Decision Making: Style and Clarity

A look at:

• Authority

• Nature of decisions

• Need for involvement

• Congregational culture

Decision Making: Style and Clarity - 1

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Life is about choices. Scripture is rich with stories involving individuals and groups faced with decisions – faith, survival, goals, practice, and sacrifice. Circumstances, trust level, role and authority all determine who makes what decision and who learns about it. God allows us choices, but we are given opportunity to prayerfully and faithfully make them. We are ultimately charged by God to "choose life" and are given the skills and support to do so within a community of faith.

Today we will explore a number of factors to consider in determining who should be involved in decision-making and how the decisions will be made. And we will have an opportunity to analyze your own congregation's decision-making style and explore the consequences of that style. We will look at issues of authority, decision making methods, how the nature of decisions and the need for involvement influence which method to adopt, and the impact of congregational culture on decision making. We'll spend some extra time on consensus decision-making since it is often appropriate for congregations and is widely misunderstood.

Let's start with a Biblical story of decision making from Acts. Read Acts 15:1-29.

Note that in verses 1-5 the core of the argument is laid out. In Verses 6-11, Peter adds an opposing view, and in Verse 12 Barnabas and Paul describe their experience. James, the "senior pastor," offers a compromise in Verses 12-21, and the decision is made in verses 22 -29. Look at Verse 22 in particular ("Then the apostles and elders, with the consent of the whole church decided to choose. . .").

WHO made the decision? What is the significance of this as a model for us today?

Pray Without Ceasing …

Prayer is the first step in any decision-making process.

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Talking Points

Now look at Verse 28 – "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . ."

What are the divine and human elements in the decision making of the first Great Council of the Church? What is the significance of this model for us and our congregations as we make decisions?

All decisions should be made in the context of prayer – prayers for clarity of vision, to understand God's will.

You might want to have participants share experiences of how prayer has been a part of their decision making processes in the past.

Before we get into the heart of our discussion, let's take a look at a couple of case studies. Please read each one carefully and circle the approach that you think would be best under the circumstances.

Distribute Case Studies A-D and facilitate a discussion about each in turn.

Who Decides?

- Who has authority?
- Should that authority be exercised?
- Is it necessary or even practical for the person with authority to make the decision?

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Talking Points

Given the decision to be made the first thing to consider is: Who has the authority to make it? Even if you (or you and your vestry) have the authority, however, it may not be wise to unilaterally exercise that authority. Some things to consider:
- Will the decision impact on others? Whom?
- Is support or cooperation by others needed in order to implement the decision?
- How likely is it that others will go along with the decision?

Think of a time when you had the authority to make a decision, but then found implementing it was practically impossible. With a partner, describe the circumstances, what happened, and what you learned.

After a few minutes, call the group together and ask for volunteers to share what they had learned from those experiences. Then continue. . .

Another factor to consider is whether you **have** to be the one to make the decision, even if you have the authority. We all are too busy, so maybe there are some decisions that could be delegated. Some reasons to consider delegation:
- Do you have the knowledge or expertise to make the decision?
- How important is the specific outcome to you? Are you willing to live with what someone else might decide?
- Is there someone or a group to whom the decision could be delegated?

When You Delegate:

- Be clear on boundaries of authority
- Set parameters for outcomes
- Establish deadlines and budgets
- Share background information
- Clarify expectations

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Talking Points

In delegating, you give up some control over the outcome so make sure you are not attached to a particular result. The key to this method is the trust level between the group or person handing the decision over, and the person or group receiving the charge to make the decision.

Parameters must be made **very clear** to the group receiving the authority. Parameters should include budget requirements, time constraints, safety rules, canons and "misconduct" rules and regulations. One outcome of this method may be increased confidence and empowerment among leadership groups. This method requires self-confidence on the part of the leader or group handing off the decision outcome.

If this style of decision making is overused, it can result in chaos for the organization and isolation for the leader.

What types of decisions do you typically delegate? Give an example of when this was an effective strategy and what made it so.

Decision-Making Methods

- Unilateral
- Unilateral with input
- Majority
- Consensus

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Talking Points

Once you have determined who has the authority to make the decision, then you need to consider what decision-making method is most appropriate given the nature of the decision itself.

There are several methods for decision making. Understanding them and the circumstances under which they are best used can help you determine which style is best for a particular decision facing you or your congregation.

These methods, each of which we will discuss in more detail, are:

       1) Unilateral
       2) Unilateral with input
       3) Majority
       4) Consensus

Each of these methods is appropriate and useful under certain circumstances. The trick is knowing when to use which method.

