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Decision by Consensus – Lost at Sea

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SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

"LOST AT SEA"

A Consensus-Seeking Task

(Adapted from "**The** 1975 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators" J. William Pfeiffer **and** John E Jones/ Editors.(University Associates, Inc./ La Jolla, California, 1975)



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DECISION BY CONSENSUS:

Lost At Sea

Time – 2 hours

Completing the rankings - 45 minutes

Group discussions – 15 minutes

Processing of Experience (Lecture discussion) – 1 hour

Learning Outcomes

The following are the main objectives of this exercise.

1. Experiencing and developing insight in the process of making a decision in a group.
2. Experiencing and understanding the process of and the factors contributing to the development of consensus.
3. Developing an insight in the various processes involved in decision making groups- problem solving processes, task facilitating processes, and group building processes.
4. Becoming sensitive to the resources available in the group, and the need to make use of such resources.
5. Developing insight into the conflict between the concern for evolving an effective decision (achievement motive) and the concern to get one's own point of view or solution accepted in the group (power motive).

RATIONALE

The exercise essentially consists in comparing the decision made by individual members with that made by them as a group. The idea of involving a group in decision making is that the collective "wisdom" of a number of individuals will produce a more effective decision than one made by a single individual, howsoever competent he may be. This is the idea of synergy- Synergy or synergism is the simultaneous action of separate agencies which, together, have greater total effect than the sum of their individual effects. Typical examples of synergy are the combined or cooperative action or force of different organs of the body, as of muscles working together, which is much greater than the arithmetic sum of the forces of the individual organs/parts had they been working separately of one another.

LOST AT SEA A Consensus-Seeking Task

AIMS

1. To explore the effectiveness of consensus-seeking behaviour in groups through experiences with individual decision making and group decision-making.
2. To explore the concept of synergy through group decision making.

GROUP SIZE

Any size group split into syndicates of five to twelve participants. Several syndicates may be directed simultaneously. (Synergistic outcomes are more likely to be achieved by smaller / groups, e.g. five to seven participants.)

TIME REQUIRED

Approximately one hour.

MATERIALS

1. Pencils.
2. Two copies of the Lost at Sea Individual Worksheet for each participant.
3. A copy of the Lost at Sea Group Worksheet for each syndicate.
4. A copy of the Lost at Sea Answer and Rationale Sheet for each participant.
5. Flipchart paper and felt-tipped markers.

PHYSICAL SETTING

Facilities for both privacy in individual work, and for syndicates to hold discussions without interrupting each other.

PROCESS

1. The facilitator distributes two copies of the Lost at Sea Individual Worksheet to each participant and asks each person to complete the forms in duplicate including their name. Emphasise that participants are to work independently during this phase and that they have a maximum of fifteen minutes to complete the worksheet.
2. After fifteen minutes, the facilitator collects one copy from each participant. The other copy is for use in the syndicate.
3. The facilitator forms syndicates of five to twelve participants and tells them to work in specific areas either in the room or in syndicate rooms. The membership of each syndicate is worth planning in advance so that it can be organised smoothly. Listing the members of the syndicates on a flipchart is an effective way to do this.
4. A representative of each syndicate is given a Lost at Sea Group Worksheet. The trainer then reads the instructions to the group, emphasising that each member of a syndicate should partially agree with the syndicate choices to establish consensus, but that they are not to use such techniques as averaging, majority voting, or trading to reach agreement. The syndicates should be asked to make serious efforts to achieve success in this task.
5. The syndicates should then be sent to complete the task with a time limit of thirty minutes.
6. While the syndicates are engaged in their task, the facilitator marks the individual ranking sheets. The score is the sum of the differences between the "correct" rank for each item and its rank on the Individual Worksheet (all differences should be made positive and added). Higher scores have greater negative implications. The facilitator then totals all individual scores for each syndicate and divides by the number of members to obtain the average individual score for each syndicate.
7. After thirty minutes, the facilitator collects the Group Worksheets making sure that they are named for each syndicate and invites the syndicates to come back together. The participants should be invited to discuss their consensus-seeking approaches to performing the task.

What difficulties did they encounter? How did they resolve them?

How happy were they with their result? Did they use the time effectively?

These questions may be written up on a flipchart for the group to consider.

- 8 The facilitator then scores the Group Worksheets as was done for the Individual Worksheets. If there are two facilitators one may mark the Worksheets while the other leads the discussion.
9. The facilitator then prepares a chart such as the one following, summarising the statistics.

