

Making Difficult Decisions

A Guide for Neighborhood Organizations

A neighborhood organization occasionally has to make a decision about a subject that generates strong disagreement among the members.

Here are a series of steps your organization can take to reach a decision that everyone sees as democratic and fair. Not all of these steps are necessary in every decision making process, so use your own judgment.

1. Select a **neutral** facilitator.

The role of the facilitator is to lead the group to make a group decision and develop an inclusive process to make that happen.



Facilitators must be able to conduct the meeting fairly and in a neutral manner. They must also make sure everyone gets a chance to express their views. (*"Ted, you've been keeping awfully quiet; we'd be interested in your thoughts about this."*)

At some point, facilitator leaders can voice their points of view if not expressed by someone else, but they must trust that the group will make the right decision, even if it is not one they themselves would have chosen.

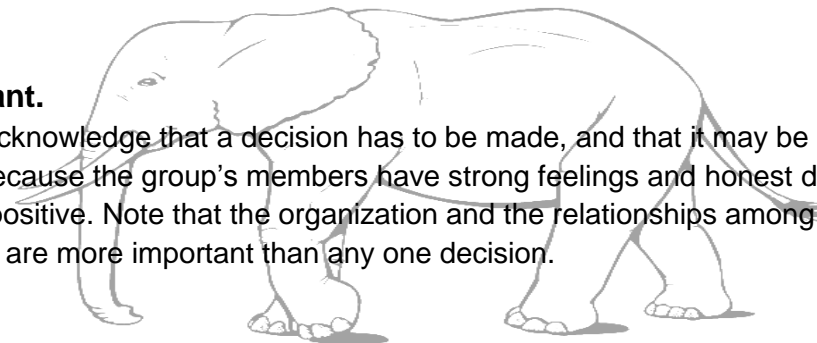


"The facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking and practice. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding and cultivates shared responsibility. By supporting everyone to do their best thinking, a facilitator enables group members to search for inclusive solutions and build sustainable agreements."

Sam Kaner / Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making

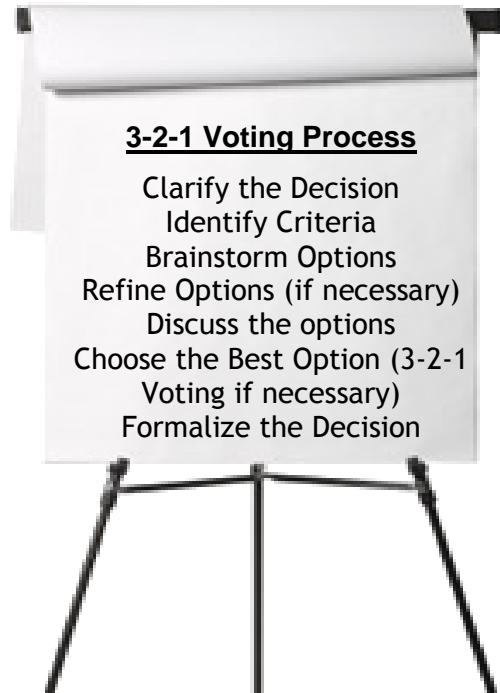
2. Name the Elephant.

At the outset, acknowledge that a decision has to be made, and that it may be difficult or controversial because the group's members have strong feelings and honest differences of opinion. Be positive. Note that the organization and the relationships among members will survive and are more important than any one decision.



3. Get Buy-In.

Write down the steps of the **3-2-1 Voting Process** (see Item 10 below) on a flip chart. Explain the steps. Ask if everyone is okay with this method of making the decision. Keep the flip chart posted so everyone can see where the process is and where it is headed.



4. Clarify the decision to be made.

Ask one or more persons to state what is to be decided. Come to agreement on the question before moving forward. (For example, is the choice whether to have a Halloween party or to have ANY social event this fall?)



