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Consensus versus majority decision making

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Abstract

Educational decision making in the past has reflected its business counterpart in developing a centralized body or person to make decisions. Over the past fifteen years, there has been a decided shift in both areas, especially pronounced currently in education, to a more de-centralized process of decision making, incorporating more persons and more levels into the final decision. This shift can best be seen in School Based Management models, Participatory Decision Making models, Teacher Empowerment models, and Shared Decision Making models, all of which compare basically to their business counterpart of Quality Circles. These models share a common idea of incorporating the mainstream worker/teacher into the "structure" for decision making. The purpose is to enhance the personal or intrinsic satisfaction of the worker/teacher and to create better and lasting decisions.

CONSENSUS VERSUS MAJORITY

DECISION MAKING

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

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by

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Educational decision making in the past has reflected its business counterpart in developing a centralized body or person to make decisions. Over the past fifteen years, there has been a decided shift in both areas, especially pronounced currently in education, to a more de-centralized process of decision making, incorporating more persons and more levels into the final decision. This shift can best be seen in School Based Management models, Participatory Decision Making models, Teacher Empowerment models, and Shared Decision Making models, all of which compare basically to their business counterpart of Quality Circles. These models share a common idea of incorporating the mainstream worker/teacher into the "structure" for decision making. The purpose is to enhance the personal or intrinsic satisfaction of the worker/teacher and to create better and lasting decisions.

Decisions are made in all our lives on a daily basis. They may represent individual concerns where a sole person decides what is best, they may be within the framework of a small group of persons, or within the confines of a large or very large grouping of people. The latter two groupings will usually display

two types of processes to reach their "collective" decision(s), namely, majority vote or consensus.

Consensus may be defined as follows: To reach the same conclusion about what should be done in the name of all even when opinions may still differ, (Hare, 1973) or "...an infinite series of reciprocating understandings between the members of the group" (Scheff, 1979, p.45).

Majority vote or majority decision making is by far the most widely used because it offers a clean resolution in the sense that once a vote has been taken the majority will have its way, and hence a decision has been made. Very little time need be taken with discussing an issue, and no concern need be given to the minority point of view.

The problem arises with the implementation of the decision and how effectively the minority will adhere to the decision reached. "...once the power of the authority has been removed, the individual may no longer conform. Conformity is most difficult to change if the individual defines the issue as one which involves basic values which represent his whole way of life" (Hare, 1973, p.141).

Often when issues are extremely tense and a majority decision cannot be reached, an impasse develops. The scenario that then usually follows is that "private" meetings take place where compromises are reached and agreed to. In this framework of one-man, one-vote, compromise is the only method of breaching an impasse, and it usually represents a giving-in of one or more parties. "The majority vote can be used effectively where the minority is willing to go along with the will of the majority or can be coerced to do so..." (Scheff, 1979, p. 132).

Much of our present day elementary and secondary school administrations' views and attitudes about decision making have been borrowed or adopted from the business sector. The underlying thought is that if business is successful then it must be making good decisions, and the school need only adopt the structure of the business decision making process to be successful as well.

Many of these business decision making theories follow the management by objective (MBO) text, whereby a decision making body supposedly follows the objectives of the company in identifying various undertakings. The decision is made in hierarchical

fashion where a few persons, that is a board of

directors or executive board, or even a single person,

that is a company president or chief executive officer,

mulls over the issue(s) and finally dictates a

decision. The decision is then filtered down through

the hierarchy and finally implemented.

There is, however, one segment of the business

community that has not adopted this approach and is

still conducting business as it has for over three

hundred years. That segment, The Society of Friends or

Quakers, has a reputation as top-notch, hard-nosed

businessmen. Yet they conduct their business meetings

> making group decisions without voting. Their
> method is to find a 'sense of the meeting'
> which represents consensus of those involved.
> Ideally this consensus is not simply
> 'unanimity' or even an opinion on which all
> members agree, but rather a 'unity'; a higher
> truth which grows from the consideration of
> divergent opinions and unites them all (Hare,
> 1973, p. 85).

It is this crucial difference between 'unanimity' and

'unity' that makes this approach different.