Things to Consider

- Importance of quality
- Level of expertise
- Degree of structure
- Importance of acceptance
- Likelihood of acceptance
- Likelihood of conflict
- Who has to live with consequences?

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Talking Points

These are some of the factors that will help guide you in determining the kind of decision-making method to use. The need for a quality decision or high levels of expertise points to the need for greater levels of inclusion. In addition the higher the need for buy-in, the less structured the problem, and the more support from others is needed for implementation, the more inclusive the method of decision making should be.

The final question is also important – are those making the decision the ones who have to live with the consequences? For example, is the November Vestry making big decisions for the new January Vestry to carry out? Are the people who will have to be involved in implementation included in the decision-making process?

Decision-Making Methods

Unilateral

• Decide unilaterally and announce your decision.

• Ask for paraphrase to make sure you have been clear.

• Leader's information and/or expertise are key.

• Is it likely the group will accept the leader's decision?

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Talking Points

Let's look at the first method – unilateral decision making. This is the most authoritarian. Here, the leader announces the goal, vision and direction. **The level of a group's trust for their leader and the authority of the leader directly influence this method.**

There are some important and necessary questions to ask yourself before using this decision-making method:
• Is it your job to make the decision?
• Do you have the authority to make it?
• Do you have the necessary knowledge or expertise?
• What is your role in the system where the decision is being made?

This method is effective for dealing with daily administrative questions, simple routine decisions, or decisions that must be made in a tight time frame. The downsides are that it relies totally on one person's ideas, values, experience and knowledge. Commitment on the part of others to implement the decision is often lacking, and resentment or disagreement with the decision can lead to sabotage and erosion of trust. If overused, this method can result in lack of energy, apathy, scapegoating and sabotage.

Remember that there are times when it is most appropriate to use this decision-making method. Pastoral emergencies often require wise and prompt decisions. You cannot always "call a committee" for a decision, especially involving a confidential situation.

You might want to ask participants:
• *When have you used this style of decision making?*
• *Was it a fruitful process?*
• *How might you have done it differently?*
• *Name some up-coming decisions where this method might be best.*

Decision-Making Methods

Unilateral with Input

- You decide, but <u>genuinely</u> seek counsel prior to your final decision.
- Describe a problem, state that you must and will decide, but that first you want input, perhaps recommendations.
- Especially important when you lack expertise or knowledge.

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Talking Points

When this style is used, it is critical that those being consulted understand that they are <u>not</u> making the final decision. It is also critical that the decision-maker be open to input. If this method is used to solicit options when it is clear that the decision-maker has already determined a course of action, it leads to widespread mistrust and cynicism.

This method is useful for making competent decisions; it adds to the decision maker's ideas, experiences, and knowledge; and it adds the benefit of group discussion to a strictly unilateral method. It does, however, require more time than unilateral decision making and not guarantee that there will be a commitment to implementation. Conflicts and disagreements among group members are not resolved, and the method tends to create situations in which those asked for their counsel either compete to influence the decision maker or simply tell the decision-maker what they think he/she wants to hear.

You might want to ask participants to consider the following questions:

- *From whom would you seek counsel in using this style of decision making?*
- *When have you experienced this method as a leader? As the person who was asked for input?*
- *Was it fruitful? Why or why not?*
- *What are some examples of decisions in which this method might best be used in your congregation?*

Decision-Making Methods

Majority Rule

- Be willing to accept even if out-voted.
- Give up veto power.
- Not appropriate if acceptance by all is critical.

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Talking Points

If a decision is to be made by majority rule, you must be willing to accept the group's decision. Majority rule results in a solution that is acceptable to more than half of the group and unlike unilateral decision making, it gives the group power over the decision. It is helpful in situations where commitment is not necessary to implement the decision and/or the issue is not important to group members. It has some significant downsides, however – it encourages competition and potentially creates "winners" and "losers"; it usually leaves an alienated minority, which damages future group effectiveness. There are times when canon law requires a decision to be made by majority rule (e.g., in the election of a new rector), so you need to be sure to check the canons and your parish by-laws to determine under what circumstances you must request a vote. However, there are ways of working toward consensus prior to the voting in order to minimize the impact of the win-lose scenario.

