass students to examine the problem from their point of view. This helps them be certain that they are on track before going ahead with the rest of the project. Before going on to the next step, each group member should be able to state the problem clearly and succinctly.

The second step is problem analysis. Here group members gather information, data, and even opinions to help them understand the history and causes of the problem. Group members need to decide how serious or widespread the problem is. Considering solutions that will resolve a problem for a few isolated people is quite different from considering solutions that will resolve a problem that affects many. Continuing with the previous example, the group surveys students for the type of food service they might prefer. Their next step is to contact the food services department on campus to discuss the types of services they could make available on north campus. With both sets of information, the group can compare the foods that are easily accessible from food services with the foods students want. And, although the general focus is on problems, group members also need to think about any hidden issues. One hidden issue—and the real reason

food is not available on this part of campus—is that custodial staff is limited on this part of campus, meaning that there are not enough custodians to keep the food areas up to health department standards of sanitation.

The third step involves identifying the minimal criteria for the solution. In the food problem, the primary criterion is money. How much are students willing to spend for the convenience of eating near their classes? How much money can food services allot in their budget to establish food service on the north campus? How much money will be required for extra custodial help? In discussing these issues, the group finds other criteria that need to be considered. For example, where will these new food services be located? Who will give permission to install food outlets in classroom buildings? Because space is so tight, the only place that can reasonably hold a food outlet is the theatre department's ticket office. But the group does not pursue the issue of what will happen to the ticket office if it is moved to accommodate food outlets. The more criteria group members can think of for evaluating solutions, the more complete and the more useful their decisions will be.

In the fourth step, group members generate solutions. As you might guess, it is difficult to keep from doing this throughout the discussion generated in the first three steps. But groups that generate solutions too quickly can come to premature conclusions without fully investigating all potential solutions. For example, the group studying the problem of food on the north campus fails to generate other solutions such as independent food cart vendors, which do not require permanent space. It is a good idea to allow at least two meetings for idea generation. That way, group members have the opportunity to think about the problem individually before coming back to the group.

The fifth step is evaluating solutions and selecting one as best. If the group has followed the standard agenda, this step will be relatively easy because the group has access to all needed information. Using the criteria generated in the third step, the group should evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each solution generated in the fourth step. What about our campus food group? Unfortunately, they get stuck early on in the process. That is, they become so focused on moving the ticket office and installing a fast food outlet that they have no other options to evaluate at this stage. As a result, they force themselves into recommending a solution that will not be approved.

The sixth step of the standard agenda is solution implementation. But follow-through can be a weak area for groups. Sometimes the charge of the group does not include implementation, so group members get little practice in this area. Other times the group has used all of its energy in making a decision and has little left over for implementing the decision. Thus they simply stop after selecting a solution. Because implementation is a common weakness for groups, we will explore this step in detail in the next chapter.

Using these six steps maximizes group effectiveness in decision making because it provides equal opportunity to all proposals, no matter who makes them. Highly cohesive groups benefit from using the standard agenda procedure because members of such groups can feel inhibited about criticizing an idea or proposal

before the group (Pavitt, 1993). Following the steps of the standard agenda allows group members to question ideas and ask for clarification.

Although the standard agenda is often seen as the ideal procedure for most decision-making activities, it is not always practical (Jarboe, 1996). Some groups may find it difficult to follow the steps of the standard agenda. The sequence of steps structures the type of discussion the group has at each point in the process, and the procedure certainly takes time. However, this procedure satisfies the five critical functions that a group must perform to make effective decisions.

The other five decision-making procedures can be used in the various steps of the standard agenda. Each procedure can contribute to the group's decision making in different ways. In practice, groups may use several different procedures throughout their decision-making activity.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an idea generation technique designed to improve productivity and creativity (Osborn, 1963). Thus the brainstorming procedure helps a group to function creatively. In a brainstorming session, group members first state as many alternatives as possible to a given problem. Creative ideas are encouraged; ideas do not have to be traditional or unoriginal. Actually, the wilder and crazier

Using brainstorming procedures, group members alternately generate ideas, post ideas, and discuss ideas. Each group member has the opportunity to contribute ideas, to ask questions about ideas, and to vote for his or her top choices.

the ideas, the better. But it's important that all ideas be accepted without criticism —verbal or nonverbal—from other group members. Next, ideas that have been presented can be improved upon or combined with other ideas. Finally, the group evaluates ideas after the idea generation phase is complete. The group should also record all ideas for future consideration, even those that are initially discarded. A group member can act as the facilitator of the brainstorming session, but research has shown that someone external to the group may be more effective in this role. The facilitator helps the group maintain momentum and helps members remain neutral by not stopping to criticize ideas (Kramer, Fleming, & Mannis, 2001).