> A group organized according to the rule 'one-
> man, one-vote' reaches unanimity, that
> special condition of majority rule in which
> the majority happens to include all the
> members. Unity is more complex. If does not
> necessarily reflect total agreement on the
> issue under discussion. It incorporates a
> perception of the relationship to each other
> and to the issue. The unity sought is a

> recognition of what decison is proper for the
> meeting as a whole. Unanimity requires that
> all reach the same opinion on the issue to be
> decided. Unity requires all to reach the
> same conclusion about what should be done in
> the name of all, even when opinions may still
> differ (p. 77).

In reaching consensus within a group, small or
large, the minority point of view is expressed and
noted, and "...as a result, one's point of view can
always be woven into the final decision" (Hare, 1980,
p. 141). Thus, as the majority decison making process
needs and relies upon the force of numbers to validate
its decisions, "...the consensus is very powerful
because it involves in a positive way all levels of the
social system and deals with the complete range of
functional needs" (p. 133). This enables the decision
reached or agreed upon to encompass each person
involved and have each person feel that the agreement
contains his/her points of view, thus allowing each
person to fully back the decision.

In the Quaker experience, the business meeting has
no creed and no single set of beliefs which must be
endorsed by all. Rather the object is to explore as
well as convince. The synthesis of a variety of
elements is often obtained by a crossfertilization, and
the final result is not, therefore, or at least ought

not to be a compromise. Thus the united judgment is built up until it finds such expression by some individual as can be endorsed by the meeting as a whole. No minority should remain with a feeling of being overridden (Hare, 1973, p. 176).

This is exemplified by Chase (1951), "...the issue was not compromised but moved to another level where a new plan was evolved - a plan in nobody's mind at the beginning of the discussion" (p. 49). This also coincides with Hare's (1980) comment about consensus,"...the consensus method is very powerful because it involves in a positive way all levels of the social system and deals with the complete range of functional needs" (p. 133).

Scheff (1979) defined consensus as "...an infinite series of reciprocating understandings between members of a group" (p.45). Consensus also can be stated in terms of "co-orientation of individuals in a group toward a statement" (p. 33).

Co-orientation is the underlying belief that consensus deals with the recognition of a person's feelings as well as the need to arrive at a decision. This understanding allows for varied needs of the group

to be met, allowing the relationship of the group to move towards cooperation.

Hare (1973) stated that the needs of the group fall into four areas, yet one area has more influence then the others. The most influential area rests on the premise that the persons involved must share a common identity and have commitment to the group; the area of second importance is the group's need for access to skills and resources; the third area of importance is the group's need to coordinate itself and generate solidarity for the solution; and the fourth area of importance (and least influential) is the exercise of control by members of the group over the group.

This concept makes sense because all of us first identify ourselves with people with whom we feel comfortable, with whom we share common beliefs, and through these beliefs we then develop a common bond of affection and trust. This type of bonding is more cohesive than is power wielding, and much more intense than one based on information.

Hare (1980) concluded

In contrast to the typical group which may only make decisions which involve the

gathering of new information (adaptation) and the exercise of power (goal attainment), the consensus method is usually used by a group of members who have a feeling of affection for one another (intergration), and above all it involves agreement on common values (pattern maintenance). Thus the consensus method is very powerful because it involves all levels of the social system and deals with a complete range of functional need (p.84).

The idea behind consensus and its impact on decison making is that it allows for individual expression of concern or doubt and still bonds the individual to the decision. Thus, as in the case of the Quakers, "members of effective [decision] groups tend to interact on substantive matters until agreement is reached" (Hirokowa, 1980, p.312). Thus, again, divergent opinions and discussions are encouraged and even necessary for good (effective) decision making.

Sturm and Young (1980) developed a model called SNARE, the acronym standing for Sharing, Narrowing, Agreeing, Recording/Reporting, and Evaluating which contains three elemental ideas: 1)agreements and disagreements are diversities that can be used to facilitate rather that block the group accomplishment, 2) clear understanding of the group's purpose is imperative regardless of individual differences or opinions, and 3) commitment and support given by

individual members will affect the quality of group effort and outcomes.

As the SNARE model makes clear, the group process of arriving at a decision is complex because of its social nature, as well as the social nature of people as individuals. Since schools are mostly socially oriented and motivated, it seems to make sense that these decisions be arrived at a socially acceptable level to create as much adherence to the decision as possible. Keeping in mind the diversity of personalities to be found in schools, it seems prudent that, when arriving at a decision, compliance with that decision be considered as an imperative, and then facilitated.

Quality Circles have been used for just this reason. They are used to allow individuals to modify, at their level, the decision that has been made, not to disavow the decision, but rather to make the decision more applicable to a local or given situation.

