

# Democratic Decision Making that Works

Peggy Holman

As team based structures become more common in organizations, understanding how to reach effective group decisions becomes more critical. There are two prevalent forms of group decision making: majority rule and consensus. (See side bar.) In both forms decisions often take a long time to reach and result in less than satisfactory answers. In a third alternative, alignment, people discuss issues in a way that decisions are reached quickly, they're fully supported and often, the results are more creative than otherwise possible.

An example of how challenging group decision making can be is illustrated by the following exchange among a group of internal consultants at a forest products company, who were setting their decision making norms. "I'm fine with consensus as our default form of decision making; but, if there's one person who is hanging us up, then that person needs to abstain from the process so that we can move on." With that comment, the group was ready to agree. This seemed a good solution to the common complaint with consensus: it takes too long. When someone in the group said, "but that's majority rule," there was a stunned silence. Finally another person spoke up in confusion, "majority rule is more than fifty per cent."

"More than fifty and less than one hundred." It finally sunk in. Their solution to making consensus easier was really using majority rule. So why not use majority rule?

With decisions that have broad impact, there is a dark side to majority rule. What happens to the people with minority views? They can be separated from the organization or community – if the majority doesn't care about their interests, they better watch out for themselves. They may be active resisters, creating problems throughout implementation. They may be silent resisters, blocking the decision in subtle, subversive ways. They may sit back and say, "I told you so" when something fails. They may form a splinter group and set up competition. In almost every case, they feel they were never heard. In majority rule, there is no requirement for the group to understand the perspective of those who see things differently. When voices are left out, organizations often pay the price in slow or failed implementations.

## Why is group decision making so hard?

Group decision making is hard because we are using a communication mode that is designed for only the crudest form of group decision making: majority rule. This is played out most profoundly in the work place where autocracies still reign. Our training in presenting convincing arguments transfers seamlessly into autocratic organizations. Unlike a democracy, a person doesn't have to convince their peers, only the boss.

That is one reason democratic forms seem more time consuming than the autocratic approaches that still dominate business. The audience to be convinced is larger and more diverse. Majority rule is based upon bringing a majority around to your point of view. Consensus lays the added burden of convincing everyone that your position is "right." Neither form addresses the underlying principles governing the way we talk together. Applying new principles for conversation vastly increases the likelihood of achieving alignment – quicker and more creatively.

## The New Principles

### Inquiry Replaces Advocacy

In majority rule, the goal is to convince the most people. Debate raises this to an art as each side prepares to make its case the most convincing. The focus is on "having our say." Each side simply advocates and rebuffs louder and harder until its time to take a vote. No new territory need be explored. The sad truth of our training: majority rule has no requirement for listening.

To reach alignment listening is essential. Rather than arguing a position, the goal is to understand the whole picture. Each perspective is part of the whole. The assumptions, beliefs; the why's behind perspectives are uncovered. Through understanding each other's reasoning, people learn they are in this together. The focus shifts from "having your say" to feeling heard.

Alignment requires a new skill: suspending judgment. This means to put aside evaluation for the moment so that you can learn about another's perspective. A simple trigger to remember this practice is whenever you find yourself ready to say, "I disagree," instead ask, "Why do you say that?" Then listen to the answer.

### Inclusive Replaces Exclusive

In majority rule, the goal is to do the best possible job advocating for your side. The underlying assumption is that there are two possible answers: yours or mine. The result is that each side takes care of its own. In consensus, the assumption of two possible answers still operates. Each side gives and takes a little. The patchwork we call compromise is the result. Only in alignment is there room for many views. The goal is to understand the whole picture.

This inclusive approach requires a second new skill: seeking new ground. This work flows from suspending judgement. By listening to the answers to "why do you say that," the talker and listeners can focus on hearing the assumptions that surface. These assumptions form the basis of a decision that contains what is essential to each point of view. This gives the group what it needs to create an inclusive and creative decision.

	<b>MAJORITY RULE</b>	<b>CONSENSUS OR ALIGNMENT</b>
<b>The Goal</b>	To convince	To understand
<b>The Focus</b>	The positions	The whole picture
<b>The Emphasis</b>	Having your say	Feeling heard
<b>The Result</b>	Each side for itself	We're in it together
<b>The Skills</b>	Debating	Suspending judgment, seeking new ground
<b>The New Practices</b>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Instead of saying: "I disagree," Ask, "Why do you say that?"</li> <li>2. Listen for underlying beliefs and assumptions</li> </ol>

### **Applying the Practices**

Just being conscious about asking why and listening to the answer can make the likelihood of alignment much greater. A reliable method can increase the possibility even more. This process has been tested for about a year as I have worked with a variety of groups at a large forest products company. I have used it with groups from four to twenty with great success. It has been used with leadership teams, project teams and natural work teams. In most cases, the process was introduced because the decisions being made would have lasting impact on the group's future. The process has no special name. It can be used by anyone, although having someone there who has no stake in the outcome can be helpful.

