

# Tools FOR SCHOOLS

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## Decisive action

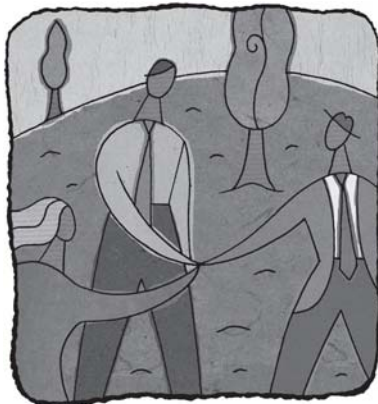
*Crucial steps streamline  
decision-making process*

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

**E**ducational consultant Ann Delephant tells the story of a school district that once created a rule for group decision making stating, "All decisions will be made by consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, there will be no decision."

When a group in that district wanted to take any action, every member of the group had to agree on the action. Think about the groups you've been involved with, and you'll understand the result. Among many examples of the rule's effect, this district went through three superintendent searches without selecting a new superintendent because not every member of the search committee could agree on the same first choice.

Making decisions is a difficult task for any group of thoughtful individuals, but Delephant says, it is the heart of a group's work. While any



one decision may not have a decided impact, how effective the group is depends on its collective decision-making ability, she says in her new book, *Making Meetings Work: How to Get Started, Get Going, and Get It Done* (Corwin, 2007).

The group leader or facilitator plays a crucial role in ensuring that the group takes an organized approach

to making decisions. The facilitator helps the group get clear about who is responsible for a decision, what is being decided, and how the group will reach a final choice on a matter, Delephant says.

### **GUIDING WHO MAKES THE DECISIONS AND WHAT DECISIONS ARE ABOUT**

The facilitator first clarifies who has the real authority to decide. Some groups may be formed to advise rather than decide. Members of any

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## Decisive action: Crucial steps streamline decision-making process

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group must know as they are doing their work whether they are being asked to make a decision or to advise another body that has decision-making authority. Groups that begin with a clear understanding of their authority have fewer conflicts, Delehant says.

In addition, the facilitator should help groups focus on pertinent decisions, according to Delehant. Some groups may tend to spend time as a whole on every matter. Expediency dictates that some decisions be delegated to one member or a subgroup. For example, it isn't efficient to have a whole group decide what food to serve at a meeting or whether to file minutes in the office or the lounge. Effective groups reserve group time for issues that have larger-scale impact.

Delehant notes that effective facilitators also help the group clarify what the group is deciding. Some decisions may seem clear — “We are deciding whether to use the Harcourt Brace or McGraw-Hill textbooks” — while others require some finessing — “We are deciding how we as a staff will respond to a three-year decline in our 3rd-grade reading scores.”

### CREATING SOLUTIONS

When a group is faced with making a decision, the facilitator helps members create options, narrow their choices, and determine their next step, Delehant notes in the book.

In many situations, she says, the group leader or facilitator may begin with a brainstorming session to generate ideas for the group to consider. Brainstorming is productive when a group wants to generate original ideas and many possible solutions to a problem. See Page 4 for Brainstorming tool.

The group leader or facilitator states specifically the issue or problem, making sure participants understand it. The facilitator also outlines the rules for brainstorming, encouraging members to offer specific, tangible ideas rather than abstract thoughts or opinions, and has members agree to a time limit for the activity. Members also should be clear about the objective — generating many ideas and adding to

each other's thoughts.

Delehant notes there are different kinds of brainstorming. The group can be *freewheeling*, calling out ideas spontaneously for a scribe to record. In *round-robin brainstorming*, the scribe asks each member to take a turn offering an idea. Members may pass on any round, and the session continues until all have passed during a round.

A basic rule in all brainstorming approaches is that participants do not respond publicly to any idea. All ideas are recorded. None are criticized by other participants.

### NARROWING THE OPTIONS

The next step, Delehant says, is having the group weigh the alternatives members have brainstormed and narrow their options. Even groups that do not have ultimate decision-making authority may need to reduce the list of options that are suggested.

Delehant recommends these methods to provide groups ways to select between and among many choices:

- **List reduction** enables the group to cluster similar ideas, measure them against criteria, and vote to narrow the selection.
- **Nominal group process** prioritizes a series of items according to its overall group score.
- In **criteria sorting**, group members first identify key criteria for evaluating the options, then cast votes that are weighted according to the importance of each each characteristic. See Page 5.
- **Weighted voting** gives each member a number of votes to cast to help clarify the group's position on suggested actions. See Page 6.
- **Paired comparisons** enable group members to choose one of two options in a series of pairs that match every possibility until the group determines which options are favored. See Page 7.
- Using **dots**, each group member has a number of stickers/votes equal to the number of choices minus two and marks his or her top choices. Each round of voting reduces the options.

