

New Testament Basis for Group Decision Making

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Introduction

Maxwell (2001, p. xiii) states “Just about everything you do depends on teamwork. It doesn’t matter whether you are a leader or follower, coach or player, teacher or student, parent or child, CEO or nonprofit volunteer worker.” Certainly effective teamwork can include making decisions and solving problems as a team or a group process. Because of synergy between team members, making decisions as a team can be more effective than the formal leader as a single individual dictating decisions to the team. This paper examines the leadership theory of decision making in groups by defining characteristics of the theory, describing symptoms associated with negative and positive outcomes, and evaluating group decision making from a biblical perspective.

Key Concepts

A group making decisions has several potential benefits in comparison with the formal leader or manager making decisions. Yukl (2002, p. 326) states “Groups have more relevant knowledge and ideas that can be pooled to improve decision quality, and active participation will increase member understanding of decisions and member commitment to implement them.” Decision acceptance is “the degree of commitment to implement a decision effectively” and is likely to be greater when team members participate (Yukl, 2002; p. 89). Decision quality refers to the effectiveness of team performance and is likely to be greater when team members have appropriate information, relevant skills, and problem solving experience in the appropriate areas of expertise (Yukl, 2002; pp. 89-90). Organizational effectiveness as well as individual satisfaction can increase when the work group becomes responsible for designing their work activities as well as making relevant decisions. The role of the formal leader or manager in such a group

evolves to become more of a facilitator, advisor, and negotiator rather than the final decision arbiter (Finch, 1977).

Yukl (2002) provides a summary of group characteristics that affect group decision making effectiveness, and points out that while groups decision making provide potential benefits, there are also potentially negative effects (pp. 326-328):

1. Group Size. Assuming more varied skills, experiences, and perspectives, larger groups can add value to the decision making process. However, as the group increases in size it becomes more difficult to reach a consensus.
2. Status Differentials. Different statuses of team members can also provide varied skills, experiences, and perspectives thus adding value to the decision making process. Information exchange can also be stifled as low status individuals become reluctant to offer opinions and the opinions of high status individuals become more likely to be accepted regardless of merit.
3. Cohesiveness. People with similar values are likely to arrive at agreement quickly, but may not completely evaluate the situation. When this occurs, it can detrimentally affect outcomes through an illusion of harmony that suggests the team is working effectively when in actuality they are avoiding disagreement.
4. Diversity of Membership. While differences in personality, demographics, beliefs, values, and traditions can provide more creative input to the decision making process, individuals can also be less accepting of each other. When this occurs, it can cause communication and other difficulties that inhibit team effectiveness. This is the opposite of cohesiveness.

5. Emotional Maturity. Confident individuals who are calm and level headed as a result of relevant experience can compensate for the young and inexperienced. However, immature behavior that is disruptive or self-oriented can reduce the cohesiveness of the group.

The term groupthink is defined by Janis as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group...members' striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (as cited by Neck and Manz, 1994). Symptoms of groupthink include group pressure on individuals to conform to group norms, reluctance to voice an opinion (self-censorship), delusions that the group cannot fail, incorrect beliefs that the group is in accord, and rationalization by the group at large (Neck and Manz, 1994). When symptoms of groupthink are present, symptoms of defective group decision making such as inadequate understanding of group objectives, incomplete identification and consideration of alternatives, inadequate evaluation of risks, selective processing of available information, and incomplete contingency planning can be expected (Neck and Manz, 1994). Much has been written about such negative affects (or "process losses") of group decision making, but comparatively little about the positive affects (or "process gains") (Neck and Manz, 1994).

Neck and Manz (1994) introduce a new term teamthink and define it as "effective synergistic thinking within the group." Neck and Manz (1994) go on to describe symptoms of teamthink that include "encouragement of divergent views, open expression of concerns/ideas, awareness of limitations/threats, recognition of member's

uniqueness, and discussion of collective doubts.” Groups exhibiting teamthink symptoms also exhibit enhanced and synergistic decision making. Teamthink symptoms generally are opposite to those of groupthink; thus teamthink is the opposite of groupthink.