This brainstorming procedure helps groups generate as many ideas as possible from which to select a solution. Generally, as the number of ideas increases, so does idea quality. Members may experience periods of silence during idea generation, but research has shown that good ideas can come after moments of silence while members reflect and think individually (Ruback, Dabbs, & Hopper, 1984). So it may be premature to end idea generation the first time all members become quiet.

When should a group use brainstorming? Brainstorming is best used when the problem is specific rather than general. For example, brainstorming can be effective in identifying ways to attract minority employees to an organization. But the problem—what does a group hope to accomplish in the next 5 years—is too broad. Use a brainstorming session to break it down into subproblems, and then devote a further session to each one. Brainstorming works best with smaller rather than larger groups. Finally, members are more likely to generate a greater number of unique ideas if they write their ideas down before presenting them to the group (Mullen, Johnson, & Salas, 1991).

Brainstorming can help increase group cohesiveness because it encourages all members to participate. It also helps group members realize that they can work together productively (Pavitt, 1993). In addition, group members report that they like having an opportunity to be creative and to build upon one another's ideas (Kramer, Kuo, & Dailey, 1997), and they usually find brainstorming fun. However, groups do better if they have a chance to warm up or to practice the process (Firestien, 1990). The practice session should be unrelated to the subject of the actual brainstorming session. Practice sessions are beneficial because they reinforce the procedure and reassure participants that the idea generation and evaluation steps will not be integrated. Posting the five brainstorming steps so they are visible during the session helps remind participants of the procedure's rules.

To summarize, the brainstorming procedure should include the following steps:

1. State as many alternatives as possible.
2. Encourage creative ideas.
3. Examine ideas that have been presented to see if they can be improved upon or combined with other ideas.
4. Accept all ideas without criticism.
5. Evaluate ideas after the idea generation phase is complete.

Notice that brainstorming is a procedure for generating ideas, and not for making decisions. As a result, brainstorming by itself cannot satisfy the five critical functions of group decision making. However, it is especially effective in helping a group seek and develop a set of realistic and acceptable alternatives and in coming to an understanding of what constitutes an acceptable resolution, and moderately effective in helping group members achieve an understanding of the problem.

Nominal Group Technique

The same basic principles of brainstorming are also applied in the nominal group technique (NGT) except that group members work both independently as indi-viduals and interdependently in the group. Thus the **nominal group technique** is an idea generation process in which individual group members generate ideas on their own before interacting as a group to discuss the ideas. The unique aspect of this procedure is that the group temporarily suspends interaction to take advant-age of independent thinking and reflection (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975). NGT is based on two principles: (a) Individuals think most creatively and generate more alternatives working alone, and (b) group discussion is best used for refining and clarifying alternatives.

NGT is a six-step linear process, with each step focusing on different aspects of the problem-solving process. In step 1, group members silently generate as many ideas as possible, writing down each idea. It's sensible to give members a few minutes after everyone appears to be finished, as some of our best ideas occur to us after we think we are finished.

In step 2, the ideas are recorded on a flip chart by a facilitator. Generally, it is best to invite someone outside the group to help facilitate the process so all group members can participate. Members take turns, giving one idea at a time to be written on the flip chart. Duplicate ideas do not need to be recorded, but ideas that are slightly different from those already posted should be listed. Ideas are not discussed during this step. The person recording the group's ideas on the flip chart should summarize and shorten lengthy ideas into a phrase. But first, this person should check with the member who originated the idea to make sure that editorializing did not occur. When a member runs out of ideas, he or she simply says "pass," and the facilitator moves on to the next person. When all members have passed, the recording step is over.