*Continued on p. 3*

**“When the outcome of a meeting is to have another meeting, it has been a lousy meeting.”**

—Herbert Hoover

**“It is said that the world is run by those willing to sit until the end of meetings.”**

—Hugh Park

**“Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything.”**

—John Galbraith

**“Consensus: Arrive at agreement—agreeably”**

Joan Richardson, *Tools for Schools*, April/May 2004  
Discusses 10 steps groups can take to arrive at a consensus decision.

**“Group work has its dangers, but facilitators have some helpful strategies”**

Robert J. Garmston, *JSD*, Summer 2004  
Describes group leaders’ and facilitators’ roles in helping members generate compelling, productive conversations that will help lead to good decisions.

**How to Make Meetings Work**

Michael Doyle & David Straus, Jove Books, 1982  
Describes the interaction meeting method, a way to stop wasting time and get things done at meetings.

**“Misconceptions about meetings”**

Robert Garmston, *JSD*, Summer 2001  
Deflates some of the myths about running effective meetings.

**More Than 50 Ways to Build Team Consensus**

R. Bruce Williams, Corwin Press, 2006  
Packed with practical ideas to help facilitators aid groups in collaborating to achieve their goal.

**“Research comes before decisions”**

Stephanie Hirsh, *Results*, April 2002  
Describes the need for leaders to become informed consumers of educational research in order to make more effective decisions about staff development approaches.

**“Standards can guide success in meetings: Efficiency is key to making decisions”**

Robert Garmston, *JSD*, Summer 2002  
Contends groups are more likely to make sound decisions when they adhere to several meeting standards.

**“The five principles of successful meetings”**

Robert Garmston, *JSD*, Winter 2002  
Details five principles that make meetings more effective and more valued by participants.

**The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict Into Cooperation**

Daniel Yankelovich, Touchstone, 2001  
Outlines specific strategies to use in generating successful outcomes through dialogue that promotes understanding and resolving conflicts.

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Reaching good decisions as a group is seldom easy, but it is, after all, the essence of many groups’ work.

► See page 8 for details on Ann Delehan’s new book, *Making Meetings Work: How to Get Started, Get Going, and Get It Done* (Corwin, 2007).

**REFERENCE**

DuFour, R. (1999, Spring). Game plan. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2).

Continued from p. 2

Groups sometimes use more than one method to narrow their selections, Delehan says. Some might begin with dots, for example, to reach five or six choices, and then do weighted voting. The group then might set criteria to evaluate the remaining choices.

**FOCUSING ON AN OUTCOME**

Once the group has narrowed its options, the facilitator helps members reach an agreeable solution. Delehan notes that the literature on change says of any group, 8% will be innovators, 17% will be leaders, 29% will be early adopters, 29% will be late adopters, and 17% will be resisters. She says one could conclude from that data that any group is unlikely to have every member agree on a single option in making a decision. Consultant Rick DuFour calls the

majority decision the “will of the group” (Dufour, 1999).

In this form of decision making, members agree that they will have arrived at a decision when all points of view have been heard and the will of the group is evident *even to those who oppose it*.

The essential parts of any decision-making process are that everyone’s opinion is acknowledged and that all agree to support the process moving forward.

Reaching good decisions as a group is seldom easy, but it is, after all, the essence of many groups’ work. Delehan says that good facilitation helps group members clarify what they are acting on, develop a range of possible solutions, narrow the choices, and smooth the way for all to come to a conclusion they can support. ■

# Brainstorming

## Rules of Brainstorming

**Suspend** all judgment.

**Say each idea** out loud as it occurs to you (if using spontaneous brainstorming).

**Hitchhike** or “piggy-back” on others’ ideas.

**Encourage** a free, uninterrupted flow of ideas.

**Be** outrageous.

**Record** all ideas.

**Ask for** a clarification of any idea you don’t understand. *Note:* Only the individual who announced the idea should offer the clarification.

**Purpose:** Brainstorming is a helpful method to tap the resources of an entire group that needs original ideas or more ideas to respond to an issue. Through brainstorming, a group strives for quantity of ideas, not quality.

