Effective Team Decision-Making Process

Teams are particularly effective in problem solving as they are comprised of people with complementary skills. These complementary skills allow team members to examine issues from various angles, as well as see the implications of their decisions from a variety of perspectives. In this section we will look at a process that can help teams solve problems and make 'good' decisions.

In essence, teams make decisions using problem solving techniques. Thus, the process largely rests on the selection of a course of action following the evaluation of two or more alternatives. To effectively navigate this path, the following step-by-step approach[1] can be used.

1. **Recognize the problem.** Teams must see and recognize that a problem exists and that a decision needs to be made to move forward. While on its face this step appears elementary, many teams do not always recognize that there is an issue that needs to be addressed due to issues such as group think.

2. **Define the problem.** In this stage, teams must map out the issue at hand. During this step, teams should:
   o State how, when, and where members became aware of the problem
   o Explore different ways of viewing the problem – different ways of viewing the problem can lead to an improved understanding of the 'core' problem
   o Challenge any assumptions that are made about the problem to ensure that the team fully sees the 'real' issue at hand.

3. **Gather information.** Once the problem has been defined, teams need to gather information relevant to the problem. Why do teams need to perform this step? Two reasons: (1) to verify that the problem was defined correctly in step 2; and (2) to develop alternative solutions to the problem at hand.

4. **Develop Alternative Solutions.** While it can be easy for teams to 'jump on' and accept the first solution, teams that are effective in problem solving take the time to explore several potential solutions to the problem. Some ways to generate alternatives include:
   a. **Brainstorming.** During this process teams are encouraged to come up with as many ways as possible to solve the problem at hand. While brainstorming can help generate creative solutions to problems, a few guidelines are needed to help it work most effectively.
      ▪ no criticism of any ideas during the brainstorming phase;
      ▪ all ideas, no matter how silly, get recorded;
      ▪ get past the sillies - sometimes very creative, and viable, solutions come after people have made what appear to be 'silly' suggestions.
   b. **Ask Questions.** Network with colleagues internal and external to the organization to get their ideas and suggestions.
   c. **Explore.** Read journals/books, go to networking functions, and attend conferences etc. that cover similar issues. Also be prepared to go outside of the healthcare domain. Other industries may have faced similar issues and their solutions can provide insights for you.

5. **Select the BEST alternative.** Once all the alternatives are in, the team needs to determine the alternative that best addresses the problem at hand. For this element to be effective, you need to consider both rational and human elements.

   o **Rational Elements.** These rational elements stem from the previous steps of the team decision making/problem solving model:

      1. **Analyze the problem (see Steps 1 –2)**
      2. **Determine the desired end state.** Here teams need to clearly define what success looks like.
      3. **Evaluate alternatives against the desired state.** Here teams discuss the merits of each alternative and the extent to which each can move the team to the desired state. To help on this step, some teams rate each alternative on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is low and 5 is high.
      4. **Discuss potential adverse consequences of each alternative.** Here teams need to discuss the potential downsides of the options.

   o **Human Elements.**   Here the team needs to ensure the following:
      ▪ **Active listening.** This requires that team members:
         • Pay attention to the dialogue and anticipate where the conversation is going;
         • Objectively weigh out what's been said;
         • Try to understand what the other person is saying; and
         • Review and summarize what has been said.
      ▪ **Supporting each others' ideas.**   Most people tend to focus on what is wrong versus right. Being supportive requires that you:
         • Assume that others have valid points;
         • Point out the useful aspects of what has been said;
         • Build on these useful points; and
         • Avoid unnecessary criticism.
      ▪ **Are comfortable presenting differing views.** Remember that group think is a key concern for teams. To effectively present differing views make sure that you:
         • Clearly state your differing view;
         • Focus on the reasons for the differences; and
         • Treat differences as a source of ideas rather than a source of interpersonal conflict.
      ▪ **Participate.** To fully take advantage of the complementary skills present in a team, all team members must participate. Sometimes, one or two people dominate team decision making processes because of their interpersonal style (i.e. extraverted vs. introverted), their need for recognition, or their presumed status/position. This can have a negative effect on the team in terms of its ability to make effective decisions. When this occurs, the team needs to address this issue - especially as they face this problem as a team.

6. **Implement the best alternative.** Once the alternative has been chosen, the team needs to implement its decision. This requires effective planning as well as communicating the

decision to all the stakeholders that may be impacted by this decision.

7. **Evaluate the outcome.** Remember that teams and team building is a learning process. It is critical that the team examine whether the proposed plans of action were achieved in an effective way and resulted in positive outcomes.

Shared Leadership

While people often think of team leadership in terms of a formally appointed leader, it is important to note that leaders can emerge in teams. In teams where no formal leader has been named, emergent leadership occurs when a participant takes leadership roles (task or relationship) or when (s)he has subject matter expertise that the team needs. However, even when a team leader has been named, effective team leaders share leadership by encouraging team members to take on leadership roles or by formally recognizing team members with special subject matter expertise.

Membership and leadership roles are inseparable and involve an emphasis on role functions rather than on a particular discipline or a set of personality traits. Although one or more individuals may have a formal designation as a group leader, all team members need to share responsibility for informal and formal leadership. In true interprofessional teams, the functions of leadership and membership are viewed as synonymous. Because all team members have an investment in seeing the team achieve its goals and objectives, each member has the responsibility to help the team progress.

An emerging pattern in many primary health care teams is the requirement for equal participation and responsibility from all team members with shifting leadership determined by the nature of the problem to be solved.

The functions of leadership are:

1. Helping the group decide on its purposes and goals.
2. Helping the group focus on its own process of work together so that it may become more effective rather than becoming trapped by faulty ways of problem solving and decision making.
3. Helping the group become aware of its own resources and how best to use them.
4. Helping the group evaluate its progress and development.
5. Helping the group to be open to new and different ideas without becoming immobilized by conflict.
6. Helping the group learn from its failures and frustrations as well as from its success.

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[1]Adapted from Lafferty, J.T. (1988). *Subarctic survival situation: Leader's guide*. Plymouth, MI: Human Synergistics.