

Chapter 6

Decision Making

If the Yuba Watershed Council is any indication, deciding HOW you are going to decide things may be the most difficult decision you'll make during the watershed council start-up phase.

In a *Partnership Handbook*, a document compiled by Ann Moote for the University of Arizona's Water Resources Research Center, the author makes important suggestions for helping establish decision-making structures in your organization.

Before defining your decision-making rules, identify the extent of the partnership's decision-making authority. What are the legal limitations? Can local regulations effectively control development? What changes need to be made to empower the partnership? To what extent do participants have authority to make decisions for the agency or organization they represent?

After considering those questions, agree upon and clearly define a decision-making mechanism, such as consensus-based or majority voting. To ensure full support in the implementation stage, it is recommended that you choose a decision-making process that involves all partnership members, at least in the early stages of your organization's development. If such decision-making protocols cause problems or issues among the group, they can always be changed later.

Many partnership groups operate by consensus. *Consensus* may be defined as unanimous agreement or agreement without objection (i.e.: participants can abstain rather than agree or disagree) among each of the individual participants, or among designated interest representatives – as in a steering group, or agreement of caucuses or coalitions. Agreement of the majority does not typically constitute consensus. Consensus is usually only achieved only when all sides agree that a decision is acceptable to them. Consensus decision-making therefore ensures that all participants are more or less comfortable with and can accept a decision, and that no participant can later disagree with a decision. For this reason, many partnership groups insist upon decision-making by consensus.

Different Definitions of Consensus

"Unanimous agreement among each of the individual participants."

— Partnership Handbook

"Participants don't vote; but modify options or seek alternatives until everyone agrees that the best decision has been reached."

— Building Local Partnerships, CTIC

"Group harmony, cooperation and general agreement of opinion."

— Webster

One group, the McKenzie Watershed Council in Oregon, recognizes several levels of consensus, ranging from “wholeheartedly agree” to “serious concerns, but can live with the decision.” The bottom line is, consensus is reached when each member can live with the decision and no one feels the need to stand in the way of the decision’s being accepted. But in order to be sure that everyone’s concerns are taken into account, the relative “degrees” of consensus, so to speak, are recorded with the final decision.

In general, consensus processes are beneficial because:

- they are inclusive
- they allow for the identification and evaluation of multiple options
- they promote education among different groups and participants
- they offer a better opportunity for creating acceptable and workable solutions than traditional voting processes
- they recognize that decisions reflecting the concerns of all parties are usually better
- they force each participant to take ownership of the process and the decisions.

On the flip side, consensus decision-making means that any individual member can, in essence, exercise veto rights over the rest of the group. Strict adherence to consensus as a decision-making process can, therefore, significantly slow down decision-making and action.

Agreeing to a decision-making structure is another of those difficult choices that will largely depend on the make-up of your group and the kinds of issues facing your watershed. Regardless of what decision-making structure you choose, be sure to consider what, if any, requirements you want to place on who can actually vote or have decision-making authority within the group.

For example, if you are using a consensus model, you will want to avoid a situation where the one person opposing a specific project comes only to that meeting to prevent consensus on that issue by refusing to support it. Especially in the consensus process, you want people making decisions that have been working together for some time and have had the chance to get to know

one another and one another's points of view. So you might want to consider requiring that anyone involved in the actual decision-making be "vested" somehow, most likely through attendance at previous meetings. Also, keep in mind that consensus works best in smaller groups of 15 people or fewer.

The Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) offers some hints for building consensus in partnership groups, like watershed councils.

Building Consensus

Effective consensus decisions share the following characteristics:

- √ Total participation - All major interests are identified and brought together.
- √ All partners are responsible - Everyone helps plan activities and offers suggestions to make them more effective.
- √ Partners educate each other - They spend time discussing the history of the issue, their perceptions and concerns, and ideas for solutions.
- √ People are kept informed - Partners keep their own groups and the rest of the people who live in the watershed informed.
- √ A common definition of the problem is used - Partners discuss and agree on a constructive definition of the problem.
- √ Multiple options are identified - Partners seek a range of options to satisfy their respective concerns and avoid pushing single positions.
- √ Decisions are made by mutual agreement - Partners don't vote; but modify options or seek alternatives until everyone agrees that the best decision has been reached.
- √ Partners are responsible for implementation - The group identifies ways to implement solutions.

WIRE Criteria used by Henry's Fork Watershed Coalition to evaluate projects and proposals:

Watershed perspective: *does the project employ or reflect a total watershed perspective?*

Credibility: *is the project based upon credible research or scientific data?*

Problem and solution: *does the project clearly identify the resource problems and propose workable solutions that consider the relevant resources?*

Water supply: *does the project demonstrate an understanding of water supply?*

Project management: *does project management employ accepted or innovative practices,*

On one end of the spectrum there is the Henry's Fork Watershed Coalition, which has no set number of members, per se, and has no official Board of Directors or other limited decision-making body. Decisions are made by whomever attends a given meeting, using a facilitated consensus-based approach. Projects brought up to the group get evaluated using a set of previously agreed-upon criteria, called WIRE criteria (Watershed Integrity Review and Evaluation). Whoever is attending the meeting receives a full presentation about the project in the morning. In the afternoon, the group breaks up into three subgroups: citizen, agency and technical. Each subgroup reviews the project proposal using the WIRE criteria. Then they all come back together at the end and use facilitated consensus discussion to decide whether to take action on the project or not.

