

When Consensus isn't the Best Method

The Roman Catholic Church, and therefore its parishes, is a hierarchical system whose ultimate decision making power rests with a single person, the pastor. After Vatican II, when the use of Councils for Finance and for the Pastoral Care of the parish were either mandated or strongly recommended, and when it was determined that these Councils are *consultative* to the pastor, some thought this was the door opening to more democratic governance structures. In fact, this has not turned out to be the case in most circumstances. Pastors still hold the decision-making power regardless of the recommendations of a council.

That said, there has been a movement toward embracing the recommendations of various councils and committees in an effort to honor the truth that decisions made by groups tend to be more creative and have more energy behind them than those made individually. Out of this perspective has come the crowning of **consensus** decision-making as the way all of these groups should work. The outcome of this commitment has been Councils that never make recommendations because they could not reach consensus, as well as the decision not to act being the one made simply because a consensus was not reached. Finally, many people have failed to understand consensus decision-making or do not understand the many types of decision-making available to a group.

What follows is a look at decision-making types. The point here is that it is important to know when to use what type of decision-making, and therefore, to note that not every decision before a Council or a Committee need be one of consensus. Choosing the right method enables the work of the Kingdom to be done.

Method 1. Decision made by authority without group discussion

Process: The designated leader makes all decisions without consulting group members. We see this method used by Jesus about such things as how long they were staying in a place.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes minimal time to make decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No group interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commonly used in organizations (so we are familiar with method) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team may not understand decision or be unable to implement decision
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables rapid response/movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived as negative or dismissive of others

Appropriate Times for Method 1

- Simple, routine, administrative decisions; little time available to make decision (as in emergencies or surprise deadlines); team commitment required to implement the decision is low.

Method 2. Decision by expert

Process: Select the expert from group, let the expert consider the issues, and let the expert make decisions. This method honors the notion that within groups there are those best equipped by charism of the Holy Spirit, education and/or experience to make the decision.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful when one person on the team has the overwhelming expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unclear how to determine who the expert is (team members may have different opinions)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enables movement toward implementation rather than time spent making an entire team an expert 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No group interaction May become popularity issue or power issue

Appropriate Times for Method 2

- Result is highly dependent on specific expertise; there is a clear recognition within the team about who the expert is and, team commitment required to implement the decision is low or the team has agreed to implement the expert’s decision.

Method 3. Decision by averaging individuals' opinions

Process: Separately ask each team member his/her opinion/recommendation and average the results. This method also honors the notion that the Spirit works within the community and can yield a convergence of wisdom if trusted.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extreme opinions cancelled out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No outward group interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Error typically cancelled out. This is one of the things promised by the Holy Spirit in the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opinions of least and most knowledgeable members may cancel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group members consulted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to decision may not be strong
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful when it is difficult to get the team together to talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unresolved conflict may exist or escalate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Urgent decisions can be made 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May damage future team effectiveness when more interactive decision-making methods are necessary

Appropriate Times for Method 3

- Time available for decision is limited; team participation is required, but lengthy interaction is undesirable; team commitment required to implement the decision is low. For example, groups gather for a meeting and use the time to arrive at a consensus on EVERY item on the agenda, exhausting the group, wasting time on matters better decided using another method and eventually taking time away from decisions that do require the group to be assembled and attentive.

Method 4. Decision made by authority after group discussion

Process: The team creates ideas and has discussions, but the designated leader makes the final decision. The designated leader calls a meeting, presents the issue, listens to discussion from the team, and announces her/his decision. This is very close to the consultative process imagined by the Church for her Councils and Committees. It maintains the authority with the pastor but invites the perspectives of those called to serve. It acknowledges the Holy Spirit’s work within the community but does not change the power structure.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team used more than methods 1–3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team is not part of decision
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listening to the team increases the accuracy of the decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team may compete for the leader’s attention
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The potential for multiple viewpoints, ideas not thought of previously and reactions of those who will experience the results of the decision can happen	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team members may tell leader “what he/she wants to hear”• Still may not have commitment from the team to the decision

Appropriate Times for Method 4

- Available time allows team interaction and the decision is not the team’s to make; there is a clear recognition of the one who has the authority to decide; team commitment required to implement decision is moderately low or has been yielded to the authority.

Method 5. Decision by minority

Process: A minority of the team, two or more members who constitute less than 50% of the team, make the team’s decision. This is seen in practice when Executive Committees of Finance or Parish Councils actually meet with the Pastor and make decisions. This may also be operating when the Pastor and the Parish Staff make decisions without the consultation of a wider group.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Method often used by executive committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be railroading
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Method can be used by temporary committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not have full team commitment to decision
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful for large number of decisions and limited time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May create an air of competition among team members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some team perspective and discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still may not have commitment from team to decision

Appropriate Times for Method 5

- Limited time on the part of those needing to make decisions or on the part of those involved in consultative bodies prevents convening entire team; there is a clear choice of membership and conferred authority in this minority group; team commitment required to implement the decision is moderately low or has been yielded to the authority.

Method 6. Decision by majority vote

Process: Discuss the decision until 51% or more of the team members make the decision. While this simple majority voting method is commonly associated with how “we do it in America”, it is not necessarily the best method. In terms of the Christian community who has a history of the prophetic single voice speaking for God, this may in fact be detrimental to discerning what God is trying to say. It is certainly a method at odds with the hierarchical structure of the typical Catholic parish.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful when there is insufficient time to make decision by consensus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taken for granted as the natural, or only, way for teams to make a decision; opens the door to coercive tactics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful when the complete team-member commitment is unnecessary for implementing a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team is viewed as the “winners and the losers”; reduces the quality of decision

decision	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority opinion not discussed and may not be valued
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have unresolved and unaddressed conflict
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full group interaction is not obtained

Appropriate Times for Method 6

- Time constraints require decision (this may become the case when discussion goes on and on and a clear consensus or direction is not emerging); group consensus supports a voting process or the governing documents of the group specify this type of decision-making; team commitment required to implement decision is moderately high.

Method 7. Decision by consensus

Process: Collective decision arrived at through a specified communication process which includes all team members having spoken and engaged in active listening in a climate where all points of view were valued not just by words, but by the time given to them, the attitude of curiosity and explanation surrounding differing points of view and the sense that what is being sought is something better than any individual option. Parishes across the Western world have tried to adopt consensus decision-making as the “way” the parish operates, believing it to reflect God’s ways most accurately. However, while openness to ideas, respect for one another and active listening do reflect the ways of God in Christ, they are not the only ways to come to decisions.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most effective method of team decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes more time than methods 1–6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All team members express their thoughts and feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes psychological energy and high degree of team-member skill (can be negative if individual team members not committed to the process)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team members “feel understood” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes skilled facilitation and trust that the investment of time will yield a decision that can be implemented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active listening used 	

Appropriate Times for Method 7

- Time available allows a consensus to be reached; the team is sufficiently skilled to reach a consensus; the team commitment required to implement the decision is high.

Method 7 takes well-practiced communication skills by all team members, a high degree of trust within the team members as well as in the power of the Holy Spirit to create something out of all of the offerings, and an understanding of the definition of the different types of consensus decisions.

ConSpirita Consulting Network can help leadership teams understand these methods, the various aspects of consensus decision-making and empower you to use the methods best suited to your circumstances, thus moving forward with the work of the Kingdom.

Adapted from: <http://www.foundationcoalition.org/home/keycomponents/teams/decision2.html>
Accessed 4/12/11.