**Comments to facilitator:** If the group is large, break up into smaller groups of five to eight. This activity works best when group members have similar status. To ensure that the group focuses on quantity of ideas, stress at the beginning of the session that participants should refrain from evaluating or criticizing ideas when they are offered to allow for the greatest number of ideas.

**Time:** 30 minutes.

**Materials:** Sticky notes or paper, pens, pencils, chart paper, marking pen.

**Preparation:** Post chart paper on a wall where all participants can see it clearly. Distribute sticky notes or notepaper and writing tools.

## Directions

1. Review with the group the basic rules of brainstorming. See list at left.
2. Decide or discuss with the group whether to have a *spontaneous*, freewheeling approach in which participants call out their ideas or to use a *round-robin* approach in which individuals take turns until they have exhausted their ideas.
3. Identify the topic for discussion. Write the topic on the chart paper or a chalkboard at the front of the room.
4. Ask each participant to silently write as many issues, concerns, or solutions for the topic as possible. Have group members use a separate sticky note for each idea if the group will be sorting at the end. *Time: 5 minutes.*
5. Invite participants to share one idea aloud with the group, either spontaneously or in round-robin fashion. Write each issue, concern, or solution on the chart paper in the participant’s own words and, if participants will be organizing the ideas, also post their sticky notes on the wall.
6. If an idea is unclear, allow other group members to ask for clarification. The participant who suggested the idea rewrites the idea using clarifying language.
7. When the group runs out of ideas, use prompts to elicit more suggestions. If more ideas are suggested, add them to the list on the chart and to the sticky notes if the group will be prioritizing in this process.
8. Read all the ideas aloud for the group to hear.
9. Ask participants to adapt, modify, magnify, substitute, rearrange, reverse, or otherwise change ideas that have been presented to improve brainstorming results.
10. Allow participants to organize, group, and prioritize ideas to begin the sorting process, if desired, using the posted sticky notes.

**Purpose:** Establish the criteria that will be used to evaluate proposed options and apply the criteria to those options.

**Materials:** Sticky dots in three different colors, flip chart, felt-tip markers.

**Time:** Two hours.

## Directions

- Invite participants to determine criteria for evaluating the options for their situation. Write those on a flip chart.
 

*Examples of criteria:* Can be done with existing budget; offers support for teachers who want to differentiate instruction; compatible with existing course textbook and materials.

(Note: A small group may want to work in pairs for this step; larger groups may want to break into smaller groups of five or six.)
- After the group lists possible criteria, give participants nine sticky dots in three different colors. Identify one color for each category and ask participants to label the dots as follows:
 

**Criteria Weight**

**3** = Critical. An option must match this criterion if we are to reach our goal.

**2** = Important. An option should match this criterion if possible.

**1** = Would be nice. An option might meet this criterion but it is not essential.
- Invite participants to use their dots to place three criteria in each category.
- Tabulate the results and create new lists of the “critical,” “important,” and “would be nice” criteria. (The group should discuss any criteria that fall in the gaps between two categories. If necessary, the facilitator may have the group vote again on disputed criteria.)
- Bring forward the list of options that the group created. Post the list of critical criteria next to the options.
- Give participants another supply of sticky dots and invite them to label each option as follows:
 

**Criteria Match**

**5** = Matches the criteria.

**3** = Somewhat matches the criteria.

**1** = Does not match the criteria.
- On a flip chart, create a larger version of the chart example below and fill out each square on the chart for each option.
- Create a list that ranks the options from highest to lowest.

	Option #1: Provide teachers with one hour of daily team time				
CRITERIA	Criteria Weight		Criteria Match		Criteria Total
Must be done within existing budget	3	x	5	=	15
		x		=	

**Source:** Based on recommendations included in *Putting Sense into Consensus*, by Connie Hoffman and Judy Ness (VISTA Associates, 1998).

## Weighted Voting Format

**Purpose:** This process provides information about where individuals stand and how strongly they feel about an issue. This approach can surface opposing viewpoints and priorities which prevent the group from reaching consensus. Weighted voting is not used to make the final decision between two options, but helps develop greater clarity in the discussion.