BEFORE GROUP DISCUSSION

Group	Average Individual Score	Score of Most Accurate Individual
Example	55	45
1		
2		
3		
Average for all groups		

AFTER GROUP DISCUSSION

Group	Score for Group Consensus	Gain/ Loss Over Average Individual	Gain/ Loss over Most Accurate Individual	Synergy*
Example	40	+15	+5	Yes
1				
2				
3				
Average for all groups				

* Synergy is defined as having occurred when the consensus score is lower than the lowest individual score in the syndicate.

10. The facilitator returns all Individual and Group Worksheets and distributes a copy of the Lost at Sea Answer and Rationale Sheet to each participant. After allowing the group a few minutes to discuss the answers and rationale, the facilitator analyses the statistics and explains the synergy factor.

11. The facilitator leads a discussion of the comparative outcomes of individual rankings and group consensus rankings. Discussion questions such as the following might be suggested by the facilitator:-

- What behaviours helped or hindered the consensus-seeking process?
- What patterns of decision-making occurred?
- Who were the influential members and how were they influential?
- How did the group discover and use its information resources? Were these resources fully utilised?
- What are the implications of consensus-seeking and synergistic outcomes for intact task groups such as committees and staff of institutions?
- What might be the consequences of such a process for the group's attitudes?

Processing the Exercise

The following dimensions need to be brought out during the processing of the experience in the exercise.

1. Motivational Dimensions of Consensus: The trainer may ask the volunteers from the various groups to share with others what they thought was the main focus of the group while it was involved in decision making. What was the prevailing meta-climate, one of arriving at an effective decision or one of getting one's opinion accepted. The first orientation is that of achievement motivation, and the second that of power motivation. In the process of decision-making the group may range between two extremes. One extreme may be the main concern of getting one's own point of view accepted. On this extreme the members are concerned about whose views will be accepted, instead of being concerned with the problem on which a decision is to be made; they are more concerned about the personal influence they can wield and they use various methods of testing the strength and power which different members have. On the other extreme is the focus on making good decision, generating resources in the group, and pooling and using the resources. The decision making process can be near one of these two points in a continuum. We can broadly say that the decision making in a group can be either by the process of division (power, or by the process of consensus (achievement), In the process of division, the strength of various members is tested and the group gets divided. In the process of consensus the strength of various members is brought to bear on the best possible decision. Consensus does not necessarily mean unanimity. It means the

sharing of differences, listening to one another accepting the final choice in spite of the difference which may still exist. As a result of consensus, all members of the group do not come to the same conclusion. The differences may continue. However, members have an opportunity to express such differences, discuss the rationale behind the different points of view, and have the satisfaction that the members of the group have listened to them and they in turn listened to the logic put forward by the other members. At the end of such discussion the members come to a conclusion that one optimum solution is to be selected. And this helps them to accept one solution out of several alternatives, even though some of them may not agree with that alternative completely. However, the commitment of the members to the implementation of the solution is assured.

2. Facilitating and Hindering Factors in Consensus Building : The trainer may probe two contrasting groups to find out what factors helped one group to move towards consensus, and what factors hindered such a movement in the case of the other group. Usually the following factors hinder consensus building:

(a) Domination by a few: When there is a tendency by some members to dominate in a group, and influence the decision, consensus is difficult to develop.

(b) Withdrawal: The natural result of domination by a few is withdrawal by several other members when they do not see an opportunity to express themselves freely and influence the process of decision making.

(c) Tendency to make quick decision: When members of the group rush to make decision very fast the possibility of consensus decreases. Consensus would require patience, and members' tendency to pay attention to the opinions of other members. This takes time.

(d) Testing strength: In the process of decision making, when some ways are used to test the strength and take a decision according to the strength either on the basis of numerical strength or on the strength of argument, the group splits. Instead of moving towards a consensus there is always a tendency to break the group into divisions. Voting in a group to find the majority and minority opinion, does not help the group to move towards a consensus because the members holding the minority view usually fail to commit themselves to the decision taken by the majority.

(e) Avoiding confrontation: When the members of a group avoid confronting differences in making the choice by continuous discussion, the possibility of consensus decreases. One way to avoid confrontation is to use a third party intervention or decided: by chance like flipping

a coin.

(f) Trading or compromising: Sometimes, people in order to get their suggestion or point of view accepted, trade their own point of view with some others; this way they come to an agreement that the suggestion given by one member will be accepted in exchange of another suggestion given by another member. This kind of trading or compromising reduces the possibility of consensus.

The following factors have usually been reported to help build consensus.

(a) Concern for others: The basis of consensus is respect and concern people have for one another. This also helps them to look for expertise and the resources available with the different members.

(b) Listening: A consequence of respect and concern for others leads people to listen carefully to what others say, rather than being obsessed with their own ideas about a problem.