### Getting Started

Before gathering, there are two important questions to be answered: what is the purpose and who needs to be there? The clearer the convenor(s) on what is at stake for them, the more infused with heart and energy the conversation will be. With the purpose clear, the convenor(s) can determine who needs to participate. The simple answer is whomever is affected by the result. By taking a holistic approach from the beginning, the stage is set for a constructive outcome.

The best physical layout for group decision making is a circle. This may seem trivial, and yet the quality of conversation can be dramatically affected by the arrangement. In one example, a leadership team that had a history of dysfunction moved from a U-shaped meeting space to sitting around a table to discuss a

particularly divisive topic: who would control development activities. With no other changes, they held a discussion that led to common understanding and agreement on how to proceed.

### Frame the Discussion

Why is this subject important? What is at stake? What does the group hope to accomplish? The convenor is generally the appropriate person to open with answers to these questions.

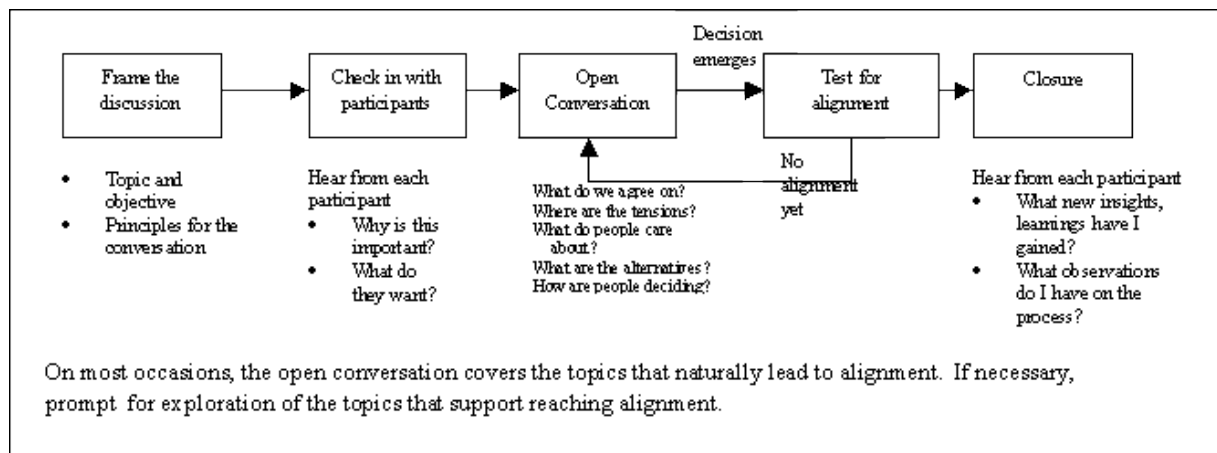
Because talking together using these principles is not yet a natural act, make the new principles explicit every time the group meets. I state them as: Leave “I disagree” behind and substitute “Why do you say that?” The second principle is to listen for underlying assumptions. Whenever I skip this, I experience the decibel level in the room rising. In a recent project team meeting, while designing a process for a leadership group, a group found itself in a heated debate over methods. By returning to “Why do you say that,” the tension subsided and the group returned to productive work.

### "Check-in" on participants' thoughts/feelings

This is a critical difference from traditional meeting practices. Once the session is framed, each person in the group talks – one at a time without interruption until everyone who wants to has done so. The intent is to ensure that the people are heard without being judged. In one example, a group of people gathered to talk because of possible synergy among their work. After each person described their work and what they needed to be successful, they realized all of them were looking for a department-wide guiding vision. This was an unexpected insight that strengthened their commitment to each other. They quickly banded together and took a proposal to the department’s leadership to pursue the creation of a vision.

### Open conversation – the heart of it all

Having heard from everyone, typically, a natural conversation follows. Differences are explored and new ideas emerge. A decision emerges and the group is ready for closure. One group I worked with had Information Technology people who had a strong desire to see electronic forms usage dramatically increase. The Forms Management people, who were experts in doing paper forms, although they saw value in electronic forms, weren’t ready to move as quickly. It turned out the decision wasn’t about should they move to electronic forms, but how quickly could the company assimilate the transition. By discovering the source of tension was pace, they were able to shift the focus of the discussion and reach conclusion.



### Test for alignment

Once a decision emerges, hearing from each participant ensures that it belongs to everyone. There are several ways to test. A quick test: everyone holds a fist thumbs up, thumbs down, thumbs in the middle. People with thumbs down or in the middle then talk about their choice. It is important to resist the temptation to try to convince the people who are not in agreement with the majority. In one case, a leadership group was deciding on whether to share some sensitive information with the rest of the department. One person was thumbs down on the idea. After listening to his reasons, everyone started to

try and talk him out of his perspective. When they realized they had fallen into talking to convince rather than listening to understand they backed off. At that point, feeling his concern had been heard, the person indicated he would be okay with sharing the information.

