

Skills 360 – Leading a Group Decision (Part 2)

Discussion Questions

1. How can you make sure people stay on topic during a group discussion?
2. In your experience, what problems can make group decision-making difficult?
3. What are some ways of encouraging people to think creatively?

Vocabulary

To buy into: to believe in and support an idea or plan; “If you didn’t ask for the group’s input, you can’t really expect them to buy into your plan, can you?”

Easier said than done: it is a good idea, but difficult to achieve; “Just talk to Jacob about his behavior? Well, that’s easier said than done. I’m sure he’ll get upset.”

To dream on: when someone talks about something that you think is impossible, you can say “dream on;” “A: I’m hoping my little mobile game is successful enough for me to retire. B: Dream on. Very few games actually succeed.”

Obstacles: anything that stops you from achieving something; “If a lack of education is an obstacle in your career, then why don’t you go back to school?”

To detect: to notice; “The safety inspector detected a small crack in the foundation of the building, which we’ll need to repair quickly.”

To shut down: to stop something from functioning, such as a machine or a discussion; “I’m sorry everyone, but this argument has gone too far and I’m going to shut the meeting down.”

To call someone out: to ask someone to justify or explain a decision or action, or to criticize someone for an action or decision; “Some need to call Roger out for this, or he’ll do it again.”

To shut up: to stop talking; “I tend to shut up in a meeting when it seems like nobody is listening to each other.”

Million dollar idea: an excellent idea, especially one that will make a lot of money; “I think this is a million dollar idea you’ve got, and I’m going to help you pitch it to the boss.”

Off topic: not related to what is being discussed; "Wait just a minute... I thought we were talking about recruiting strategy. The sales award is really off topic."

To steer a conversation: to guide or direct a conversation to a specific topic; "Ryan has a strange way of steering every conversation back to him and his experience."

To stray: to move away from the correct path or topic of conversation; "A good meeting chairperson can recognize when people stray too far from the agenda and bring them back."

To go on and on: to talk a lot or too much about something; "You didn't miss much at the meeting. Hanna just went on and on about the budget again."

Aggressive: acting in a way that is direct, rude, angry, or determined to win; "A soft approach hasn't worked with these guys, so it's time to get a bit more aggressive in negotiations."

Groupthink: "groupthink" happens when people support bad decisions or ideas because they don't want to cause trouble in the group; "Groupthink on the Board of Directors has led to stupid decisions and a feeling that the company is stronger than it is."

From the get-go: from the beginning; "Jackson has been a fantastic employee from the get-go. He made a positive impact in his very first week."

Blue sky thinking: creative thinking, not limited by current or traditional beliefs or ideas; "Okay everyone, this is a tough problem, and I'd like to start with some blue sky thinking."

Off the wall: strange or different; "Yeah, Tanis is a bit off the wall, but it can be a huge advantage to be a bit weird in the marketing field."

Solo: by oneself; "After 15 years at a big company, I've decided to work solo as a consultant."

To self-censor: to stop yourself from saying or writing something because you're worried about what others will think or feel; "If a manager is too critical of new ideas, then people will start to self-censor during meetings."

Vocal: freely expressing one's opinion; "I thought I was pretty vocal, but Manny really doesn't hesitate at all to say what he thinks, does he?"

Susceptible: easily affected by something; "Shippers and manufacturers use a lot of fuel, so they're very susceptible to changes in oil prices."

To drill down on something: to look at something in depth or in greater detail; "Let's bring our accounting team in on this and really drill down on these budgetary problems."

To compromise: to accept a decision or solution even if it's not exactly what you want; "Okay, if they really won't accept our offer, maybe we should compromise and offer a bit more."

To drag something out: to make something longer than is necessary; "Management is betting that the union isn't willing to drag the strike out for more than a month."

To table something: to decide to discuss something at a later time; "Well, we're almost out of time so I think we'll have to table the rest of these agenda items for next time."

To shoot for: to try to achieve something; "I think if we shoot for a 5% reduction in operating costs we'll be in a much better financial position."

To play it right: to do things that give you an advantage or better chance of success; "Nice work Wendy, once again. If you play it right, you could end up running this company one day."

At every turn: often, or every time you do something; "This new development is so frustrating... seems like the government is putting up obstacles at every turn."

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to look at leading a group to a decision.

If you tuned in last time, you may remember what I said makes a good decision. It's one that people **buy into**, and people see the reasons behind. Well, that's **easier said than done**. If you're leading the meeting, you might wish for a simple and straightforward discussion that ends in one - and only one - logical decision. But **dream on**. You should expect a few **obstacles** along the way.

For one thing, sometimes people can get a bit personal. I mean, one person makes a suggestion, and someone else attacks the *person*, as opposed to the idea. It might be pretty easy to **detect**, like "Come on Dave, you always come up with the stupidest ideas." But it might be a bit more indirect, like "Geez Dave, do you have any other great ideas?" In any case, you need to **shut this down** immediately. **Call people out** for personal attacks, and keep the discussion focused on ideas, not personality conflict.

This is part of your role as a facilitator. You're supposed to encourage people to listen, prevent interruption, and generally make sure people feel respected and heard. As soon as people feel attacked personally, they'll **shut up**. And you don't want anyone to shut up, because anyone in the room could be sitting on the **million dollar idea**. So bring it back, nicely, to a focus on ideas, like this: "Okay everyone, let's just focus on the issue at hand..." or "All right, but what about the website ideas?"