In step 3, group interaction resumes. Taking one idea at a time, group mem-bers discuss each idea for clarification. If an idea needs no clarification, then the group moves on to the next one. Rather than asking only the group member who contributed the idea to clarify it, the facilitator should ask if any group member has questions about the idea. By including everyone in the clarification process, group ownership of the idea increases.

In step 4, group members vote on the ideas they believe are most important. For instance, if your group generates 40 ideas, consider asking group members to vote for their top 5. By not narrowing the number of choices too severely or too

quickly, group members have a chance to discuss the ideas they most prefer. If time permits, let group members come to the flip charts and select their most important ideas themselves. This helps ensure that members select the ideas that are important to them without the influence of peer pressure.

In step 5, the group discusses the vote just taken. Suppose that, from the 40 ideas presented, 11 receive two or more votes. Now is the time for group members to further elaborate on each of these ideas. Direct the discussion according to the order of ideas as they appear on the flip chart, rather than starting with the idea that received the most votes. Beginning the discussion in a neutral or randomly selected place encourages discussion on each item, not just on the one that appears most popular at this point in the procedure.

With that discussion complete, step 6 requires that group members repeat steps 4 and 5. That is, once again, members vote on the importance of the remaining ideas. With 11 ideas left, you might ask members to select their top 3 choices. After members vote, the group discusses the three ideas that received the most votes. Now it is time for the final vote. This time, group members select the idea they most favor.

The greatest advantage of NGT is that the independent idea generation steps encourage equal participation of group members regardless of power or status. The views of more silent members are treated the same as the views of dominant members (Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1974). In fact, NGT groups develop more proposals and higher-quality proposals than groups using other procedures (Green, 1975; Kramer et al., 1997). Another advantage of NGT is that its specified structure helps bring a sense of closure and accomplishment to group problem solving (Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1974). When the meeting is finished, members have a firm grasp of what the group decided and a feeling of satisfaction because they helped the group reach that decision.

To summarize, NGT includes the following steps:

1. Individuals silently generate ideas, writing down each idea.
2. Have a facilitator record the ideas, one at a time, on a flip chart.
3. As a group, discuss each idea for clarification.
4. To narrow the number of ideas, vote on the ideas believed to be most important.
5. Discuss the ideas that receive the most votes.
6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 until only one idea remains.

When is it best to use NGT? Several group situations can be enhanced by the NGT process (Pavitt, 1993). NGT is most helpful when proposal generation is crucial. For example, suppose your softball team needs to find new and creative ways to raise funds. Your team has already tried most of the traditional approaches to raising money, and members' enthusiasm for selling door to door is low. NGT can help the team identify alternatives without group members surrendering to the ideas of the coach or the best players. NGT also can be very helpful for groups

that are not very cohesive. When a group's culture is unhealthy and cohesiveness is low but the group's work must be done, NGT can help the group overcome its relationship problems and allow it to continue with its tasks. The minimized interaction in the idea generation phase of NGT gives everyone a chance to participate, increasing the likelihood that members will be satisfied with the group's final choice. Finally, NGT is particularly helpful when the problem facing the group is particularly volatile—for example, when organizational groups have to make difficult decisions about which items or projects to cut from the budget. The conflict that is likely to occur through more interactive procedures or unstructured processes can be destructive. The structured process of NGT helps group members focus on the task because turn taking is controlled.

With respect to the five critical functions of group decision making, NGT satisfies four. Because interaction is limited, especially in the idea generation phase, group members are not likely to achieve understanding of the problem. The discussion phase of NGT, however, should be effective in helping group members come to understand what constitutes an acceptable resolution to the problem, develop realistic and acceptable alternatives, and assess the positive and negative qualities of alternatives considered.

Consensus

Consensus means that each group member agrees with the decision or that group members' individual positions are close enough that they can support the group's decision (DeStephen & Hirokawa, 1988; Hoffman & Kleinman, 1994). In the latter case, even if members do not totally agree with the decision, they choose to support the group by supporting the decision. Consensus is achieved through discussion. Through members' interactions, alternatives emerge and are tested. In their interaction, group members consult with one another and weigh various alternatives. Eventually, one idea emerges as the decision that group members can support.