When the decision is of significant magnitude, knowing why people make the choice they do can be vital when the going gets tough during implementation. This test consists of asking each person to speak: “yes and here’s why,” “no and here’s why” or “I haven’t decided and here’s what I need to decide.” A project team in a very cost constrained environment was considering involving the whole organization in a vision setting process. While there seemed to be consensus to proceed, during the test for alignment, the leader of the group expressed her doubts about what they were going to do. She expressed what she needed to know to proceed with the plan. Uncovering her remaining doubts ensured that the process would not be derailed after the commitment to the whole organization had been made.

### Closure

The focus of the check-out is typically on insights, learnings and observations about the process. This is a time for reflection that supports deeper learning. I consistently find this to be one of the most valuable parts of the experience for a group. In the case of a leadership team that had been deeply divided for years, closure was a turning point in beginning to form a different relationship. It was the first time they admitted to each other that there might be value in building a better sense of team work among themselves.

### **Summary**

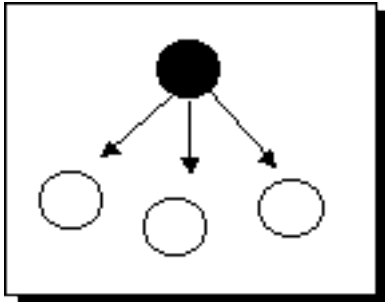
The way we talk with each other is such a fundamental skill that the underlying principles are invisible. It takes conscious commitment to put new principles into practice. Shifting the emphasis to asking why and listening to the answer makes an enormous difference in our ability to make group decisions. Given the increasing reliance on team based organizations, this ability is critical. While the work may be hard, the results make it worth the effort.

## Decision Making Options

### Autocratic

Autocratic forms of decision making are still the most prevalent in today's organizations. They are based in the notion that the boss knows best.

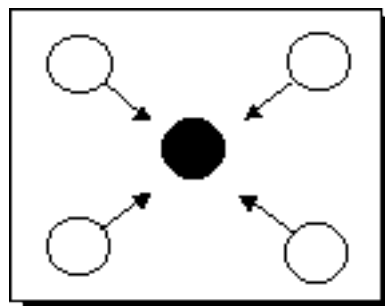
#### Traditional Autocrat



The boss decides and announces the decision to the group.

This form has proven faulty in enough circumstances that it has been almost completely replaced by two variations.

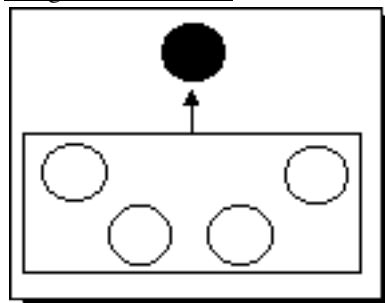
#### Benevolent Autocrat



The boss gathers input from individuals and then decides.

In this mode, people might feel that someone finds value in what they have to say. There is no opportunity for hearing the perspectives of others.

#### Enlightened Autocrat



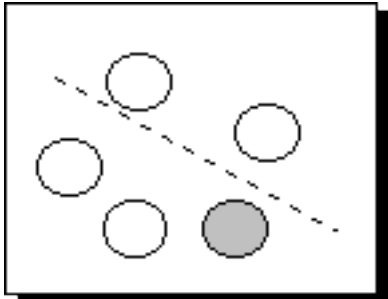
The boss calls a group together to hear their collective input and then decides.

While they still have no ownership in the decision, in this approach, people have an opportunity to hear each other's perspectives.

### Democratic

In organizations where team based structures are common, democratic forms are becoming more prevalent. While there is generally still a boss, for decision making purposes, the more mature the team, the more the boss' voice is equivalent to others.

### Majority rule

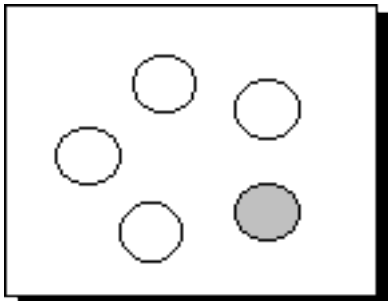


The decision is chosen when more than fifty per cent of the group vote for it. Everyone is expected to respect the will of the majority, although individuals may continue to push for another option publicly or privately.

As organizations begin to implement team based structures, majority rule is becoming more common in the work place. While quick and familiar, the risks of this approach include fragmentation and active or passive resistance to implementation.

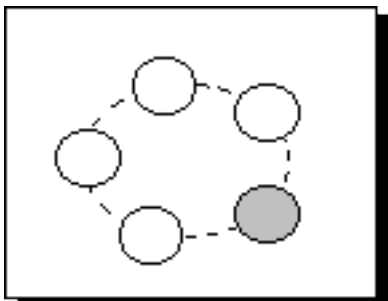
### Consensus

In consensus, enough discussion occurs that everyone can live with the decision, no personal value is violated.



In practice, often consensus takes the form of compromise. This implies a process of giving up something to get something. At its worst, the result can be a decision that no one has much enthusiasm to implement.

### Alignment



When there is active engagement to understand and incorporate the essentials of every point of view, everyone is personally committed to actively implementing the decision.

This is the best of all possible worlds. When there is alignment, the opportunity for quick and successful implementation is at its highest.

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