The benefits of such a system are many, as are the drawbacks. On the positive side, such a process is helpful in community and relationship building. The focus is placed on listening and learning about others' perspectives instead of on the win-lose situation automatically set up by a vote. Everyone's concerns are validated; the three break-out groups have equal standing with the full group. And in talking to staff from the Henry's Fork Watershed Council, they reported that very few times has the group reached an impasse and chosen not to take action because consensus was not reached. Sometimes it will take more than one meeting to reach a decision. For example, if one of the subgroups brings up some major concerns, the full group can choose to recommend to the project sponsors that they make some modifications to the project to address the concerns and then bring the project back for reconsideration. Usually when this happens, the group is able to reach consensus at some future meeting.

Drawbacks to using exclusively consensus decision-making relate to the perceived ability of one individual or faction to continually stall the process. Since consensus by definition requires all participants to agree to support the decision, if one person or entity chooses not to support the decision, there is no consensus. If your group can take no action without consensus, you could find yourselves not able to do much.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance in Delaware and Maryland. This group has a set 12-person board of directors with equal representation among Delaware organizations, Maryland organizations and public organizations or proprietary groups. The group makes its decisions using an interesting voting process, in which “an absolute majority is a simple majority of ‘Yeas’ except that every ‘Nay’ cancels one ‘Yea.’” In other words, to pass a vote, you must have at least seven *yes* votes. But each *no* vote cancels out one *yes*. So if you end up with nine *yes* votes and three *no* votes, you must subtract three cancelled votes from the *yes* column, leaving you with only six *yes* votes, which is not enough for a majority. This makes the negative vote more powerful without requiring complete unanimity to reach a decision.

If you’re finding it hard to decide between consensus and traditional voting structures, you may want to consider a hybrid. For example, you can set up your decision-making structure to require undergoing a consensus process first; but for those times where action is desired and consensus can’t be reached, a majority (50% + 1) or a super majority of some sort (e.g. 2/3 majority) will be used to make the decision.

The McKenzie Watershed Council, for example, chose to use a consensus process whenever possible. They viewed such a process as a mechanism to bring diverse interests together and develop alternatives that all members can support. But, recognizing that there are times when consensus won’t work, the McKenzie group has a fallback. The group can choose, by consensus, to take a majority vote. This usually works best when there are no “deal-breaking” issues under consideration or when all partners can live with any of the possible outcomes of a vote. The group has used this fallback to choose a logo when members could not achieve a clear consensus on a single design. The first council co-chair election also used a majority vote when consensus was not possible.

In general, consensus decision-making is most appropriate when: issues are complex; many parties/interests have a stake in the outcome; parties are willing to participate in the process;

set realistic time frames for their implementation, and employ an effective monitoring plan?

Sustainability: *does the project emphasize sustainable ecosystems?*

Social and cultural: *does the project sufficiently address the watershed’s social and cultural concerns?*

Economy: *does the project promote economic diversity within the watershed and help sustain a healthy economic base?*

Cooperation and coordination: *does the project maximize cooperation among all parties and demonstrate sufficient coordination among appropriate groups or agencies?*

Legality: *is the project lawful and respectful of agencies’ legal responsibilities?*

issues are negotiable; and no single agency or organization has the ability to solve the problems addressed or achieve the objectives alone.

Some people feel that having a majority vote as an accepted fallback undermines the spirit of cooperation associated with achieving decisions through consensus. But, since the goal of most watershed councils is to take action to maintain or improve watershed health, many groups find it helpful to have a Plan B, should consensus on an issue be impossible.

Your decision-making framework will depend a great deal on who the players are in your watershed council and how they work together. In the case of the Yuba Watershed Council, long-time adversaries have been able to work together and at least make organizational and structural decisions by consensus. But the real test is when your group is asked to take a position or undertake some specific action related to a controversial issue.

Recommendations:

Use the consensus process for decision-making at least during the start-up phase, so that everyone can buy-in to the organization and its processes.

Consider codifying a “fallback” approach for those times when consensus is not possible on issues that require action (such as choosing a logo).

Try to reach consensus on a few “easy” issues right away so the team will feel a sense of accomplishment. Revisit and discuss difficult problems at a later date. Experience has shown that as the team members develop trust in each other, consensus can be achieved on most issues.



CHAPTER 6 - KEY CONTACTS/RESOURCES/REFERENCES

Partnership Handbook, a document compiled by Ann Moote (Water Resources Research Center, College of Agriculture, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. Email: partners@ag.arizona.edu)

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McKenzie Watershed Council/o Lane Council of Governments, 125 E. 8th Avenue, Eugene, OR 97401. Contact: Kathi Wiederhold. Tel: 541-687-4430. Fax: 541-687-4099.

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Building Local Partnerships: A Guide for Watershed Partnerships. Published as part of Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) "Know Your Watershed" campaign. Contact: Know Your Watershed, 1220 Potter Drive, Room 170, W. Lafayette, IN 47906. Tel: 317-494-9555. Fax: 317-494-5969.