You might want to ask participants to share their experiences of this method of decision making.
- *Name a time when this method has been successful. Not so successful.*
- *How might you as a congregational leader deal with others who have had a decision "not go their way" when this method was used?*

Decision-Making Methods

Consensus

- Not unanimity

- A course of action to which all can consent

- Gain <u>assent</u> of a community and not get everyone to <u>agree</u>
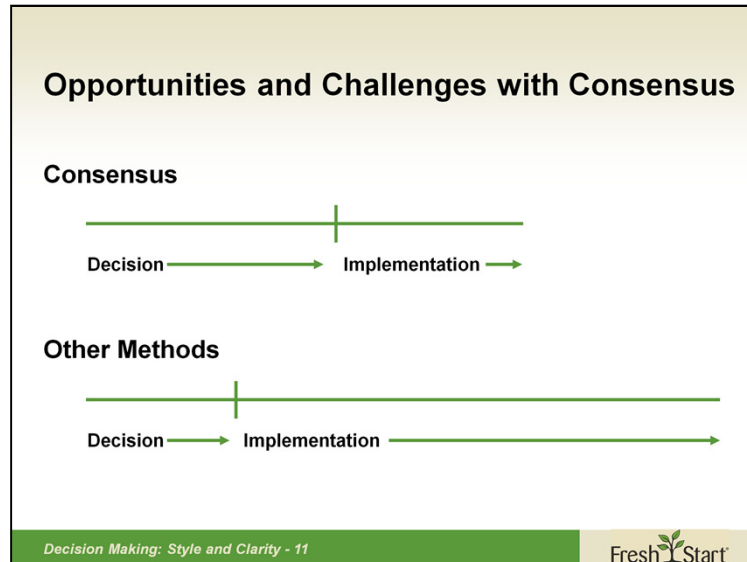
- Disciplined – requires a clear process

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Talking Points

Consensus seeks to put aside the dynamic of winners and losers.

This method is often misrepresented and misused. While unanimity around a decision is certainly a possible outcome, it is not necessary for there to be consensus. Consensus can also mean that some parties to the decision disagree with some aspect of the decision, but can "live with it." Or it might mean that one or more people disagree with the decision totally, but still feel that they can live with the decision. In Quaker practice, this last type of disagreement is called a "difference of preference". What IS core to consensus is that represents a course of action to which all the individuals in a group can give their consent. Once consensus is reached, parties to the decision agree not to sabotage or undermine it any way – they are committed to the course of action, even if it was not their first choice or even a preference.

Using consensus decision-making requires a structured approach. Here are some basic steps and a couple of techniques to use when consensus is hard to reach.

Distribute Handout 1 and give participants a few minutes to look it over. If the group is interested, you may want to go into more detail regarding the consensus decision-making process.

Opportunities and Challenges with Consensus

Consensus

Decision ——————→ Implementation ——→

Other Methods

Decision ——→ Implementation ——————————→

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Talking Points

The major drawback of consensus decision making is that it takes time – HOWEVER, although reaching the decision may take more time, implementation is likely to go more smoothly than with other methods thus shortening the total time from problem identification to solution.

Decisions made through consensus are the result of the combined ingenuity, creativity and intelligence of the group (synergy). Let me illustrate with a quick exercise *(**distribute Handout 2).*** Take a few minutes to read through the scenario and circle your answers. Then in small groups, share your answers and come up with a group response to each statement.

After the groups have come up with their answers, give the correct answers. Ask for a show of hands for how many correct answers people got individually – and then how many each group got right. Usually the groups do better than the individuals.

A further advantage to consensus is that because everyone's ideas and perspectives are listened to and their concerns taken into consideration, it is more likely that all essential factors have been considered in making the decision. The process allows for challenges to ideas, so they are not simply taken at face value. Participation in the decision making is maximized, which promotes commitment to implementation (hence the shorter time to the end of the process). By avoiding setting up competition, the method fosters group cohesiveness and trust.

How quickly a group reaches consensus depends on the subject, the level of trust in the group, and the relevant skills and knowledge of group members. The greater the level of ownership by a member or subgroup of a particular idea or position, the greater the difficulty in reaching consensus. When have you successfully engaged in consensus decision-making?

In a community of intention, which is what a congregation is, consensus is often the preferred method of decision-making. However it is not always appropriate, and its use must be considered thoroughly and carefully, as with any other method. A major drawback with consensus is that one person who is manipulative and controlling can hold the others in the group "hostage" if he/she chooses to sabotage the process. ***Distribute Handout 3.*** Here are some tips for reaching consensus in difficult situations.