Biblical Evaluation of Key Concepts

It is interesting to note a significant change in leadership patterns found in the Old Testament as compared to the New Testament. The Old Testament is dominated by individual leadership in the pattern of prophets, priests, and kings dictating to their followers. A prophet is “a spokesman for God” such as Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and others (Young, 1987; pp. 823, 828). A priest is a “mediatory agent between humans and God” (Merriam-Webster) such as Aaron and his sons (Buswell, 1987; p. 820). A king is a “male ruler...stressing physical strength or... intellectual superiority” such as Saul, David, Solomon, and others (Russel, 1097; p. 567). All of these roles emphasize one individual in a leadership or authority position over others. In the Old Testament, leaders had autonomy in their leadership and decision making; there is minimal collaboration between a leader and others in the decision making process.

Although there is strong leadership by individuals in the New Testament, no single leader dictates to the group. Instead, leaders strive to gain consensus of the leadership team or the group as a whole. Senior Pastor Otis Buchan (personal interview, January, 30, 2002) of the Northville Christian Assembly church states “In Christian leadership, it’s about the plurality of leaders. In Acts, the model is not for a single dictatorial voice.”

Pastor Buchan cites Peter's quotation of the prophet Joel as an illustration of a shift in leadership from singularity in the Old Testament to plurality in the New Testament:

¹⁷ In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy. Acts 2:17-18 (NIV)

This shift to plurality in the New Testament is consistent with the leadership theory of group decision making. The passage in the book of Acts known as the Council of Jerusalem illustrates this view.

Biblical Example

Acts 15 describes a dispute in the church at Antioch as the Jews who became followers of Jesus insist that converted Gentiles must follow the law as given by Moses (such as the ritual of circumcision). All agreed that the question should be taken to Jerusalem for consideration by the apostles and church elders.

¹Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ²This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. Acts 15:1-2 (NIV)

The apostles and church elders met in Jerusalem with Paul and Barnabas to consider the matter. After much discussion between Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, and others in the group, they arrived at a consensus decision.

⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

¹²The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. Acts 15:5-14 (NIV)

¹⁹"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

²²Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. Acts 15:19-22 (NIV)

²⁷Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Acts 15:27-29 (NIV)

The symptoms of teamthink as previously quoted can be seen in these Acts 15 passages. Verse 2 exemplifies “encouragement of divergent views” and “open expression of concerns/ideas” in terms of “sharp dispute and debate” as well as verses 6 and 7 in terms of “much discussion” in considering the question at hand. Verse 10 exemplifies “awareness of limitations/threats” and “recognition of member's uniqueness” in terms of realistic expectations on the part of Gentiles as well as Jews. Verses 1 and 5 indicate that group members felt free in their “discussion of collective doubts.” The events that occurred at the Council of Jerusalem provide a pattern for group decision making that can be directly applied in the life of a leader.

Practical Application

All team leaders would do well to keep the pitfalls of groupthink and the synergies of teamthink at the forefront of their minds as they deal with group decision making and problem solving. Awareness of the symptoms of groupthink allows detection of potential group problems so that active steps can be taken to avoid process losses and turn them into an opportunity to realize process gains. Especially when decision acceptance is important to ensure effective implementation, proactive adoption and promotion of approaches that encourage the realization of teamthink symptoms improve decision quality and maximize the likelihood of process gains in group decision making.

Approaches to encourage teamthink include ensuring that the group considers differing viewpoints, promoting openness for all group members to express their ideas, and challenging apparent consensus among group members when none express dissenting views.

Conclusion

Effective team work can include group decision making, but this approach is not without its pitfalls. There is much information on leadership that describes groupthink and the potential negative outcomes of group decision making when group dynamics become dysfunctional through excessive conformance among team members. Groupthink tends to thwart teamthink and the kind of creative thinking that stimulates a team into synergistic results in problem solving and decision making. However, there are significant opportunities to improve effective decision making by encouraging open and honest communication, considering the diverse views of all team members, and understanding the practical realities that limit potential results. The notion that the views of all team members add value to the decision making process is consistent with the New Testament principal of the plurality of leadership. Leaders can improve their effectiveness and the performance of their teams by using these principles for team decision making and problem solving processes.

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