To the extent that group members feel they have participated in the decision-making process, they are satisfied with the group's interaction. That satisfaction is then extended to the consensus decision. Thus, when all group members can give verbal support, consensus has been achieved. To develop consensus, a group uses discussion to combine the best insights of all members to find a solution that incorporates all points of view. For example, juries that award damages in lawsuits must make consensus decisions—everyone must agree on the amount of money to be awarded.

Too frequently, consensus building is seen as a freewheeling discussion without any sort of process, plan, or procedure. But there are guidelines a group can use to achieve consensus. This procedure is especially useful for groups that must make highly subjective decisions (for example, a panel of judges deciding which contestant best represents the university, or the local United Way board of directors deciding how much money will be allocated to community service agencies) (Hare, 1982). Thus consensus is a procedure that helps a group reach agreement.

To develop consensus, the leader or another group member takes on the role of coordinator to facilitate the group's discussion. This coordinator does not express his or her opinions or argue for or against proposals suggested by the group. Rather, he or she uses ideas generated by members to formulate proposals acceptable to all members. Another group member can act as a recorder to document each of the proposals. Throughout the discussion, the recorder should read back statements that reflect the initial agreements of the group. This ensures that the agreement is real. When the group feels it has reached consensus, the recorder should read aloud this decision so members can give approval or modify the proposal.

To summarize, the steps for using consensus include the following:

1. Assign one group member to the role of coordinator to facilitate the discussion.
2. The coordinator uses ideas generated by members to formulate proposals acceptable to all members.
3. Assign another group member to record each of the proposals.
4. Throughout the discussion, the recorder reads back statements that reflect the agreements of the group.
5. The recorder reads aloud the final decision so members can give approval or modify the proposal.

In addition to following these steps, all group members need to be aware of a few basic discussion rules. First, the goal of the group's discussion is to find a solution that incorporates all points of view. Second, group members should not only give their opinions on the issue but also seek out the opinions of other members. The coordinator should make an extra effort to include less talkative members in the discussion. Third, group members should address their opinions and remarks to the group as a whole, and not to the coordinator. Finally, group members should avoid calling for a vote, which has the effect of stopping the discussion.

Consensus can only be reached through interaction. Although each group member should be encouraged to give his or her opinion, group members should avoid arguing for their personal ideas. It is better to state your ideas and give supporting reasons. Arguing about whose idea is better or whose idea is more correct will not help the group achieve consensus. If other group members express opinions that differ from yours, avoid confrontation and criticism. Rather, ask questions that can help you understand their points of view.

As the group works toward consensus, it can be tempting to change your mind just so the group can reach consensus and move on to other activities. Be careful! Changing your mind only to reach agreement will make you less satisfied with the process and the decision. If the group has trouble reaching consensus, it is better to postpone the decision until another meeting. Pressing for a solution because time is short will not help group members understand and commit to the decision. If a decision is postponed, assigning group members to gather more information can help the next discussion session.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Group Goal and Interdependence

Think about a group decision in which you participated for which consensus was the decision-making procedure used by the group. To what extent did consensus decision making help the group achieve its goal? How well did consensus decision making reflect interdependence among group members? Was consensus the most appropriate decision-making procedure for this group and this decision? In what way did the group's practice of consensus match the description of consensus given in this chapter? Considering what you know now about decision-making procedures, what three pieces of advice would you give to this group about its use of consensus?
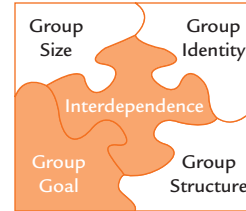
How well does consensus achieve the five critical functions of decision making? As a decision procedure, it is very effective in helping group members achieve an understanding of the problem they are trying to resolve, identify what constitutes an acceptable resolution, and develop a set of realistic and acceptable alternatives. Discussion leading to consensus allows more viewpoints to be discussed, so members are made aware of issues and facts they did not previously know. As a result, group members become more knowledgeable about the problem. Consensus discussions involve everyone, which results in a high degree of integration as at least part of everyone's point of view is represented in the final decision. Thus consensus can help achieve the first three critical functions. However, it is less effective in helping groups assess the positive and negative qualities of the alternatives presented.

