

A METHOD OF GROUP DECISION MAKING

The Jesuit procedure would have each participant in the group decision-making process ask the following questions:

- How do I feel about the issue?
- What is the origin of that particular feeling? Is it from God, or not from God? The “not from God” feelings can be from self (from ignorance, obstinacy, indigestion), from other persons (whose position on this particular issue may be “not from God”), or from diabolical sources.

Four Prerequisites

To sort out all the elements is a subtle exercise. To discern or decide well, a person must be:

- **ready to move** in any direction that God wants, therefore radically free;
- **open to sharing** all that God has given him or her, therefore radically generous;
- **willing to suffer** if God’s will requires it, therefore radically patient;
- **questing for union** with God in prayer, therefore radically spiritual.

Jesuits would agree with former Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn’s famous remark: “When two people always agree about everything, it just goes to show that one of them is doing all the thinking!” We respect that. We also know that if union is to be achieved, it can only come out of difference. The point of the process I am outlining here is to provide a method for moving from difference to consensus amicably and prayerfully.

Free to Express Differences

Central to this method is the isolation of pros from cons, and the uninhibited expression of arguments, both pro and con, by each participant. Each is expected to disclose how he or she thinks (judges) the situation to be. An inclination “pro” will not hold up if it rests on inaccurate data. Is it true or false? is a question of intelligence or understanding.

Each participant is also to disclose how he or she feels about each side of the issue. Is it good or bad? is very much a question of feeling. And this is where discernment, the sorting out of feelings, comes in. This is what the early Jesuits did as they were deciding how best to design the very organization that would define them as Jesuits. Seeing something good on either side of a question is not insincerity or make-believe; any question important enough to become a policy issue certainly has two sides. But honesty requires that an effort be made to determine why each participant feels one way or another about a proposed option. “Disordered affections,” as Ignatius would call them, can sabotage the work of intelligence and distort accurate judgments of fact.

Separating Pros and Cons

Is there a place for conflict and positive persuasion anywhere in the process? Yes. But the appropriate place is in the initial phase of the process where the issue for discernment, the question to be decided, is formulated. Once the process is on the tracks, the discussion of positive and negative arguments should be separated. Contrary to what some might suspect, this saves time instead of wasting it. When debate (proper to the formulation stage) displaces dialogue (proper to the discernment process), ears and minds close, points are tallied, and a win-lose fulcrum falls into place, making the process vulnerable to the loudest voice, the greatest threat, or the highest emotion. Repair meetings are needed, which often fail to prevent unwise decisions. The Jesuit method is totally civilized, basically religious, and properly nonviolent. What's more, it works!

Signs of a Good Decision

How does the group know it has reached a good decision? The Jesuit tradition puts the premium on peace as the confirmatory factor. Each person should ask, "Am I at peace with this decision? Am I at ease now, especially if what I antecedently regarded as the best course of action is not the one chosen by the group consensus? Or am I uneasy?"

A group is well on its way to good decision making if everyone in the group feels free to express, in the presence of the others, any unease he or she may feel about the issue before them, which is much easier if subjective reactive feelings have been shared very early in the process. After the decision is made, the disappearance of that unease is, I think, sufficient confirmation that God's will is working in the group. No vote was taken. No disgruntled minority remains. Group unity is substantially enhanced.

Another useful norm is the consistency or inconsistency of the decision with the statement of purpose that constitutes the corporate vision of the group (a mission or goal statement). If the decision is consistent with the shared vision, you have another confirmatory factor in place. Let me just note the obvious mischief waiting to break out if any participant in the process does not really share—in the sense of buying into—the vision of the group. Anyone who remains uncommitted to the vision (the declared purpose or mission) of the organization or group has no rightful place in deciding the future of that organization or group.

A Process for Group Decision

Making Look at your charter, mission statement, papers of incorporation, brand name, motto, or slogan. Is there room for the admission that your organization, like your nation, operates “under God”? If so, reaffirm that fact and determine not to hide it at the policy--making table. If not, then at least acknowledge the power and presence of the group as larger than the power and presence of any one participant (including the boss!) and expect more from the group than could come from the individual.

Have a little quiet time before and during decision-making meetings. In many cases it would be a good idea for top management or group leaders to take a few days off for a communications workshop or a management retreat to dissolve interpersonal tensions, reduce anxiety levels, and open members of the decision-making group to the possibility of exchange of feelings and subjective views. Mutual trust is a sine qua non for good group decisions.

Allow for full participation in the preparation of the agenda, with provision for strong advocacy of a position early in the meeting process. Make careful provision for the accumulation and assimilation of all necessary information.

Provide opportunities for all elements of unease to surface, followed by a quiet time when each participant can reflect on the possible sources of his or her own unease.

Segment the meeting into time “pro” and time “con” with respect to every major issue. In each of these segments, all participants must speak, if only to agree with a point already made.

Whoever chairs the process then tries to “read a consensus” and tests it against the group. If there is no clear consensus, the chair can probe for areas of consensus. At this juncture, some open debate may be useful. As a last resort, the group can decide by vote.

Confirmatory procedures will evolve as the group gains experience with the process.

The output of a good discernment process is **clarity**.

The direction of an ongoing decision-making group is from clarity to clarity. The Jesuit is convinced that inner peace can be found through the discernment process, which leads to decisions that embody clarity. Full respect must be given, however, to the preconditions: freedom, generosity, patience, and a desire to find union with God in prayer. No believer should ever forget that the outstretched hand of God is always there to help.

With thanks to Sr Sheila McNamara who compiled these notes.