Good Team Spirit Doesn't Guarantee Better Team Decsions

Most church teams enjoy hanging out together. The weekly rhythm of doing church brings staff and volunteers together across a broad span of activities– the laughing and praying of our leading and meeting. **While no church is perfect, many staff teams enjoy a strong bond and collegial spirit.**

But good team spirit doesn't ensure better team decisions. Did you ever reflect on the fact that healthy fellowship among church leaders by itself doesn't lead to an effective culture of decision-making? In fact, I have discovered an opposite dynamic. **Sometimes the common bond of ministry actually enables weaker decision-making practices, and as a result, poorer decisions.** Ironically, a mutual respect can backfire to empower a "you do your thing and I'll do mine" attitude of disengagement.

What's at stake if teams don't make better team decisions? From a long list of potential answers, four stand out:

Lost time: Poor team decision-making simply burns more time. It may be more time in the meeting itself because there were no collaboration guidelines. Perhaps it's lost time outside of the meeting in hallway conversations because ideas weren't fully explored or vetted.

Dissipated energy: Poor team decision-making leaves questions unanswered and half-baked solutions in the atmosphere. We don't know exactly where we stand or what we've decided. The thought of revisiting an unfinished conversation itself is an unwelcome burden.

Mediocre ideas: Poor team decision-making fortifies our weakest thinking. Innovation is something we read about but never experience. We cut-n-past the ideas of others because we don't know how to generate our own. We traffic in good ideas and miss great ones.

Competing visions: Poor team decision-making invites an unhealthy drift toward independence. No one has the conscious thought that they have a competing vision. But in reality, there are differences to each person's picture of there future. It's impossible for this divergence not to happen if there is no dialogue.

So, how do you start to create a dynamic of collaborative decision-making? Try these seven practices for making better team decisions.

1. Define how the decision will be made.
There are several ways to decide something together. The same team could even use multiple decision-making methods in the same meeting, as long as the team is clear about the method being used for each decision. Here are some questions that will clarify which type of discussion you are having.

- Are we giving input to the decision maker? (executive decision)
- Will we discuss and then vote? (majority rules)

- Will we discuss until we all agree? (consensus)
- Will two people bring a solution under another leader's authority (compromise)

Of course, there are variations to all of these. For example, in our collaborative visioning work we use the 100/80 principle: *"Do 100% of us feel 80% good about the decision?"* We consider that a truly **collaborative** decision.

How many hours of team time has been wasted trying to get consensus on something that is really an executive decision that will be made by the lead pastor? Don't waste that time. Let everyone know up front how the decision will be made and then begin the discussion.

2. Listen.
You might think this goes without saying, but it's so crucial to good team dynamics. Many people—especially leaders—come into a conversation with their minds already made up. All they're doing is waiting for everyone else to be quiet so they can say what they think.

Instead, listen to what the team is saying. **Ask clarifying questions. Listen to understand, not to respond.** Try your best to understand not only what each team member is saying, but their driving passions and underlying concerns and built in assumptions that they're not voicing. You will make much better decisions as a team if you all learn to listen well.

3. Share with an appropriate level of honesty.
Every member of the team should feel free to honestly say what they think. But how many times has a discussion been derailed by what a team member defensively calls brutal honesty? If you have to preface your comment with something like, "I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but..." is usually a clue that you should rethink and reword what you were about to say.

Honesty is good. Brutal honesty is brutal. You don't need to be brutal in order to be honest. By sharing thoughts and opinions with an appropriate level of transparency, you can will both share openly and honor your team members.

4. Say it in the room.
If you have something to say, especially if you disagree with the direction being considered, you must voice your thoughts in the room, not in the hallway afterward. This is one of the most destructive things a team can experience. **It can bring division and strife, wrecking unity and blocking momentum.**

If you think of something after the meeting is over, let the whole team know that you'd like to revisit the conversation. Side conversations and adjusting the decision after a team discussion devalues every person on the team. "*Why did we have to sit through that whole discussion if they were just going to change it after the fact?*" If you have something to say, say it in the room.

5. Ask the question, "Is there anyone else should speak into this decision that isn't here?"
Many times there other people on the team, no matter where they sit in the organizational chart,

that have experience, insight, or such a stake in the decision that their input should be included before a final decision is reached. At the very least, it's always important to think about the people that will be directly impacted by the decision and communicate with them as much information as possible. No one likes to be blindsided. I've seen too many church leaders rail about the "immaturity" of a team member that could have more to do with the way decisions are communicated than it does with the maturity level of the team member in question.

6. Make a decision.

You've heard this before: "*Not making a decision is still making a decision.*" That's true. And there are going to be times when this is the right thing to do. But at least acknowledge that you're making a decision to table the issue or include other people in the conversation. **No matter what, make a decision and be clear about it.**

With our Auxano team, we use the phrase "Decide/Commit" to signal to the team that I think we've had enough discussion about a topic and it's time for us to make a decision. To learn more about the different stages of a collaborative discussion, check out the [Collaboration Cube](). It's a great tool to help your team collaborate more effectively.

7. Stick to the decision after the meeting.

This might sound obvious but it's violated so often that it's worth repeating. Once you've made a decision, stick with it! Changing the decision after the team has agreed on a direction basically communicates that you didn't really need the rest of the team's input anyway and you're just going to do what you want to do. Guard the long-term effectiveness of your team by sticking with the decisions you make together. **If you do need to change a decision, get the team back together to discuss it again first.** Yes, even if that means missing the deadline or pushing back the timeline. Your team is more important.

If your team will use these seven practices, you'll experience a dramatic synergy. What will better decisions do? You will:

- **Save time.**
- **Add energy.**
- **Generate great ideas.**
- **And play on the same page with the same vision.**

> [Read more from Will]().