There are a few disadvantages to using consensus. First, this procedure takes time. When not enough time is allotted, some members may opt out of the discussion process, allowing the group to come to a **false consensus**—agreeing to a decision simply to be done with the task. Thus the extent to which consensus is effective depends on the voluntary and effective participation of group members. Second, consensus is usually not effective when controversial or complex decisions must be made. A group charged with making a decision that heightens emotional issues for members is likely to make a better decision with a more standardized approach that structures group inquiry. This is why the consensus procedure is not always effective in assessing the positive and negative qualities of the alternatives presented.

Voting

Voting, another decision-making procedure, is simply the process of casting written or verbal ballots in support of or against a specific proposal. Many organizational groups rely on the outcomes of majority voting to elect officers or pass

resolutions. A group that votes needs to decide on three procedural issues before a vote is taken.

The first procedural issue centers on the discussion the group should have before members vote. Members do not simply walk into a meeting and vote. Voting should be on clear proposals, and only after substantial group discussion. Here is a suggested procedure to follow in voting (Hare, 1982). Members bring items to the attention of the group by making proposals in the form of motions. Let's say that your communication students' association is making decisions about its budget. Karen says, "I move that we set aside part of our budget for community activities." But subsequent discussion among group members reveals two ambiguities. What does Karen mean by "part of our budget": 20 percent? 40 percent? And what are "community activities"? Do they include teaching junior high students how to give speeches? With other members' help, Karen's proposal is made more specific: "I move that we set aside 20 percent of our budget for community intervention activities that help children appreciate the value of communicating effectively." Now, with a specific motion, Karen can argue for her proposal by stating its merits. Even with a specific proposal, she is going to receive some opposition or face more questions. That is okay because it helps all group members understand her motion more clearly. During this discussion, the group leader makes sure that all those who want to be heard get a chance to talk. However, the leader does not argue for or against any particular motion. To do so would put undue influence on the group. The group's secretary or recorder keeps track of the motions and identifies which ones receive approval from the group.

The second procedural issue is to decide how the vote will be taken. When sensitive issues are being voted on, it is better to use a written ballot. Similar ballots or pieces of paper are given to each group member. This way group members can vote their conscience and retain their anonymity. Two group members should count the votes and verify the decision before announcing it to the group.

A verbal vote, or a show of hands, is more efficient when it is necessary only to document the approval or disapproval apparent in the group's discussion. For example, suppose your communication students' association has several items of business to take care of at the next meeting. Specifically, the association needs to elect officers, approve the budget, and select a faculty member for the outstanding professor award. The budget was read to members at the last meeting and then discussed. Although members will ask some questions before the vote, the group basically needs to approve or disapprove the budget. Because there is nothing out of the ordinary about the budget and little controversy is expected, it is okay to use a show of hands in this case.

However, electing officers and voting for one professor to receive an award can bring up conflicting emotions among group members. Both of these matters are better handled with written ballots. This way group members can freely support the candidates and the professor they desire without fear of intimidation or retaliation.

The final procedural issue that needs to be agreed on before taking a vote is how many votes are needed to win or decide an issue. Most of the time, a simple

majority vote (one more than half of the members) is satisfactory. However, if a group is changing its constitution or taking some type of legal action, a two-thirds or three-fourths majority may be preferable. Both the method of voting and the majority required for a decision need to be agreed upon before any voting takes place.

Voting can be efficient, but it can also arbitrarily limit a group's choices. Many times motions considered for a vote take on an either/or quality that limits the choice to two alternatives. And a decision made by voting is seen as final—groups seldom revote. This is why having an adequate discussion period before voting is necessary. As you can see, voting is not the best choice when complex decisions must be made.

To summarize, the procedures for voting include the following:

1. Hold discussions to generate a clear proposal.
2. Decide how the vote will be taken—written ballot, verbal vote, or show of hands.
3. Decide how many votes are needed to win or decide an issue.
4. Restate the proposal before voting.

How well a group develops the discussion before voting determines how well the group satisfies the five critical functions of group decision making. Although voting is often perceived as a way of providing a quick decision, inadequate time for group discussion can severely limit the appropriateness or effectiveness of the proposals to be voted on.

