

## **Effective Departmental Decision-Making**

In this short handout we describe some of the essential features of effective deliberation and collaboration. These are a few concepts and strategies that we have seen first-hand help groups make better decisions and ensure that all members feel they have been fairly treated and authentically empowered. There is a wealth of research evidence demonstrating that these strategies can produce better decisions and create programs and policies that have lasting impact.

We are committed to helping you implement these strategies, as well as help you create tailored-made processes to address your department's unique needs and circumstances. If you would like to explore these ideas further, or would like help in designing a decision-making process for your department, please do not hesitate to contact Dr. Darrin Hicks, Faculty Senate President ([darrin.hicks@du.edu](mailto:darrin.hicks@du.edu), 720-208-8155)

### **I. The Four Stages of Effective Deliberation**

A department's ability to make high-quality decisions is dependent on the quality of deliberation that precedes the choices made as a department. There is considerable historical and empirical evidence that the quality of interaction is the single most important determinant of the decision-making success or failure a group. This is because the manner in which group members talk about the problems, options, and consequences affects the way they think about those problems, options, and consequences, which ultimately determines the quality of final choices they make as a group.

Effective deliberation precedes in four stages:

1. The analysis of the problem facing the group.
2. The establishment of goals and objectives the group seeks to achieve.
3. The articulation of a number of possible choices for addressing the problem.
4. The evaluation of positive and negative qualities of available choices.

While the need to follow these four steps may appear self-evident, groups, especially academic departments, often fail to do so in a consistent and disciplined manner. For instance, it is easy to simply assume that everyone understands the nature of the problem and its likely causes, which leads the group to jump too quickly to generating possible solutions, without considering if these solutions really address the core problem. Or, the goals and objectives the group hopes to achieve are not articulated in sufficient detail to serve as criteria for devising possible solutions. Groups often end the process of generating potential solutions once the most obvious options have been stated, without looking for ways of addressing the core problem in novel, and perhaps indirect, ways. And they often fail to rigorously evaluate potential advantages and disadvantages of proposed solutions, and do not create the means for tracking the impact of choices once made.

Effective deliberation takes time and sustained attention. But following these four steps in a consistent and disciplined manner is well worth it—as it is the single most effective way of ensuring high-quality decisions—that are widely accepted and address core needs that can be effectively implemented.

## **II. The Three Common Components of Successful Collaborative Decision-Making: Process, Power, Platform.**

In addition to structuring their deliberation so it moves orderly through these four stages, highly successful collaborative groups—those groups who have created measurable and lasting positive change in their organizations and communities—have three common characteristics. These groups (1) establish a decision-making **process** that members perceive as fair and focused on the clear-felt needs of their constituencies; (2) ensure that members feel they have the **power** to design solutions that will be implemented; and (3) use a **platform** to reveal the patterns of interaction and thinking of the group, using these platforms to continuously improve their decision-making processes.

**Process:** A process organizes the work of the group; it must be capable of facilitating shared reflection, equal speaking time, and joint decision-making. Successful collaborative groups agree to direct their collective energy towards achieving a shared goal. The group, however, avoids jumping directly into action. Rather, it begins by co-constructing a fair process for assessing the situation, determining needs, defining problems, and designing solutions.

- The specific steps of a process are less important to eventual success than whether or not the process is jointly constructed, consistently used, and fair.
- The members' perception of the fairness of the process is the single most important factor in determining how much they will risk their own identity and resources and commit to group goals. Judgments concerning the fairness of process serve as a proxy for interpersonal trust in guiding decisions about whether to behave in a cooperative fashion.
- If members perceive the process is fair, they will abide by group decisions; if they perceive it is unfair, they will compete and sabotage, even if they get more than they asked for.
- A fair process is *inclusive* (considering a diverse range of experiences and viewpoints), *equitable* (all members feel they have an equal opportunity to influence decision-making), *transparent* (all members know the status of the proposals made) and *revisable* (the process can be easily adapted, if members feel it is unfair or ineffective).

There are several simple, proven strategies that you can use to create more fair processes:

**Equalize Speaking Time:** Google recently completed a multi-year study (Project Aristotle) that revealed that there was one difference between high and low performing teams--the distribution of speaking time among group members. In high-performing teams members spoke for roughly the same amount of time in each meeting, where in low-performing teams some members dominated the interaction. They found that the distribution of speaking time predicted member's feeling of psychological safety. *So, we would suggest a process where each person is given an equal allotment of speaking time, for instance 2-3 minutes each during each round of talk on a particular topic (you can have as many rounds of talk as needed). You should use a timer, making sure that it rings when the allocated time is over, and move directly to the next speaker. Moreover, you may find it useful, especially in contexts with clear power differences, to ask people to use their time to simply articulate their own thoughts on the issue, without refuting the points others have made or using their time to cross-examine prior speakers. The point is not to limit debate, but to facilitate all members having an opportunity to share their thoughts without fear of being attacked. Most people will adjust their thinking so as to*

