



## CLARIFY YOUR DECISION-MAKING & CONSENSUS PRACTICES

### Observations of Common Practice

Groups and teams often claim not to “stand on ceremony” with their decision-making; believe they practise *informal consensus*; and behave as though a *simple majority* voting procedure is the official fall-back decision-making process. These matters are very often untested and unwarranted assumptions.

Leaders and managers similarly claim their decisions are made mostly by consensus, even within hierarchical organisations – the most common form – where the structure requires managerial decision-making. In reality, “*Keeping people guessing*”, “*Playing it close to the chest*” and “*Inventing the Process as we Go*” are common, and often so because they (managers and leaders) have yet to clarify for themselves the values, principles and procedures on which they will lead, manage and make decisions. Lacking a clear foundation, they may vacillate between one set of behaviours and another, moving unannounced and arbitrarily between heavily autocratic and messily democratic polar extremes.

How decisions are to be made, and which issues should be resolved by a particular decision-making process, are matters rarely subjected to careful scrutiny or planning – and that can cause problems, especially in a dilemma crisis where widely divergent views may be held.

For example, although consensus means “agreement”, individual constituents of groups which claim to value and practise consensus decision-making usually hold different views on what it means in practice and on the best procedures for applying it. Decisions made by this form of “consensus” may fail to bring about united support and produce resentment because of perceptions of bullying, manipulation or time-wasting dithering.

### Good Sense Assumptions

When groups, teams, leaders and managers take time to clarify the principles, models and procedures they intend to manage the decision-making process, constituents can more efficiently play their part in the process and may do so with greater willingness, confidence, and eventual support of decisions reached. Considerable efficiencies are thus achieved.

Different decision-making models can be pre-determined to apply to different matters or categories of issues.

Decision-making is facilitated and commitment to decisions enhanced when these are clarified, commonly-known and consistently practised. Guidelines for their practice should be documented. Unfamiliarity with the practices should be addressed through training.

Because there is so much disagreement on what is meant by true consensus and its practice, groups intending to use it are wise to clarify these matters in advance of their being applied.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The same can be said of all the other management operating systems and practices required by an organisation, beginning with these highlighted in these notes.

## Consensus Decision-Making

What some people call *true consensus* involves a process more time-consuming than is tolerable in many organisational cultures. Although its advantage over other models is that true commitment is developed to the outcomes, groups which prefer to use less time to reach decisions sometimes adopt a Plan B for use when consensus has been fairly attempted and found not to work. This *Decision-making Model B* should also be clarified and its guidelines documented.

One view of consensus (some would call it a watered-down version) is that it means *general agreement*. In this view, consensus is reached when all members of a group are willing to accept a decision; even though it may not be an individual's first choice, she or he considers it a workable approach and in the best interests of the group. This *general agreement* can be tested by asking individuals if they can say in respect of a single solution or decision:

- I believe that you have heard and understood my point of view.
- I believe that I heard and understood your point of view.
- Whether or not I prefer this decision, I will support it because it was reached openly and fairly.

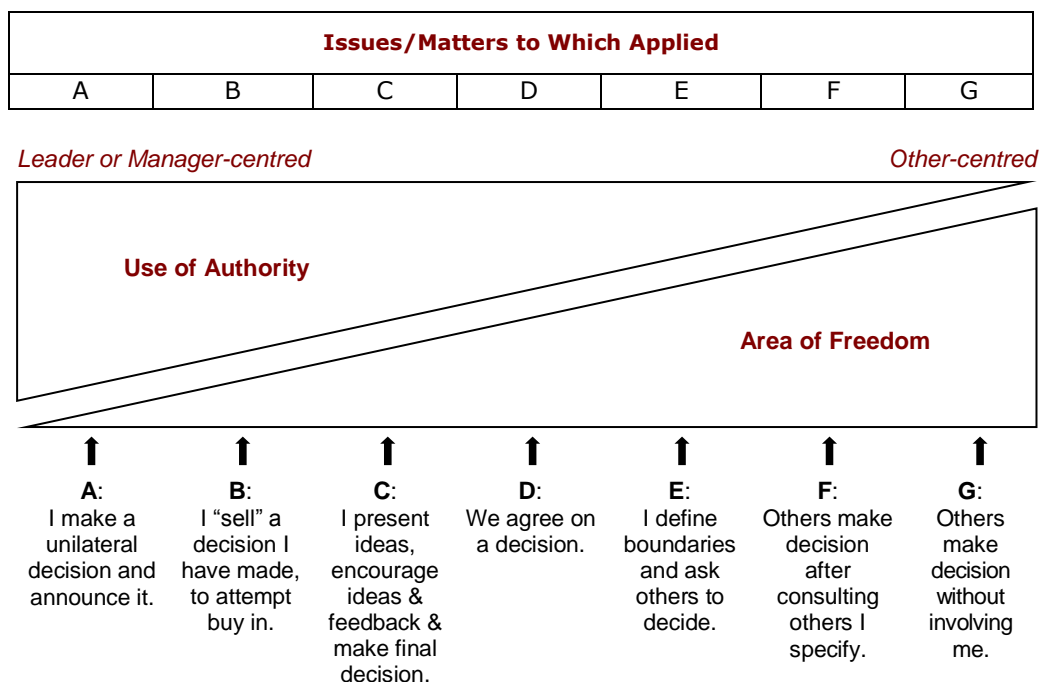
Collective consensus can be tested by asking:

- Does everyone accept this decision?
- Is there any opposition to this decision?
- Can everyone live with the decision?

Obviously, consensus simply will not work unless all members of the group feel confident to express themselves safely. Simply asking the questions above is no real test of this.

## Create a Decision-Making Continuum

Groups, teams, leaders and managers can remove the guesswork (their own and others') from their decision-making processes by making them clear to others. It can be helpful to clarify between four and seven different processes and the issues or matters to which they apply. For example:



[After: Robert Tannenbaum & Warren H Schmidt.]

Where a majority vote is an unchangeable constitutional requirement, altering it to mean, say, a 75% or 80% majority can helpfully change the nature of the process; greater listening, more careful deliberation and testing of understanding becomes necessary.

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