Ranking

Ranking is the process of assigning a numerical value to each decision alternative so that group members' preferences are revealed. Groups often use a ranking process when there are many viable alternatives from which to choose, but the group must select the preferred alternative or a set of preferred alternatives. There are two steps to the ranking process.

First, each member individually assigns a numerical value to each decision alternative. In effect, rankings position each alternative from highest to lowest, as well as relative to one another. Usually, 1 is assigned to the most valued choice, 2 to the next most valued choice, and so on. These rankings may be based on a set of criteria developed by the group (for instance, How well does this alternative fix the problem? Is the alternative possible within the time frame allotted the project?).

Second, after group members complete their individual rankings, the values for each alternative are summed and totaled. Now the group has a score for each alternative. The alternative with the lowest total is the group's first-ranked alternative. The alternative with the second-lowest score is the group's second-ranked alternative, and so on. This procedure, which helps group members come to agreement, can be done publicly so group members can see or hear the ranking

of one another's alternatives, or the process can be done on paper so individual rankings are anonymous.

Just as with voting, the ranking procedure is most effective when the group has adequate time to develop and discuss the alternatives to be ranked. Compared to groups instructed to "choose the best alternative," groups that rank-order their alternatives do a better job, as all alternatives must be discussed for members to perform the ranking task (Hollingshead, 1996). Thus the extent to which this procedure satisfies the five critical functions of group decision making depends on the quality of the group's discussion.

To summarize, to use ranking effectively as a decision procedure, a group should take the following steps:

1. Hold adequate discussion that leads to clear proposals.
2. Have each member assign a numerical value to each decision alternative.
3. Sum individual rankings and total them for the group.
4. The alternative with the lowest total is the group's first-ranked alternative.

Although ranking decreases group members' feelings of personal involve-ment or participation, groups using this procedure report little negativity in decision making. Fewer arguments or conflicts are reported when ranking is used because it is more difficult for one or two individual members to alter a group's decision-making process. Each member gets to indicate his or her preference, and all preferences are treated equally. Thus group members report feeling satisfied with the outcome (Green & Taber, 1980). Group members usually prefer ranking to voting for making a decision when more than two alternatives exist.

Comparing Procedures

Procedures help groups by managing their discussions and decision-making processes. In turn, this enhances the quality of decision making in the group by coordinating members' thinking and communication, providing a set of ground rules all members can and must follow, balancing member participation, manag-ing conflicts, and improving group climate (Jarboe, 1996; Poole, 1991; Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999). Most importantly, procedures help groups avoid becoming solution-minded too quickly.

But which procedure is best? Sometimes the group leader or facilitator selects a procedure. Other times the group relies on familiarity—selecting the procedure it used last time regardless of its effectiveness. Rather than select a procedure arbitrarily, groups should select a procedure or a combination of procedures that best suits their needs and satisfies the five critical functions of group decision making. Table 7.1 summarizes the ways in which each procedure satisfies the five functions.

Thinking of each function as a unique type of decision task, we can see that the standard agenda fulfills all five functions and seems to be the most effective decision procedure. But we should be cautious in recommending it as the most

Table 7.1 The Ways in Which Various Procedures Satisfy Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Functions

	Understand the Problem	Understand What Constitutes Acceptable Resolution	Develop Realistic and Acceptable Alternatives	Assess the Positive Qualities of Alternatives	Assess the Negative Qualities of Alternatives
Standard Agenda	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Brainstorming	Somewhat	Yes	Yes	No	No
NGT	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Consensus	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Voting	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* voting	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* voting	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* voting	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* voting	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* voting
Ranking	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* ranking	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* ranking	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* ranking	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* ranking	Depends on quality of group discussion *before* ranking

effective procedure in all group decision-making tasks. Why? Although the standard agenda identifies which steps need to be completed, it does not ensure that all members will participate. Recall that the type and structure of communication among group members differs across these procedures. Groups need to select the procedure that best fits their communication needs.

Before you select a procedure, you should analyze the type of task before your group. If the task is easy—for example, the group has all of the necessary information to make effective choices—the type of procedure you select will have less influence on the group's ability to resolve the problem or reach a decision. However, if the group task or decision is difficult—for example, members' decision-making skills vary, the group needs to consult with people outside the group, or the decision has multiple parts—the decision procedure selected will have a greater impact on the group's decision-making abilities. Generally, in these situations, the procedure that encourages vigilant and systematic face-to-face interaction will result in higher-quality outcomes (Hirokawa et al., 1996).