(c) Identifying and using resources: People in the group realise that each member is a special resource. In order to make a good decision it is necessary that all the resources are utilised. The group takes active steps, to find out what the dimensions of the problem are, and if anyone in the group seem to have necessary resources on the various dimensions. It is recognised that different members have different skills. Without necessarily formal discussions on the matters an effective group brings to use these skills in order to perform its task effectively.

(d) Discussing underlying assumptions and logic: When people discuss not only their own suggestions and ideas - but also why they are proposing these and what the underlying rationale of these suggestions and ideas is the movement towards a common understanding becomes easier and the group is able to move towards consensus.

(e) Testing consensus and disagreements: A consensus is reinforced when after some amount of discussion the members of the group examine if there are still some disagreements; and such disagreements are allowed to be expressed and discussed. However, if agreements are not discussed and avoided, or are not voiced it would be difficult to develop a consensus. From time to time the group may stop and see whether enough consensus about what is being decided exists.

(f) Process orientation: The group which spends some time on the process is able to develop consensus faster. Instead of being concerned only with the task, the group is also concerned

about how people are feeling, whether some people have withdrawn as a result of some hot exchange of feelings, how many people are speaking and how many are silent, how fast the group has been going etc. Such questions, when discussed from time to time, will help the group to move towards consensus.

3. The Problem Solving Process: In developing a consensus it *is* necessary that enough attention is paid to the process of problem solving. The process involves several aspects like the following. The trainer may elicit these by the appropriate probing of the groups and may emphasise their importance. As will be seen from the following discussion the consensus involves both generating alternatives, as well as the narrowing down of the choices, resulting in an agreement amongst members of the group.

(a) Deciding priorities: The effective groups in such exercises have been found to spend enough time discussing the main priorities. For example, in this exercise they debate about the priorities of survival, locomotion, and communication (being spotted out by a search party). Such a discussion may narrow the objectives for the members, and they may take the first step of moving towards consensus by agreeing on the objectives.

(b) Analysing the problem at several levels: The problem may seem to be single, but it may have several aspects. For example, in this exercise the problem need to be analysed at these levels: the psychological conditions of the survivors; the conditions of the desert; implications of these conditions for survival, locomotion, and communication; effect of dehydration and so on. When the time is spent on the discussion of such dimensions, the various aspects of the problem are clarified, and the issues for decision-making get considerably narrowed.

(c) Generating alternatives: Before the final decision making, a number of alternatives need to be considered. When members give different opinions, or advance what may be called "theories" on which action will be based, the possibility of making a more rational choice increases.

(d) Discussing consequences of each alternative: Before the group makes the final decision, two processes are important. One is to consider the consequences of the various alternatives generated. For example, one alternative here may be locomotion. If this is accepted what are the consequences: how long can a person walk during the day/during the night; how much energy he will be left with to take other actions etc.

(e) Developing criteria for discussion: An effective group does not rush into the final

decision but spends enough time. on deciding on the criteria against which the decision will be Judged. The priorities discussed will help in generating the criteria.

(f) *Reviewing*: In the end, the group gets an opportunity to make the necessary corrections and modifications if it plans some time to review the decision 'in the light of the accepted criteria.

4. Task Facilitating Processes: Several processes help in making effective decisions. Some of these relate to task accomplishment. The following aspects are worth mentioning in this connection.

(a) *Initiative*: Unless members of the group take the initiative to discuss no task can be properly accomplished. It needs to be stressed that the responsibility of effective group functioning lies on each member in terms of his initiative in various matters. It may be discussed why some people took initiative and others did not.

(b) *Information seeking*: Members, who ask for more and more information in the group, help in discovering new things that may help in decision-making. For example, in this exercise, questions *like* the following may be *helpful*: "Who in this group has lived in a desert? How long can a man survive without food? After how *long* of deprivation of water does dehydration set in? How far can the reflection of a mirror be seen? Why?"

(c) *Information giving*: The complimentary part of seeking information is giving information. Information would also *include* opinions, doubts, special knowledge One has. what one has read, etc. Generating such information by the various members may help in clarifying the issues, and narrowing (zeroing in on) the choices.

(d) *Summarising*: As the proceedings move on, people tend to forget what has been discussed, what have been agreed, and where the differences persist. A member who summarises the Position at such a point of time plays an important role, and facilitates the task process.

(e) *Synthesising*: Synthesising helps in reaching and pointing out the underlying similarities in the apparently different opinions expressed by two or more members. Consensus building is helped by the revelations of such implicit agreements and common understanding.