5. Identify the criteria for making the decision.

Develop criteria that individual members might use to rate one option over another. This is not always necessary, but on a separate flip chart, you can list criteria suggested by the group, such as: Is this something we are already doing? Do we have the people, money and time to do this? Will it help us involve more members? Does it help us fulfill our mission? Members can later refer to these priorities to evaluate each option.

6. Brainstorm the options.

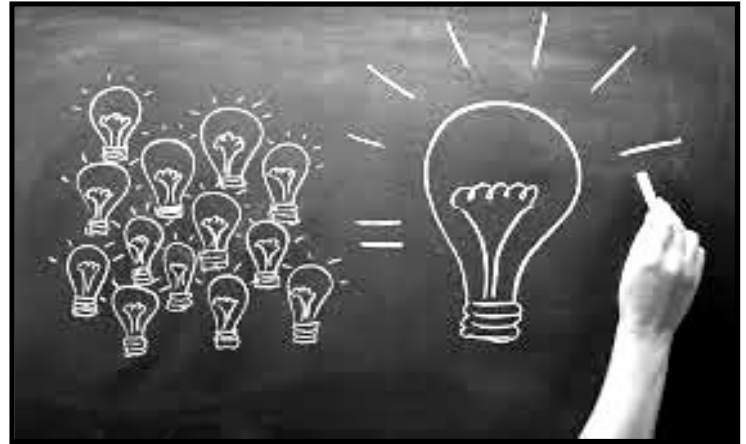
Ask the group to list all the possible options, and write each option on a large sheet of paper posted in front of the room for everyone to see.

There may be only two options (“Should we hold meetings on a weekday evening or on Saturday?”). Or there could be several choices, in which case the facilitators could go around the room, asking each person for ideas. For example, this method could be used in determining what projects the group will undertake in the next year.



7. Write down everyone's idea...

...no matter how off-the-mark it may seem. When you do this, no one feels like they have to continue to put their idea before the group. They are assured they have been heard. This also transfers the idea from the individual and makes it the group's property.



8. Refine the Options.

Determine, with the group's support, if some options should be combined. For example, if one person suggests "cleanup day" and another person suggests "beautification project," ask if these can be combined or should remain separate. This can be done as options are called out by the group, or at the end of the brainstorming session.

9. Discuss the Options.

- Conduct a general discussion of each option
OR
- Brainstorm (and write down) the pro's and con's of each option. Sometimes this approach itself makes the choice clear. For example, one option might clearly have the most pro's and fewest con's.
OR
- Bring some levity into an otherwise tense situation by holding a "campaign" and an "election." To use this method, the leader points to each option in turn and asks for a volunteer to take 2 minutes to "campaign" for that option, giving their best "stump speech." If no one is willing to champion an option, ask the group if it can be marked off the list.



10. Choose the best option(s).



- If there are only two options, the leader can check to see if there is now consensus. If not, there can be a vote.
- If there are several options and the group can only adopt one (or a few), group members can "vote" for their top choices using the **3-2-1 Voting Process**. Individuals would give 3 points for their top choice, 2 points for their next choice and 1 point for their last choice. Then the points are tallied and the group observes the options that received the most points.
- If the situation allows more than one option to be chosen, the group would decide how many of the top vote-getters they can adopt. Can they manage one? Can they manage four?

11. Search for compromise.

During this entire process, if the facilitators see opportunity for consensus and/or compromise, they might suggest a way to accommodate concerns of the minority while respecting the wishes of the majority.

For example, if the majority votes not to oppose a rezoning for a commercial business on the edge of the neighborhood, but a minority is very concerned about visual impacts, the group might also decide to appoint a committee to meet with the property developer about a landscape buffer.



12. Formalize the Decision.

Ask for a motion, a second, and a formal vote on the decision just made. Record this decision in the minutes.



This process — which can be tailored to differing circumstances — has a number of advantages:

- Everyone has an opportunity to place their option before the group and to advocate for their position.
- After an individual presents an option, it begins to “belong” to the whole group. Each option is fully explained, so advocates of that option can feel they got a fair shot at the outcome.
- The whole group makes a democratic decision.

This is an infinitely fair process and usually leads to group support for the result.