Regardless of which procedure your group selects, all members must agree to using the procedure if *any* benefits are to be achieved. Also remember that the

SKILL BUILDER

Which Procedures Will Help Your Group?

Think of three recent group experiences in which decision making was the focus of your group's activity. Which procedures do you believe might have been most beneficial for each group? Why? Could the groups have benefited from using more than one procedure? How might you have initiated the use of procedures in your groups? Would group members have welcomed this type of procedural assistance or resisted it? What strategy or strategies could you have used to get your groups to adopt decision-making procedures? What communication skills could you have relied on to help the groups adopt these procedures? Which communication skills will you use in your next group meetings to encourage the groups to adopt the procedures?

procedure itself does not ensure that all members will be motivated and willing to participate. Decision procedures cannot replace group cohesiveness. To help you distinguish among these procedures, see "Which Procedures Will Help Your Group?"

The Paradox of Using Procedures

Research has demonstrated that groups using formal discussion procedures generally develop higher member satisfaction and greater commitment to the decision. Although the standard agenda procedure helps groups pay greater attention to detail, NGT and brainstorming groups generally produce more ideas and higher-quality ideas, and voting and ranking can make decision outcomes clearer. Yet many groups try to avoid using procedures. This is because discussion and decision-making procedures take time, and groups must plan their meetings accordingly. Group members often are reluctant to use procedures because they are unaccustomed to using them or initially find them too restrictive. Group members may be more willing to try a procedure when they find out that one of the most frequent mistakes groups make is to plunge into their tasks without adequate discussion and thorough review of alternatives. Remember the student group trying to find a solution to the problem of food services not being available on the north campus?

It is often difficult for groups to stick with a procedure once it has been initiated. For example, members may find it difficult to refrain from nonverbal evaluation of ideas in brainstorming. Groups using NGT may believe they have found the best idea in the initial voting and discussion steps and so fail to pursue the rest of the process. Groups find that the standard agenda is difficult to stick with because it requires the diligence of all group members. One group member can successfully dislodge others from using the process. But it is exactly these

difficulties that procedures guard against. In each case, the group avoids the procedure to move along more quickly, but efficiency is generally not a characteristic of effective groups.

Procedures help group members resist sloppy thinking and ineffective group habits (Poole, 1991). When procedures seem unnatural, it is often because group members have had little practice with them. If members have not used a particular procedure before, it is best to hold a practice session on a nonrelated topic. Practice can help demonstrate that the use of a procedure keeps groups from falling into traps of ineffectiveness or faulty thinking. Procedures also help groups manage their discussions and decision-making conversations and improve their effectiveness by providing a set of objective ground rules. When all group members know the procedure, it keeps the leader from assuming too much power and swaying the decision process. In addition, procedures help coordinate members' thinking and interaction, making it less likely that a group will go off topic. As member participation becomes more balanced, more voices are heard, and more ideas are deliberated.

To help your group gain experience with procedures, use these seven guidelines (Poole, 1991). First, motivate your group to use a procedure. For instance, provide positive feedback to group members when a procedure is used. Or look for discussion and decision-making problems that occur in your group, and then suggest a procedure to help the group overcome that difficulty. Second, champion the procedure process. For example, know and advocate the value of the procedure, remind the group to use it, and provide advice and help when the group does so. Also, train yourself in several procedures so you can help your group use them effectively. Third, help other group members learn the procedure. The more members who know and can use the procedure, the more likely the procedure is to be used.

Fourth, if needed, tailor the procedure to the group's needs. For example, perhaps your group works so fast at brainstorming that two facilitators are needed to write down members' ideas. This modification helps the group use the procedure more effectively. Tailoring a procedure to a group's particular needs gives the group ownership over the process. Fifth, suggest that your group spend time analyzing its discussion interaction with and without procedures. Getting members accustomed to talking about the group's strengths and weaknesses helps them realize that procedures can become a natural part of the group's activities. Sixth, when conflicts are high or cohesiveness is low, ask someone who is not a member of the group to act as the facilitator. Someone who is neutral, and not intrinsically interested in the group's outcomes, can ensure that a procedure is fairly administered. Finally, help the group set reasonable expectations with respect to using procedures. Using a procedure cannot solve all of a group's problems, but it can help a group discuss alternatives and make decisions more effectively. And make sure the procedure fits the group need. This will ensure that the group achieves greater success and will encourage group members to view the procedure as a tool, not as a panacea for all of the group's troubles.