(f) *Time keeping*: When the priorities are discussed, a group may also discuss how they would like to utilise their time, and will distribute the available time. Some members may remind the group how much time has already been spent on some aspects, and how much work remains to be done. Such reminders *help* the group take timely Corrective actions.

5. Group Building Processes: While *the* task processes help in effective *completion* of the task, attention to the group *building* processes has to be paid, otherwise the group does not function as a cohesive and mutually supportive group. The following are some of the important group processes.

(a) *Listening:* Listening indicates the regard members have for one another. Listening by one member to what the other member is saying will generate reciprocal listening and the important contributions by various members can be brought out.

(b) *Expressing and responding to feelings:* Even when the group is seriously discussing a task, paying attention *to* the feelings of the members is important. In effective groups members both freely express their feelings ("I feel confused," "I feel I have not been listened to") and respond to others' feelings ("can you elaborate on your feeling that you have been ignored?" "I also feel confused now"). Such expressions help in the faster accomplishment of the task.

(c) *Gate keeping:* When several members enthusiastically speak at the same time, confusion is created. A member may point out that he cannot hear when so many persons speak simultaneously, and may request a particular person to speak first, and then may invite the next one to say what he has to say. This is called gate keeping function, which can be taken up by any member in the group—in fact, the more the members perform this function from time to time, the better it is likely to be for the group.

(d) *Supporting:* The more the members support one another, the more effective the group is. Support is provided by reinforcing a member's point of view or information by another, and also includes encouraging silent members, and those *who* are shy, to contribute to the discussion.

(e) *Process reviewing:* The group may from time to time review what has been done and how the group has functioned. For example, a member may raise a question as to how the various members feel about the decision, or if there are still some members whose opinion has not been taken, etc.

6. Decision by Consensus: The exercise focuses attention on the process of effective-decision making, the process of development of consensus. The- trainer may like to summarise the learning from the experience in the exercise. Decision-making involves making a choice from the available or generated alternatives. When a decision is made by a face-to-face group (a task group or a committee, or a departmental team) every member is a-

potential contributor to the process of decision making which involves understanding the problem or the issue, breaking down the problem or the issue into its meaningful components which indicate the real problems on which the decisions are required, formulating a general strategy in terms of the sequence of action steps, generating alternatives, providing and pooling required information, generating favourable and unfavourable points for each alternative, coming to a shared understanding, making a final choice, and getting commitment of all members to the choice made. The main advantage of a group is that it has more resources than a single individual has, and as the saying goes no one of us is as bright as all of us.

Decision by consensus creates *synergy* in the group. When members listen to one another, use the resources represented by one another and arrive at the decision to which they seem to be committed in spite of their personal differences of opinion, we may find that the decision made may be even better than taken by the most capable person in the group. The group in a way is able to produce even more than the total sum of the resources represented in the group. This is the concept of synergy. The group can move towards synergy by taking steps to continuously mobilise the group as a team and identify and use the various available resources.

The following learning points may emerge from the exercise and discussion:

- * Synergy may happen, resulting in the team answer being better than any individual answer.
- * Decision making in teams is often difficult and time consuming.
- * Negotiating group decisions after individuals have made decisions is difficult.
- * It is tempting to compromise rather than negotiate.
- * Time pressures lead to bigger compromises.
- * Dominant individuals may reduce team synergy
- * Effective teams recognise and value the expertise of individual members.
- * Teams tend not to manage their time effectively.
- * Finding the reasons for individual team members decisions is a better strategy than arguing over details (such as the positions of particular items).
- * Effective teams foster commitment to team success.

When leading the discussion the trainer should be careful to ask questions based on observed behaviours. The group should identify their own learning points from what happened. They

should not be told what should have happened or which learning points they ought to have identified. If the group are told what they should have learned there is a risk that they will reject the learning.

VARIATIONS

1. Observers can be used to give feedback about either group behaviour or individual behaviour.
2. A lecturette on synergy and consensus-seeking can immediately precede the group problem-solving phase to establish a mental set toward co-operation.
3. Participants can be given only one copy each of the Lost at Sea Individual Worksheet and instructed to score their own sheets.
4. Participants can be asked to complete their selection again after the group decision to see whether they have improved their personal score.

LOST AT SEA INDIVIDUAL WORKSHEET

Name _____

Group _____

Instructions : You are adrift on a private yacht in the South Pacific. As a consequence of a fire of unknown origin, much of the yacht and its contents have been destroyed. The yacht is now slowly sinking. Your location is unclear because of the destruction of critical navigational equipment and because you and the crew were distracted trying to bring the fire under control. Your best estimate is that you are approximately one thousand miles south-southwest of the nearest land.