**Materials:** Flip chart, felt-tip markers, notepaper, pens.

**Time:** 30-60 minutes, depending on the number of options and size of the group.

### Process

1. The leader or facilitator draws a grid on a flip chart showing group members on the vertical axis and options on the horizontal axis.
2. Each group member is allowed a number of votes equal to 1.5 times the total number of options. For example, each member has nine votes for six choices.
3. Without using any criteria or discussing any of the options, members write on their own papers their votes for their favored options, representing the strength of their support for any option by the number of votes they give it. For example, a member might give her top choice five votes, a second choice three votes, and a third choice one vote in the six-choice example. Encourage group members to express their support, but not to vote for only one choice.
4. The leader asks for and records the votes for the group to see where there is agreement.
5. Members discuss the results, including the benefits and drawbacks of the top choices.
6. The group either finds that the will of the group is clear or may decide to take a final vote based on the top choices.

**A school team must decide how to spend a \$20,000 grant. Members have identified four possible ways to spend the money. Each member is allowed six votes (1.5 multiplied by the total number of options).**

NAMES/OPTIONS	READING TUTOR	CLASS NOVELS	FIELD TRIPS	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON WRITING
<b>TOTAL</b>				

**Source:** *Making meetings work: How to get started, get going, and get it done*, by Ann M. Delehant with Valerie von Frank (Corwin, 2007).

**Purpose:** Also sometimes called “forced choice,” this process helps the group discuss and organize information. Members weigh each option against every other option. The power of paired comparisons comes from the choices that group members are forced to make. Even when two alternatives seem equal, members must choose one. Having to make difficult choices often leads people to see advantages — or disadvantages — they may not have noticed before. The process provides data to aid decision making.

**Note:** The number of possible comparisons depends on the number of options. As the options increase, the number of comparisons increases exponentially so it’s best to use paired comparisons when the group is evaluating six or fewer options. Use a simpler process, such as dots, to reduce options to the top five or six, then a more exacting process such as this one.

**Materials:** Flip chart, felt-tip markers.

**Time:** Up to two hours, depending on the number of options and discussion.

## Directions

1. On a flip chart in front of the room, set up a grid allowing for each option or potential solution to be compared individually with every other option.
2. Read aloud the two options in a pair.
3. Ask for a show of hands of those who favor the first option of the pair. Record the vote for that option, and subtract that number from the total number in the group to record a vote for the second option. (Since each member must vote for one choice in the compared pair, even if neither choice seems appealing or if both are very desirable, those who don’t raise their hands for the first vote must necessarily be opting for the second).
4. Repeat the process for each pair of options.
5. Total the votes for each option when all possible comparisons have been made.
6. Discuss the outcome. As with other tools, the option receiving the highest total on the paired comparisons chart does not automatically become the group’s decision. Often votes are clustered and favored and least favored options are obvious.
7. Group members may rapidly come to a consensus or may choose to use another process to continue examining the remaining options.

PAIRS CHART EXAMPLE					
	Rhonda	Alicia	Gary	Lee	
1 vs. 2	1	1	2	1	<b>TOTAL VOTES FOR EACH OPTION:</b> Option 1 = 11 Option 2 = 6 Option 3 = 13 Option 4 = 6 Option 5 = 4
1 vs. 3	3	1	3	1	
1 vs. 4	1	1	1	4	
1 vs. 5	4	1	1	1	
2 vs. 3	3	2	3	3	
2 vs. 4	4	2	2	4	
2 vs. 5	5	2	2	5	
3 vs. 4	3	3	3	3	
3 vs. 5	3	3	3	3	
4 vs. 5	4	5	5	4	

**Source:** *Making meetings work: How to get started, get going, and get it done*, by Ann M. Delehant with Valerie von Frank (Corwin, 2007).

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**NSDC STAFF****Executive director**

Dennis Sparks  
dennis.sparks@nsdc.org

**Deputy executive director**

Stephanie Hirsh  
stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org

**Director of publications**

Joan Richardson  
joan.richardson@nsdc.org

**Director of special projects**

Joellen Killion  
joellen.killion@nsdc.org

**Director of business services**

Leslie Miller  
leslie.miller@nsdc.org

**Editor**

Joan Richardson

**Designer**

Sue Chevalier

**MAIN BUSINESS OFFICE**

5995 Fairfield Road, #4  
Oxford OH 45056  
513-523-6029  
800-727-7288  
513-523-0638 (fax)  
E-mail: NSDCoffice@nsdc.org  
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## Are you attending more meetings and getting less done?

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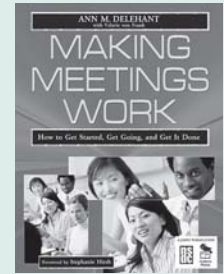
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