Another thing you need to shut down is conversation that goes completely **off topic**. People do this without even realizing it. They hear something, it reminds them of something else, they start talking about it... soon enough the conversation has gone from the topic of increasing sales to the best place to buy muffins. Your job is to **steer** the conversation back. Don't be shy about it. Just come out and say "Muffins are great, but they're way off topic." Even people who tend to **stray** appreciate this.

Okay, so what about the people who love to hear themselves talk? I mean, there are some people who will **go on and on** and on about the same idea. Well, you can't let them go on forever. Once you realize they've made their point, find a slight break in their little speech and jump in with a summary. Try something like: "So you're saying..." or, if you need to be a bit more **aggressive**, you could say: "Okay, okay, hang on just a sec. As I understand it, you think..."

Another obstacle in a decision-making meeting is what we call "**groupthink**."

Groupthink is when people just follow along with the ideas being discussed, without thinking for themselves. Or, they don't try to come up with anything new. Instead, people just accept what is being put in front of them.

So how can you deal with groupthink? Well, you can try to encourage some creative thinking [from the get-go](#). Tell everyone what groupthink is, and then tell them to avoid it. Ask for some [blue sky thinking](#) or [off the wall](#) ideas. One thing you might try is having people write down their ideas individually *before* sharing them with the group. There's actually research to show that a bunch of people thinking [solo](#) about a problem produces a greater variety of possible solutions than a group of people brainstorming together.

Avoiding groupthink means allowing unusual or new ideas to come out. Often people will [self-censor](#) when they think their ideas are not going to be accepted. But that's not always the best way to the best decision. After having people write down their own ideas, then go around the table and give each person a chance to speak. The more you leave it to the really [vocal](#) people, the more [susceptible](#) the meeting will be to groupthink.

Besides groupthink, another obstacle you may face is time. I mean, you've got a big decision to make, and only two hours to do it. So watch the time carefully. And when you're down to 25%, remind people. Say something like "okay folks, we've got half an hour left, so we really need to start [drilling down on](#) the best options." Don't be afraid to push them a bit. In most cases, people are more willing to [compromise](#) than to [drag](#) an issue [out](#) longer than necessary.

But if the group really can't come to a good decision, or if people really can't agree, or if there's just more information needed, then consider other options. For one thing, you might [table](#) the decision. A delayed decision is often better than a bad decision. Or, you might assign a smaller group to make the decision for the larger group, based on the discussion. Depending on the circumstances, you might consider either of these options.

Regardless, what you're [shooting for](#) is the best possible decision. And as we've discussed, there are many possible obstacles to making a good decision within the time you've got. But if you [play it right](#), if you manage the people well, and if you encourage good ideas, and *new* ideas, you should be able to come to a good decision. Believe me, if you do this right, people will thank you for it. Even the ones who seemed to resist [at every turn](#).

That's all for today. So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. Which of the following is part of your role as facilitator? [Choose all that apply]
 - A Working out personality conflicts.
 - B Helping people focus on ideas.
 - C Encouraging people to listen.
 - D Asking problem people to stop talking.
 - E Preventing people from interrupting each other.
 - F Forcing the group to find a simple and logical decision.
 - G Making sure people feel respected.
 - H Letting people know when they suggest a bad idea.

2. What should you do when people start talking about something other than the topic of the meeting?
 - A Ask people why they want to discuss the new topic.
 - B Give them enough time to get tired of the new topic.
 - C Summarize their ideas about the new topic.
 - D Say very directly that the new topic is not relevant.

3. Which of the following would be a good way to interrupt someone who talks too much? [Choose 2]
 - A "Okay, wait a sec. So you think that..."
 - B "Let me jump in here and just make a different point..."
 - C "We're really not getting anywhere today..."
 - D "So it sounds like you're saying..."

4. What is "groupthink?"
 - A When people use voting as a decision-making method.
 - B When everyone finally agrees on the best option.
 - C When people come up with new and innovative ideas.
 - D When people just accept the common opinion without thinking.

5. How can you deal with groupthink? [Choose all that apply]
 - A Encourage people to get along.
 - B Conduct research that helps select an option.
 - C Tell people what it is and ask them to avoid it.
 - D Have a group brainstorming session.
 - E Ask people to start by writing down their own ideas.
 - F Have people make sure their idea is acceptable before saying it.
 - G Encourage the outgoing people to get the discussion going.
 - H Find ways to encourage creative thinking.

6. If you run out of time, or people really can't agree, then what can you do?
[Choose 2]
- A Make the final decision for the group.
 - B Ask people to vote for someone to make the decision.
 - C Delay the decision.
 - D Assign a small group of people to make the decision.

Review Answers

1. Which of the following is part of your role as facilitator? [choose all that apply]
B Helping people focus on ideas.
C Encouraging people to listen.
E Preventing people from interrupting each other.
G Making sure people feel respected.
2. What should you do when people start talking about something other than the topic of the meeting?
D Say very directly that the new topic is not relevant.
3. Which of the following would be a good way to interrupt someone who talks too much? [choose 2]
A "Okay, wait a sec. So you think that..."
D "So it sounds like you're saying..."
4. What is "groupthink?"
D When people just accept the common opinion without thinking.
5. How can you deal with groupthink? [choose all that apply]
C Tell people what it is and ask them to avoid it.
E Ask people to start by writing down their own ideas.
H Find ways to encourage creative thinking.
6. If you run out of time, or people really can't agree, then what can you do? [choose 2]
C Delay the decision.
D Assign a small group of people to make the decision.