Choosing a Decision-Making Method

Of the many considerations involved in selecting the best decision-making method to use in each situation, we prioritize six criteria:

Urgency & Time Availability challenges us to align our decision-making processes with the practicalities of time constraints, ensuring that time-sensitive decisions are made with both speed and wisdom.

Complexity & Expertise encourages us to consider the level of intricacy of the issue at hand, including the range of options from which to choose, and to seek out and value the specialized knowledge that can help ensure informed and effective decision-making.

Risk & Organizational Culture urges us to weigh the potential consequences of selecting a given process against the backdrop of our shared values and aspirations.

Impact & Ownership reminds us of the importance of engaging the broader community in decisions that will have far-reaching implications to foster wide acceptance and promote willing, collective action.

Resource Availability prompts us to be realistic about how our tangible assets (e.g., budgets, technological tools) and intangible assets (e.g., mindsets, emotional bandwidth) might influence the selection of a decision-making process that is not only strategic but also feasible.

Trust in Decision-Makers is the foundation upon which all else is built; without trust, even the most well-intentioned decisions can falter.

Leadership teams have a rich array of decision-making methods at their disposal for different contexts and challenges. This tool will help determine which of the five primary approaches—consensus, voting, delegation, input, and independent decision-making—best suits the decision at hand.

- **Consensus:** Ideal for decisions that require broad buy-in, consensus aims for ensuring everyone is heard and can support the final decision.
- **Voting:** When time is of the essence or when issues are less contentious, voting allows for a democratic and swift decision, with the majority ruling the outcome.
- **Delegation:** Certain decisions require specialized knowledge or expertise. Delegation entrusts decision-making to individuals or sub-groups best equipped to handle specific issues, balancing autonomy with accountability.
- **Input:** When a decision benefits from a wide range of expertise and perspectives but does not require broad consensus, seeking input allows for careful consideration of various viewpoints and concerns and, ultimately, a more informed outcome.
- **Independent:** In situations demanding immediate action or in matters falling squarely within a leader's purview, independent decisions are made without consultation, emphasizing the need for decisive leadership while recognizing the leader's accountability.

The following is a holistic application of these criteria to help you determine when to use different decision-making methods and some pitfalls to avoid for each.

Method	Best used when...	Pitfalls to avoid
Consensus *Group seeks unanimous agreement to support the final decision.*	• The stakes are high • The issue and/or potential solution set is complex • The decision impacts the whole team or school • Widespread agreement/ownership is crucial for implementation • A member of the group or an external facilitator can be tasked with guiding the group through the consensus process • The group follows norms for expressing and considering opposing viewpoints	• Taking too long to reach a decision • Potential for groupthink • Reaching consensus too quickly, resulting in participating members continuing to deliberate and/or use tactics to sabotage • Not having a predetermined fallback plan if consensus cannot be reached • Having different conceptions among group members about what consensus means
Voting *A decision is made based on the majority of votes within a group.*	• There is a need or desire for quick decision-making • The decision has wide impact, but there is shared understanding of the issue, and it is not highly complex or contentious • There are several good options from which to choose, and people agree to support the final choice • Resources are available to implement any of the options	• Marginalizing minority opinions • Overuse, which may reduce team cohesion • Using only because the group is having trouble making a choice • Splitting the vote among too many options, resulting in a decision that lacks broad support • Could result in a tie
Delegation *Person or group responsible assigns decision-making authority to an individual or sub-committee.*	• The decision is specialized and requires specific background and expertise • The delegate(s) represent the group most affected by the decision • Empowering others is beneficial • There is a high level of trust within the team and in the person(s) responsible for making the decision	• Lack of clarity in delegated authority and responsibility • Insufficient oversight of or visibility into the decision process • Lack of communication about the decision made • Lack of collective commitment to the decision

Method	Best used when...	Pitfalls to avoid
Input *Person or group making the decision seeks input from others to gain ideas and support for the decision.*	• Many people will be affected by and care about the decision • Interested parties have raised specific concerns • Specialized expertise is needed to inform the decision • Decision maker can gather information from others relatively easily • There are many options, some of which are controversial • There is high trust in the individual(s) providing input and in the decision maker's judgment	• Over-reliance on select individuals • Potential to ignore wider team input • Dissatisfaction from those consulted if decision does not reflect their recommendation • Lack of clarity about which individuals are being consulted for what purpose • Lack of communication about how input was used
Independent *Person responsible makes the decision without involvement of others.*	• Immediate action is required • The issue and options from which to choose are clear and not controversial • The leader has clear responsibility for the area impacted by the decision • Staff view the issue as low stakes and prefer to let someone else make the decision and have a high level of trust in them to do so • Additional people would not add to the quality of the decision	• Risk of alienating team members • Potential for overuse or misuse in non-urgent situations, resulting in decreased team motivation and engagement