Summary

Decision making is a primary activity of many groups. To a large extent, our society depends on groups to make decisions—decisions that affect governmental and organizational policies, long-term policies, and day-to-day activities. Family and other social groups also make decisions. Across the variety of group decision-making situations, group members need task, relational, and procedural skills. Generally, groups are better decision makers than individuals when the problem is complex, when the problem requires input from diverse perspectives, and when people need to identify with and commit to the decision.

Regardless of the procedures or process your group uses, four principles seem to fit most group problem-solving and decision-making situations. Acknowledging that group decision making is evolutionary and circular and that there are multiple influences on decisions made within a larger context of constraints allows us to embrace rather than fight the process.

Functional theory advocates five functions as necessary for effective decision making: understanding the problem, understanding what constitutes an acceptable choice, generating realistic and acceptable alternatives, assessing the positive qualities of each alternative, and assessing the negative qualities of each alternative. Groups whose communication fulfills all five functions are more effective in their decision making because information has been pooled and evaluated.

Decision-making procedures can help groups stay on track, equalize participation among members, and balance emotional and social aspects with task issues. Groups can choose from a variety of decision-making or discussion procedures. The standard agenda, or reflective thinking, is a strict linear process that helps groups focus on different stages or aspects of the problem-solving process. By moving through each step, group members can first identify and then evaluate each of the potential alternatives in complex problem solving. Brainstorming is an idea generation procedure that can help groups be creative in thinking of alternatives. The nominal group technique also assists the idea generation process, but it strictly controls the amount and type of communication among group members. Consensus is a technique with wide application in group decision making. In this procedure, one group member helps facilitate the discussion and makes sure that all members have the opportunity to express their points of view. Voting is a popular procedure when groups must make their final selection from a set of alternatives. Like ranking, voting allows each member to equally affect the outcome.

Each procedure can help groups be more effective, but some procedures are better suited to different aspects of the decision-making process. Groups can compare procedures for their ability to satisfy the five critical functions according to functional theory.

No one person or procedure will make group decision making effective. It is the appropriate selection and combination of people, talents, procedures, and structures that strengthens group decision making. By monitoring your own performance and the performance of the group as a whole, you will be able to select the most appropriate decision-making or discussion procedures.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

1. For one week, keep a diary or journal of all the group decisions in which you participate. Identify who in the group is making the decisions, what the decisions are about, how long the group spends on decision making, and what strengths or weaknesses exist in the decision-making process. Come to class ready to discuss your experiences and to identify procedures that could have helped your group be more effective.

2. Using the data from your diary or journal from item 1, write a paper that analyzes your role in the problem-solving and decision-making procedures your group uses and the ways in which your communication skills in that role influence your group's decision-making effectiveness.

3. Select someone you know who works full-time, and ask this person to participate in an interview about group or team decision making at work. Before the interview, develop a list of questions to guide the interview. You might include questions like these: How many decision-making groups or teams are you a part of? What is your role and what are your responsibilities in those groups and teams? How would you assess the effectiveness of your decision making? Is there something unusual (good or bad) that helps or hinders your groups' decision-making abilities? If you could change one thing about how your groups make decisions, what would it be?

4. Reflect on situations in which your family or group of friends made decisions? Using the five key components of a group—group size, interdependence of members, group identity, group goal, and group structure—describe how this social group was similar to or different from a work group or sports group to which you belonged. Selecting one decision event from both types of groups, compare the decision process in which the groups engaged. What task, relational, and procedural skills did you use to help the groups with their decision making? Which of these skills do you wish you would have used? Why?

5. Reflect on a decision made by your family group. In what ways was this decision-making process similar to or different from the four characteristics of decision making (evolutionary process, circular process, influences affecting the group, and external and internal constraints)?