This conclusion was reached by Bonner (1982) when he suggested that quality circles allow for <u>initiative</u> by the group instead of mere reaction by the group to proposals. Bonner went on to add that "one major goal of the quality circle is to improve quality, by

collectively seeking better ways to increase efficiency. A second goal is to improve communications (especially upward) and thus build 'mutual trust, respect, and caring' at all levels" (p. 681).

Torrence (1982) showed that when the environment allows the participants to actively play a role in that environment, the results are positive. Quality circles themselves work at any level, and the management level is just as susceptible to their influence as is any other level.

Summarily, the consensus method of decision making has proven itself generally superior to majority decision making methods. It allows clearer decisions to be made, generates group approval and association with the decision, and is based on recognized social dictums.

Decisions are not only intellectual, but emotional and spiritual as well. They need to match an individual's need to gain compliance, or at least a level of efficiency that the decision was meant to enlist. People need (or feel they need) a reason to follow another's vision, or that the decision being made is in their best interest.

Maslow (1970) developed a pyramid of hierarchal needs that need to be met in order for any person to develop his/her humanness and human potential. Mills (1987) cited Maslow's Hierarchy in explaining the basics of teacher motivations and where their dissatisfactions are centered. Recognizing Maslow's idea that each person grows as a person through a series of individual need fulfillments, teachers seem especially to need to grow at the top two need areas, both of which deal essentially with self-actualization. Farrar (1981) reached the same conclusion. Teachers' dissatisfaction then is partly traceable to the frustration of this need not being met. Herzberg (1959) refined this concept into a theory that the lower-level needs are not motivators in our society. However, if the needs are not met, they become dissatisfiers. The literature manifests this association between social needs and social dissatisfaction. As early as 1965 with Hawley and as recently as 1988 with Corcoran et al, the relationship between teacher isolation and alienation is compatible with this view of frustrated needs and developing dissatisfiers.

The recommendations stemming from such groups as
the Carnegie Commission on Teaching as a Profession
(1986), the Holmes Group (1986), the National Governors
Association (1986), the NEA/NASSP (1986), and the Task
Force of Educational School Deans (1986) all reinforced
the stated literature on teacher needs (motivators) and
teacher dissatisfiers, focused emphasis on the need
expressed by teachers for participation in school
decision making. They also expressed the value of
teachers participating in school decisions.

Others make essentially the same point: "A very
strong, researched-based triangular relationship has
been established between collaborative decision making,
organizational satisfaction (school climate), and
organizational effectiveness (the manner in which
schools perform)" (Ambroise, 1989, p. 56). Harvard
University's Roland Barth (1989) notes the importance
of this balance by suggesting "The nature of the
relationships among the adults who inhabit a school has
more to do with a school's quality and character, the
accomplishments of its pupils, and the professionalism
of its teachers than does any other factor" (p. 56).

Decisions, regardless of how they are reached, are
only as effective as their implementation and the

adherence to the decisions by those who are to do the actual implementing of the decisions.

The literature suggests that although majority decision making can be effective, it does not ensure that the decisions will be carried out. If there is a large or significant population that wishes to oppose the implementation of the decision, it may do so effectively, so much so perhaps, that the decision is rendered operationally ineffective.

The literature is insistent that when consensus is used and a decision is reached, it is generally strongly adhered to by all. That is a very powerful and useful point.

Teacher Empowerment, School Based Management, Peer Support, and De-Centralization are all terms which command the current thinking of educators. The decisions, made for individual schools by administrators or collectively for districts, still need to be done. However, no longer should this be an isolated process, but rather an inclusive process involving a diverse group of persons. With this in mind, new approaches to problem solving need to be developed and understood. Consensus is not a new method but may be a new approach, one that enables

large groups to individually express a concern or conviction and still arrive at a conclusion that is equitable and applicable. As the Quaker experience has shown, involving the individual and respecting the variance of individual viewpoints will eventually provide more enlightened group decisions and will enhance the probability of implementing those decisions.

This ability to assuage the individual without compromising the whole, and to enable individuals who comprise the whole to feel that they, as individuals, are able to make a difference and that they are cared about and cared for, may well be the optimal characteristic of effective decision making.

Schools are about people, and people have needs that must be met. Consensus allows for the recognition of the individual, yet enlists the support of the group.

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