Below is a list of fifteen items that are intact and undamaged after the fire. In addition to these articles, you have a serviceable, rubber life raft with oars large enough to carry yourself, the crew, and all the items listed below. The total contents of all survivors' pockets are a package of cigarettes, several books of matches, and five one-dollar bills.

Your task is to rank the fifteen items below in terms of their importance to your survival. Place the number 1 by the most important item, the number 2 by the second most important, and so on to number 15, the least important.

- Sextant (A navigation instrument for measuring angular distances)
- Shaving mirror
- Five-gallon can of water
- Mosquito netting
- One case of army rations
- Maps of the Pacific Ocean
- Seat Cushion (flotation device approved by the Coast Guard)
- Two-gallon can of oil-gas mixture
- Small transistor radio
- Shark repellent
- Twenty square feet of opaque plastic
- One quart of 160-proof Puerto Rican rum
- Fifteen feet of nylon rope
- Two boxes of chocolate bars
- Fishing kit

LOST AT SEA GROUP WORKSHEET

Group _____

Instructions : This is an exercise in group decision-making. Your group is to employ the group consensus method in reaching its decision. This means that the prediction for each of the fifteen survival items must be agreed upon by each group member before it becomes a part of the group decision. Consensus is difficult to reach. Therefore, not every ranking will meet with everyone's complete approval. As a group, try to make each ranking one with which all group members can at least partially agree. Here are some principles to use in reaching consensus.

1. Avoid arguing for your own individual judgements. Approach the task on the basis of logic.
2. Avoid changing your mind if it is only to reach agreement and avoid conflict. Support only solutions with which you are able to agree at least somewhat.
3. Avoid "conflict-reducing" techniques such as majority vote, averaging, or trading in reaching your decision.
4. View differences of opinion as a help rather than a hindrance in decision-making.

- Sextant
- Shaving mirror
- Five-gallon can of water
- Mosquito netting
- One case of army rations
- Maps of the Pacific Ocean
- Seat cushion (flotation device approved by the Coast Guard)
- Two-gallon can of oil-gas mixture
- Small transistor radio
- Shark repellent
- Twenty square feet of opaque plastic
- One quart of 160-proof Puerto Rican rum
- Fifteen feet of nylon rope
- Two boxes of chocolate bars
- Fishing kit

LOST AT SEA ANSWER AND RATIONALE SHEET

Officers of the United States Merchant Marines ranked the fifteen items and provided the "correct" solution to the task.

According to these "experts", the basic supplies needed when a person is stranded in mid ocean are articles to attract attention and articles to aid survival until rescuers arrive.

Articles for navigation are of little importance. Even if a small life raft were capable of reaching land, it would be impossible to store enough food and water to survive during that period of time. Therefore, of primary importance are the shaving mirror and the two-gallon can of oil-gas mixture. These items could be used for signalling air-sea rescue. Of secondary importance are water and food, e.g., the army rations.

A brief explanation is provided for the ranking of each item. These obviously do not represent all of the potential uses for the specified items but, rather, the primary importance of each.

1. Shaving mirror
Critical for signalling air-sea rescue.
2. Two-gallon can of oil-gas mixture
Critical for signalling - the oil-gas mixture will float on the water and could be ignited with a dollar bill and a match (obviously, outside the raft).
3. Five-gallon can of water
Necessary to replenish loss by perspiring, etc.
4. One case of army rations
Provides basic food intake.
5. Twenty square feet of opaque plastic
Used to collect rain water, provide shelter from the elements.
6. Two boxes of chocolate bars
A reserve food supply.
7. Fishing kit
Ranked lower than the chocolate bars because "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush". There is no assurance that you will catch any fish.
8. Fifteen feet of nylon rope
May be used to lash equipment together to prevent it from falling overboard.
9. Floating seat cushion
If someone fell overboard, it could function as a life preserver.
10. Shark repellent
Obvious.

11. One quart of 160-proof Puerto Rican rum
Contains 80 percent alcohol - enough to use as a potential antiseptic for any injuries sustained; of little value otherwise; will cause dehydration if ingested-
12. Small transistor radio
Of little value since there is no transmitter (unfortunately, you are out of range of you favourite AM radio stations).
13. Maps of the Pacific Ocean
Worthless without additional navigational equipment -it does not really matter where you are but where the rescuers are.
14. Mosquito netting
There are no mosquitoes in the mid Pacific.
15. Sextant
Without tables and a chronometer, relatively useless.

The basic rationale for ranking signalling devices above life-sustaining items (food and water) is that without signalling devices there is almost no chance of being spotted and rescued. Furthermore, most rescues occur during the first thirty-six hours, and one can survive without food and water during this period.