

FACILITATION SERIES: The Dynamics of Group Decision Making

Martha A. Walker, Ph.D., Community Viability Specialist
Crystal Tyler-Mackey, Ph.D., Community Viability Specialist

Making a decision is never easy, regardless of whether the responsibility for the final commitment is in the hands of an individual or a group. The decision-making process is packed with numerous components requiring the decision makers to invest time in defining the issue and gathering the facts.

Because decisions reflect the values of a group, facilitators work with the group to clarify its values and build its vision in alignment with its mission. Through the discussions, facilitators will capture many ideas and solutions for the defined issue. If a group eagerly accepts the ideas generated during face-to-face discussions without exploring alternative solutions, the group will fall short of achieving the excellence it deserves. Therefore, a facilitator will always encourage the group to examine other promising ideas, review the successes accomplished by other groups facing similar situations, and develop a plan based on the best options.

The end of the decision-making process is actually the beginning of

the planning process where ideas are transitioned into goals, objectives, and strategies. Within the implementation plan, the facilitator will encourage the group to identify who will be responsible for implementation and set deadlines for the projects. Evaluation is an on-going part of the plan where you are always asking what was accomplished and what difference did it make.

The following list outlines the steps guiding the decision-making process:

- Create a constructive environment for dialogue.
- Define the issue.
- Gather the facts.
- Clarify the issue's alignment with values, ethics, vision, and mission.
- Search for alternative solutions.
- Select the best practice/solution.
- Design the implementation plan of action.
- Implement the plan.
- Evaluate/assess the impact.
- Revise the plan and evaluate again. (*This step may involve any of the previous steps in decision making.*)

Tools for Decision Making

In order to accomplish these steps, facilitators will take specific actions. The following chart provides a facilitator with guidelines for each phase of the process.

<i>Task</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Action</i>
Creating a constructive environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve stakeholders in an honest dialogue on the issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Select an impartial, competent (skilled) facilitator/leader. Understand the stages of group development. Identify individuals/groups affected by the issue. Design a non-threatening room arrangement. Design the process. Establish trust. Engage in conversation through active listening and questioning.
Defining the issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate surface issue(s) and underlying issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blue Hat questioning (see Attachment 1). Clarify vision and goal. Utilize tools such as Starbursting, 5 Whys, and SWOT analysis (See fact sheet <i>Facilitating Group Discussions: Generating & Narrowing Ideas and Planning for Implementation</i>).
Gathering the facts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize existing data. Identify missing information. Research multiple sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> White Hat questioning (See Attachment 1). Review all documents and other resources. Visit site (if appropriate). Listen to stakeholders.
Clarifying the alignment with personal, organizational, and community values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confirm the issue fits the level of consideration. Consider referral to another entity/ department/office. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review vision and mission statements. Assess ethical position. Confirm issue is appropriately assigned. Utilize Reframing Matrix.
Identifying and selecting the solution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Present multiple options for consideration. Examine pros and cons. Avoid “group think” (desire for consensus which overrides need for best thinking). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Green Hat questioning (See Attachment 1). Brainstorming. Yellow Hat questioning. Black Hat questioning. White Hat questioning. Red Hat questioning. Search for common themes using Affinity diagrams (See fact sheet <i>Facilitating Group Discussions: Generating & Narrowing Ideas</i>

		<p><i>and Planning for Implementation</i>).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use visual tools to frame the options: Brain mapping, Fishbone diagram, Pair Comparison, logic model. • Define the pros and cons: Force Field Analysis.
Developing the action plan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize a planning process with accountability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize actions. • Establish timeline. • Identify individual who will be held accountable.
Implementing the plan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage timelines and reporting requirements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place report dates on organizational agenda. • Read prepared reports. • Question responses. • Communicate with stakeholders.
Assessing the impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate every aspect of the implemented plan. • Determine the impact/effect on the original stated problem. • Report other outcomes of the implemented plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek quantifiable data when appropriate. • Look for transformation (change in behavior, attitude, response). • Ask what other effects the plan may have had.
Revising the plan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the plan based on the assessment report. • Terminate the plan when goals have been realized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit the issue seeking better ways to address the problem. • Green Hat questioning. • Yellow Hat questioning. • Black Hat questioning. • White Hat questioning. • Red Hat questioning. • <i>Know when to adjourn.</i>

References:

- de Bono, E. (1999). *Six Thinking Hats*. Little, Brown and Company. Boston.
- Haskell, J.E. & Cyr, L.F. (2007). *Strengthening Your Facilitation Skills*. University of Maine with training offered by Virginia Cooperative Extension.
- Hogue, T. & Miller, J. (2000). *Effective collaboration: Strategies for pursuing common goals*. Longmont, CO: Rocky Mountain Press, www.rmleadership.com.
- Kaner, S. (1996). *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, nsp@island.net).
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation. (2004). *Logic Model Development Guide*. <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf>
- Kelsey, D. & Plumb P. (2004). *Great meetings: Great results*. Portland Maine: Hanson Press.