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*accommodate the thoughts and feelings of others, and those who will not should not be allowed to dominate the deliberation.*

**Randomize Speaking Order:** In any group a defacto order of speaking emerges over time, with some always speaking first, and others waiting to have the last word. This may even form in relation to the seating order in the room, which while not assigned typically falls into routine patterns. These patterns create and sustain the distribution of power in the group, *so, we would suggest breaking these patterns by randomizing turn-taking. This can be done by drawing names out of hat, by using birthdate order, or any other (even funny) methods. Do this in each round of speaking, so that the patterns are constantly disputed.*

**Use Rank Order Voting:** Binary choices tend to produce factions, and fuel feelings that the process is not fair. The same is true of vetoes, say in a hiring process where one is allowed to say that a candidate is unacceptable. If a choice is truly unacceptable to all, then you can trust that it will be the lowest ranked option. But often a statement that an option is unacceptable is a strategy to advance self-interest. *So, we would suggest using rank order voting whenever possible, with at least three choices. Each person should be required to rank each option from one-to-three (without the ability to assign a zero). And if they do not rank each choice, their rankings should be thrown out. You can have successive rank order votes, devoting a round of speaking (as described above) between each vote. Once you no longer see any significant movement between ranks, you can conclude the voting process.*

**Power:** In successful collaborative groups members feel that they have been invested with the power to make decisions that are likely to be implemented. This power is what makes them feel that a collaborative effort is authentic. Therefore, members commit more of their time, resources, and energy to accomplishing shared goals. This enhanced commitment is contagious.

- When members feel they empowered, they perceive the process as authentic. If they feel robbed of this power, they perceive the process as inauthentic.
- Research has consistently found that there are two threats to authenticity: external and internal. External inauthenticity refers to the perception that strings are being pulled from the outside, which determine the results of the process. Perceptions of external may be motivated by the presence of multiple layers of approval that diffuse the group's authority or excessive constraints on what can be designed and implemented. Internal inauthenticity refers to the perception that a decision has been made in advance and the process really serves to confer legitimacy. Internally inauthentic processes do not treat members equally: the merits of some member's positions are taken for granted, while others must go to great lengths to justify their positions.
- Authentic processes engender commitment, with member's feeling that they can make a real difference. This feeling motivates considerable expenditures of energy, with each small success serving to renew the group's feeling of potency.

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To gauge authenticity, we would suggest routinely asking the group (either collectively or individually, if you suspect that there is some amount of intimidation circulating in the group) three questions:

1. Do you feel that often decisions are made in advance and simply confirmed by the process?
2. Do you feel that in our decision-making process, some people's "merits" are taken for granted while other people are asked to justify themselves?
3. Do you feel that on our decision-making process, strings are being pulled from the outside, which influence important decisions?

*You can use the answers to these questions as a means of getting the group to critically reflect on the nature of your department's process. And then you can use a deliberative process, with the same four stages described above, to determine how you can all work together to make it feel more authentic.*

**Platform:** Successful collaborative groups assign a person to monitor the process, being vigilant in protecting its quality. They do so by using a shared platform to render the group's patterns of interaction and reasoning visible. So, the group can reflect together on these patterns, discerning which configurations of communication and thought are helpful, and which are hindering its efforts.

- The essence of collaboration is the situated performance of thinking: out loud, in each other's presence, at the same time. This can be very frightening, as it exposes unsubstantiated inferences and implicit biases.
- A platform is a means for making a group's patterns of interaction and inference visible, so the group can turn its full attention to assessing how it is speaking and thinking together.

Platforms do not have to be technologically sophisticated (though some very sophisticated have been invented to great effect). Some of the most effective platform strategies are:

- **Assign a process monitor:** This is a person assigned to assess the process—making sure that ground rules are followed, that the process is procedurally fair, that speaking time is equally distributed, and that all viewpoints are adequately considered. This can take the place of a recorder, who documents the process used and decisions reached through that process. This is much more important than trying to record what each person says in a meeting.
- **Use Post Meeting Surveys:** Our colleague Barbara Smith has devised a very effective, yet simple survey tool for evaluating meetings. After each meeting each participant is asked to evaluate the meeting, across four dimensions, with a 1-5 scale. The aggregate results of the survey are then appended to the next meeting agenda. The four questions are: (1) The degree to which the meeting objectives were achieved; (2) the facilitation of the meeting was; (3) I would rate my own contributions to the meeting as; (4) the degree to which I think this meeting contributed to our purpose. This is one of the most effective strategies we have seen for improving deliberative decision-making.