Network Decision Making

For many nonprofit networks, the slow pace of decision making is a particular challenge. With close attention to the approach they use to make decisions, network leaders may open up opportunities to make decisions faster.

The key is to tailor decision-making style to the type of decision at hand. The graphic below describes four key decision styles and outlines the types of decisions that could often fall into each.

Common decision-making styles:

Typically slower   Typically faster

Consensus	Democratic	Participative	Directive
• Striving for consensus, decisions are reached when a large majority agree*	• Decisions are reached based on majority vote • Dissenting views must support the final decision	• Single point accountability for decisions • Collaborative approach with input from those with knowledge and expertise • Once decision made, all are expected to support it	• One person has decision authority for any given decision • Directives issued that are expected to be followed
Sample use cases			
Decisions that require significant buy-in to ensure successful implementation	Decision where "majority sentiment" is important	Decisions that benefit from diverse perspectives and/or relevant expertise	Decisions concerning safety and/or compliance with state or federal law

The next page provides a decision audit tool that network leaders can use to explore whether some decisions could migrate to a faster decision-making style. It's followed by a list of some common matches of decision style to decision type for nonprofit networks. The last page offers an example of a global fast food franchise's approach to decision making.

For more on this topic, see "Speeding Up Nonprofit Network Decision-Making in the Wake of COVID-19."

* With consensus decision making, most networks require at least 75 percent agreement and often strive for more than 90 percent.
Source: Bain & Company; The Bridgespan Group

Worksheet: Conducting a decision audit for your network

Step 1: Identify the critical decisions within the network that move slower than seems desirable. List them in the left hand column below.

Step 2: Identify what decision style is currently being used for each, putting a check in the corresponding column in the table.

Step 3: Identify the decisions for which a different, faster style might be possible—i.e., whether there are opportunities to "shift right" towards the decision styles that typically allow for more speed. Ask yourself these questions to help assess the potential to shift:

- What is the degree of urgency surrounding the decision?
- What level and type of input is critical to inform the decision?
- What level of buy-in is required to ensure the decision is successfully implemented?
- What is the risk involved of limiting input in the decision process?

Decision Type	Decision Style				Notes/Rationale
	Consensus	Democratic	Participative	Directive	
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9.					
10.					

Example: Common matches of decision style to decision type

Decision Type	Decision Style			
	Consensus	Democratic	Participative	Directive
1. Enacting a major, network-wide strategic shift	✓			
2. Implementing a standard set of metrics to measure results across the network	✓			
3. Changing the network dues structure		✓		
4. Changing membership standards		✓		
5. Setting strategic priorities related to a specific organizational function (e.g., marketing, fundraising)			✓	
6. Allocating resources to affiliates in "normal" times			✓	
7. Allocating resources to affiliates to help them respond to a crisis				✓
8. Putting in place new safety measures (e.g., new background checks for staff or volunteers)				✓
9. Addressing issues that pose a reputational risk to the network (e.g., an ethical violation at an affiliate)				✓