The Impact of Congregational Culture

- Formal and informal processes
- Degree of participation
- Degree of openness
- Extent of expected agreement
- Expected styles

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Talking Points

In choosing a decision making style, you need to also consider the culture of your congregation. For different types of decisions (e.g., to launch a social event or initiate a building repair or develop a budget), how have those decisions been made in the past? What are the formal processes and how closely are they followed? How many "rounds" of decision-making are there for different types of decisions? What informal processes (e.g., checking with a former senior warden before committing to a major expenditure) are in place? What are the arenas (organizational locations) where decisions are made? What is the expected degree of participation in decision making? How open and transparent has decision making been in the past? How much information is routinely shared with parishioners and how? To what extent is agreement with certain types of decisions expected? What are the expected styles or methods of decision making.

What has been the history of decision-making in the congregation particularly where major decisions have been made (e.g., to build, to add staff, to start a major missionary outreach)?

These patterns form part of the DNA of your congregation. Paying attention to them can help promote trust and goodwill. Ignoring this history leaves you at risk of sabotaging your own best intentions. You may fail to gain acceptance of the decision, even if it is one that in general people would support.

Diagramming how decisions flow is one way of beginning to understand the decision making culture of your congregation. I'd like you to work through one or two examples.

Distribute Handout 4. Give them the instructions for doing a decision diagram and allow them time to do at least one. Then ask them in pairs or in small groups to share their diagrams and what they have learned as a result. Facilitate a large group discussion of what they noticed – how open was decision making, how inclusive, how much agreement was sought, were the processes quite formal or did decisions tend to be made through informal mechanisms, did these factors vary by type of decision?

The Influence of People's Background

- Individual decision-making preferences
- May be influenced by ethnic or national culture, education, economic status
- Can be issue when cultures collide

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Talking Points

A final point: Congregations are a made of individual members, each of whom has a preferred style of decision-making. In addition congregations are increasingly multi-cultural – and not all cultures approach decision-making or understand use of power and authority in the same way.

For example, many (if not most) cultures are less individually-oriented than the predominant American culture. Decisions may be made in council or by the elders. It may be important for the community to speak with one voice – something which can be a challenge when the American way of seeking consensus is to get many voices into the room.

Another consideration is the extent to which people believe they have access to decision-making. Cultures with what Dutch sociologist, Geert Hofstede, calls "low power distance" believe that people have access to decision-making, that they can participate and feel they have (or can have) ownership in the decision. "High power distance" cultures feel that only a certain "elite" or perhaps the elders have access to decision-making. People from these cultures are less likely to question authority, to actively participate in the decision making process OR to feel a sense of ownership of the decision itself.

Such subcultures are not limited to ethnic or national groups alone – they can arise from differences within a nationality based on things such as education or class.

Have you seen these kinds of dynamics affecting decision-making in your congregation?

Remember …

- All decision-making styles have both positive and negative aspects.
- The best leaders learn to use them all.
- Overuse of any one style can be disastrous.
- All styles are participatory – just to differing degrees – be clear on the boundaries of authority.
- You may even decide – *not* to decide.
- **Whatever you do – _communicate_!**

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Talking Points

All styles may be used to achieve empowerment and to build the kingdom.

What is important is to pick the one that is best for the situation *(**Distribute Handout 5**),* and for your congregation and its culture. Of course, sometimes no decision is the best decision of all! Letting a decision go can help calm a tense situation or enable other alternatives to surface.

Once you have determined the method to use:

•   clearly communicate how and by whom the decision will be made (or whether there will be no decision at this time),
• make sure people understand their role in the process (are they to decide or just recommend, are they being asked for input or are they merely being kept informed and have no active role?) and,
• let people know the timetable for reaching a decision – then keep them updated and informed as the process unfolds.

Coming up …

- What decisions are on your "leadership horizon"?
- What style of decision making will you use?
- Who needs to be involved?
- Who would you like to pray for you during the process?

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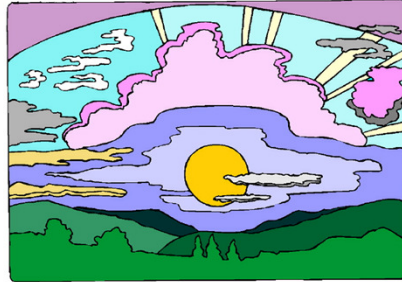
Talking Points

Now let's look at some decisions you are facing. Given what we have discussed, how might you approach them? Are there subcultures within your congregation to whom you need to pay particular attention?

Have participants share some of the decisions facing them either in a large group or in small groups. If they share in small groups, debrief what they have learned in the large group.