- MDC. (n.d.). *RCCI: Leadership for change*.
http://www.mdcinc.org/docs/education_pub_leadership.pdf
- MDC. (1998). *Moving from vision to action: A planning guide for the Rural Community College Initiative*. Chapel Hill, NC: MDC, Inc.
- MindTools http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_07.htm

Attachment 1: Six Thinking Hats

Compiled by Martha A. Walker, Ph.D.
Community Viability Specialist

Individuals and organizations want to be creative and develop ideas that effectively address pressing issues and opportunities. Edward deBono developed the Six Thinking Hats method to guide participants in managing the confusion intense thinking creates and published his parallel thinking concepts in 1985. Six Thinking Hats creates a common sign language for thinking through issues and creating viable action plans.

White Hat focuses on available data (facts and figures) while remaining neutral. Participants are encouraged to review existing information, search for gaps in knowledge, analyze past trends, and extrapolate key learnings from historical data.

Questions

- What information do we have?
- What information do we need?
- What information is missing?
- What questions do we need to ask?
- How are we going to get the information we need?
- Is it fact or belief?

Red Hat uses intuition, gut reaction, and robust emotion. It encourages participants to think about how other people will react emotionally and try to understand the responses of people who do not fully know your reasoning. Participants do not need to explain or justify individual expressions of feelings.

Questions

- How do you react to this?
- What is your intuition/opinion about this?
- Gut feelings . . . Hunches or insights . . . Likes/dislikes?
- What emotions [fear, anger, hatred, suspicion, jealousy, or love (deBono, 1999, p.53)] are involved here?

Black Hat is the basis of logical, critical thinking offering careful, cautious, and defensive insights. Try to see what is

wrong; why it might not work; what are the dangers, problems, and obstacles; what are the deficiencies in the thinking process. It allows you to eliminate the negatives, alter plans, or prepare contingency plans to counter any problems.

Questions

- What will happen if we take this action?
- What can go wrong if we proceed with this idea or implement this suggestion?
- What are the weaknesses that we need to overcome?
- How does this “fit” with our (or other’s) experience, policy, strategy, values, ethics, and resources?
- How will people respond?
- Will it work . . . be profitable . . . be acceptable?

Black Hat thinking is not an argument, but helps to make plans “tougher” and more resilient. It can help to spot fatal flaws and risks before you embark on a course of action. There is a danger of overusing black hat thinking by remaining in the critical mode and delaying green and yellow hat thinking.

Yellow Hat is a deliberate search for the positive (optimistic viewpoint) through exploration and speculation, defining the benefits of the decision and the value in it. Yellow Hat thinking is constructively blending “curiosity, pleasure, greed, and the desire to make things happen”

(deBono, 1999, p. 91). The goal is to enhance the proposal by generating alternative ideas “based on experience, available information, logical deduction, hints, trends, guesses, and hopes” (deBono, 1999, p. 98).

Questions

- What ideas, suggestions, or proposals are there for how to approach this problem? . . .to achieve this goal?
- What is the merit of the approach?
- What positives can you see in this idea?
- What could be done to make this work better? Faster? More economically?
- Under what conditions could this work?
- What would it take to make this proposal acceptable?
- What is your vision for how this could work?

Green Hat stands for energy and creativity. This is where you generate new, innovative ideas and develop creative solutions to a problem. It is a freewheeling way of thinking in which there is little criticism of ideas, and “movement” is made using provocation to move “forward with an idea or from an idea” (deBono, 1999, p.125) seeking alternative solutions. Green Hat thinking must involve shaping the idea for the user or “buyer”.

Questions

- Let’s think “outside the box.”
- What are some fresh ideas or approaches?
- This is the time for any wild or crazy or “far out” idea.
- What are all of our alternatives here?
- Aren’t there some other alternatives . . . perhaps too outside the box?
- This idea won’t work in its present form, but can we shape

it or adapt it so that it might be usable?

- We’ve always done it this way; let’s “green hat” it . . .does it have to be done this way?

Blue Hat is process control “thinking about thinking”. This is the hat worn by people chairing or facilitating the session. Blue Hat may be used at the beginning of the session to set the agenda or the sequence for using the “hats” and at the end of the session when seeking a summary and next steps. Blue Hat focuses on questioning (fishing and shooting – deBono, 1999, p.153) and provides the structure for use of other hats and other thinking/problem-solving tools

Questions:

Define Issue and Process

- What is the problem?
- Is this the real problem?
- What is the underlying problem?
- Why do we need to solve this problem?
- Where should we go first?
Where do we start?
- What should we be thinking about?

Assessment of the Process

- Are we getting anywhere?
- What factors should we consider?
- What sort of outcome would we regard as successful?
- What have we achieved so far?

Management/Facilitation

- Could you put on the “X” hat?
- You’re not using the “X” hat