

Group Decision Making — Methods and Techniques

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Team work has always been found to be effective in solving problems faster and more effectively if the decision-making process is well organized. Therefore, any group or team might need to make decisions about performing a certain surgery for some patient, define their next research project, or financial decisions. The process of group decision making involves multiple individuals who try to act collectively to define the problem needed to be solved, define possible solutions, study and understand the possible methods and tools one can apply to solve the problem and finally define what should be done as a follow-up step to prevent future risks and uncertainties.



Definition of Group Decision Making

Group decision making is a participatory process where members act collectively to analyze problems or situations, explore alternatives to solve the same and select the best alternative from the list to solve the problem. The members of a group vary in age, sex, race, and number. A group may be official or unofficial and natural. The decision-making process may be structured or unstructured.

The terms **group** and **team** are used interchangeably but strictly speaking the two represent two different entities. The major differences between the two is that:

- **Groups** usually have a leader but the leadership roles in a team are shared among the members.
- **Members of the group** are responsible for their own individual accountability but not for the group. Thus, the effectiveness of a group is measured indirectly, and one is responsible for measuring the efficacy of the work of the group whereas in a team the responsibility is measured directly through the collective work product.

The group discusses and decides together, but usually, the person who is going to execute the required tasks is a single person while the team discusses, decides, and does the task together.

To understand this difference, let us take a **surgical meeting as an example**. Usually, a group of internal medicine doctors, surgeons, and other healthcare providers attend such meetings. In most cases, a group leader governs these meetings and the goal is to decide whether the patient should undergo surgery, or continue medical treatment.

Once the decision is made, let us say to go for surgery, the surgeon is going to do the surgery and not the whole group even though the whole group discusses and reached the decision together.

Group Polarization

Group polarization refers to the **tendency for a group to make decisions that are more extreme** than the initial views of its members. The entire group shifts toward the more extreme views.

Reasons behind group polarization include:

Informational influence

Individuals become more convinced of their view after hearing novel points to support their position.

Normative influence

The influence of others that lead us to conform in order to be liked and accepted, may take a stronger stance.

Tools and Procedures of Group Decision Making

While the process of decision making among groups might sound simple at the first glance, it is, in fact, difficult, time-consuming and on many occasions, can end up without any meaningful decisions. Therefore, people who have a business background can usually go back to the basic methods of decision making which are applicable to both teams and groups.

For example, the group might use the **nominal group technique, the Delphi technique, brainstorming or dialectical inquiries** to reach a decision. We will now discuss these different tools and show how they can help the group decide.

Nominal Group Technique

The process of nominal group decision making is **structured and very well organized**. Everyone is expected to come up with a list of ideas and decisions which is written

privately and anonymously. After this process is finished, the lists of ideas are collected by the group leader and presented in front of everyone on the board.

The next step is to **discuss each idea**, ask whether the writer of this idea can clarify more and explain and then to rank the idea in order of preference. Of course, none of the group members can criticize the ideas because negative criticism can make individuals more reluctant to participate in the decision-making process in the future.

Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique is **very similar to the nominal group technique** but with few subtle differences. Firstly, when the Delphi technique is used, usually outsourcing is applied to solve the problem. In other words, the Delphi group is a **group of individuals who are highly experienced in the problem** that is going to be discussed who can be physically far from each other and perhaps not members of the same team, hospital or business firm.

These individuals send their ideas by email, fax or any other method of communication to the group leader. The group leader is then supposed to discuss these ideas with the local group, sometimes in the presence of the Delphi group by video conference, and try to reach a decision that both groups agree on as the most appropriate course of action.

Surgical telemetry meetings are known to use such methods in complicated cases. Unfortunately, this technique is usually more time-consuming. The most important advantage of the Delphi technique is that decisions are usually made based on a consensus that involves experts.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is one of the **most common methods used to reach a decision in a group**. All individuals can participate verbally with ideas which should be put on the board. It is aimed at ensuring that members have a complete understanding of the project.

Sometimes it may be divided into two stages:

- The generation of alternatives stage where all alternatives are raised and written without exploring or critique of any of them.
- The evaluation of alternatives where each method is explored and suggestions to alter the initial thought are brought forward. In this stage, other group members are then encouraged to discuss these ideas, share their own ideas, or ask for more clarification from those who provided the ideas.

This method is **unstructured and not systemic**. Usually, other group members might criticize the ideas which are strictly prohibited. Unfortunately, because individuals are expected to present their ideas verbally, those with poor presentation skills are usually going to be ignored in the decision-making process. Additionally, brainstorming while providing alternative solutions does not allow enough time to explain and evaluate such alternatives.

Brainstorming can be also done electronically where external experts might be included. Again, the process is not systemic, those who have poor presentation skills might be afraid to share their ideas and the decisions made are usually of a lower quality compared to the previous two methods.

Dialectical Inquiry

Dialectical inquiries can be considered as a **second step after choosing one of the previously mentioned methods**. Once a list of the ideas is formed by the nominal group technique, brainstorming or the Delphi technique, the group members are divided into different teams.

Usually, most solutions can be broadly **classified into two, and sometimes three categories**. For instance, while the exact surgical procedure might be debatable, sometimes it is easy to see that all ideas can be classified into either surgical or medical in a surgical telemetry meeting.

The groups are divided into those who are pro-surgery and those who are pro-medical ideas for example and each sub-group is expected to provide explanation, clarification, and reasoning for their side. Dialectical inquiries can help the group leader study in more depth all the alternatives for the given problem. It also makes sure that the group is aware of the ramifications of its decision.

Pros and Cons of Group Decision Making

Group decision-making processes are usually **needed in any hospital or health care provider setting**. They have several advantages but unfortunately, they might have few disadvantages.

Benefits of group decision making tools include:

- Allow one to explore more alternatives than individual decision making. The alternatives are also of higher quality than those from individual decisions and thus they are likely to solve the problem.
- It allows others to discuss their ideas, make them more involved in the team and to reach more evidence-based decisions.
- Finally, such tools and methods give room for opinions of experts who might be external.
- Ensures that everyone understands the group's course of action and creates a sense of ownership among its members.

Disadvantages of group decision making include:

- Group decisions are usually slower to reach a decision when compared to individual decision making.
- Group members might feel humiliated by others when their ideas are criticized or judged as completely irrelevant.
- During the process of selecting the best alternative, the group leader may become biased to an idea he/she believes is best.

References

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