DEVELOPMENT

Collaborative Decision Making

Command-and-control leadership—out. Collaborative leadership—in.

By David Straus and Pat Milton

This article is first in a two-part series.
In the modern workplace, command-and-control leadership is out, replaced by a way of leading that emphasizes collaboration and participation. We know that if we include the people affected by our decisions in the decision-making process, we get better ideas and more buy-in, but the process can take time and may bring up unresolved issues. And

there's a risk of frustrating people who provide input and don't see their ideas reflected in the final decision. So, how do you know who to involve in a collaborative decision-making process, and when?

Collaboration doesn't mean that all decisions should be made by consensus. Leaders who believe that abdicate their responsibilities and become passive members of their team, or waste time

and energy in unnecessary rounds of agreement building. Instead, leaders need to make conscious choices about how much collaboration is appropriate for each decision. After all, there are many degrees of collaboration between making a decision unilaterally and delegating it.

Decide and announce

There are times when it's completely appropriate to make and announce a decision with little or no outside input. For example, in an emergency situation, you may need to take immediate action with no time for discussion. Or, you may decide and announce when the decision involves implementing already agreed-upon core values and strategies. For example, you might state unequivocally, "We will implement our stated policy to seek diversity in all hiring decisions." There may even be times when, paradoxically, you have to be authoritarian about being collaborative: "I insist that this issue be resolved collaboratively."

The great advantage of the decide-and-announce option is speed. You can decide quickly and begin to implement immediately. The disadvantages read like the arguments *for* collaboration:

● You've made a commitment to involve stakeholders in decisions that affect them.
● The decision may not be as good without the input of others.
● It will take time to sell your decision to stakeholders.
● Stakeholders may be able to block your decision or resist its implementation.

If you have to decide and announce, try to frame your decision in context, explaining the reasons for your actions and how they're consistent with the established vision, mission, values, and strategies of your organization.

Input from individuals

Stakeholder involvement is one of the key principles of collaboration. But it's possible to involve stakeholders without hav-

ing them meet face-to-face. Sometimes it may be more efficient to contact key stakeholders individually to gather input. That method works best for decisions that are clearly yours to make, but for which input may be helpful to you—as in staff issues, for example.

But be careful. If you ignore stakeholders' advice, they might resent it and be less likely to cooperate with you the next time. Be clear that you're not seeking consensus but that you do value their input. If possible, talk about the criteria you'll use for your decision, and let them know when and how you'll tell them about it.

Input from the team

There's something powerful about discussing ideas openly in a group. Everyone hears the same ideas and can consider and respond to them, and everyone learns how others feel about an issue.

As a decision maker, you can convene a meeting and solicit input on a decision that you'll make later on your own. Perhaps the decision is too trivial (for example, the location of the new copier) or too pressing (for example, whether to bid on a specific contract) to take time for consensus. However, you may still believe it's important for people to hear each other's ideas and observe you hearing them.

The danger with that option is that the group might clearly favor one course of action, and you might decide differently. If that happens, you could cause greater resistance than if you'd consulted people individually. So, if your mind is already made up, don't hold an information-gathering session. If you do hold one, you'll want to warn stakeholders that you reserve the right to disagree and that you'll base your decision on their ideas as well as other factors. You should also let them know when you'll make your decision and how you will communicate it.

Consensus

Most people can see the benefits of con-

sensus decision making. It encourages participation, utilizes everyone's best thinking, develops cooperation, promotes empowerment, and creates a sense of individual responsibility within the group.
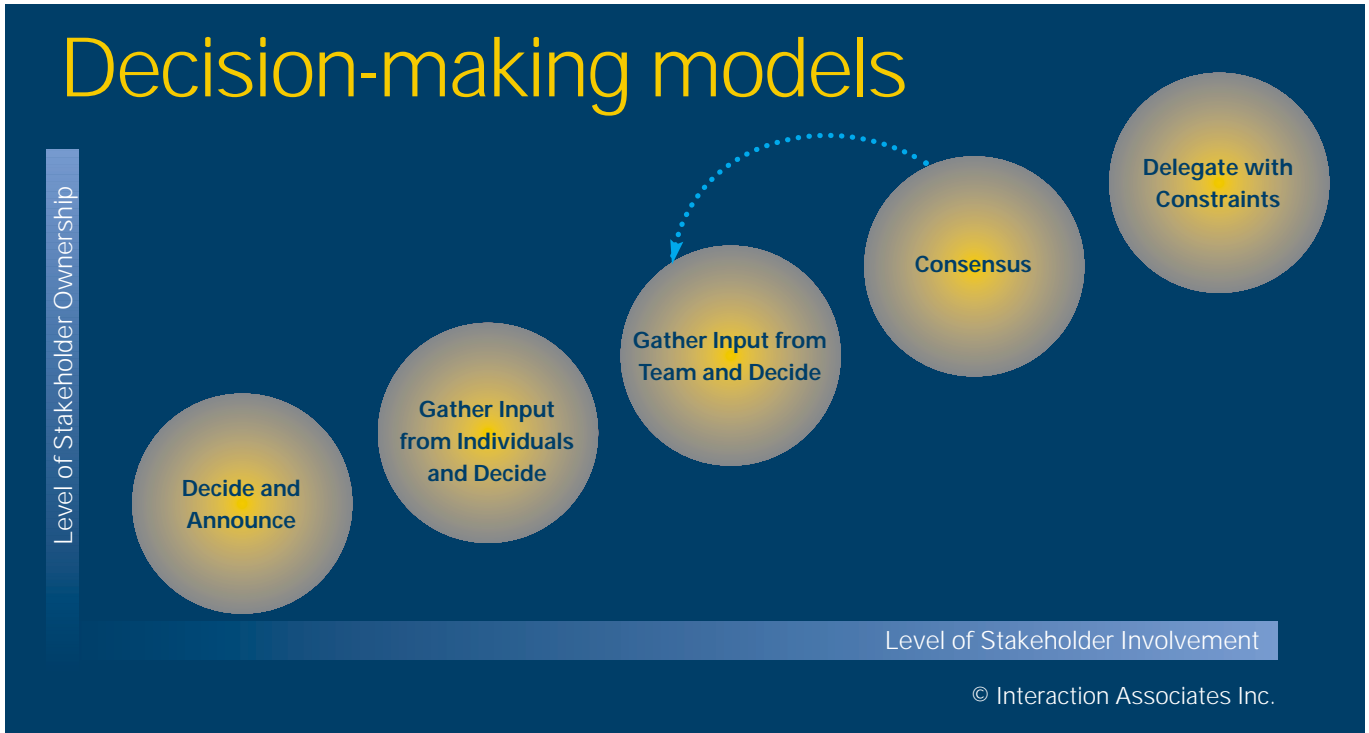
If consensus can't be reached, there's a clear fallback. As the formal decision maker, you must approve of the final outcome; you can't be outvoted. If you disagree with an emerging consensus decision and the group doesn't manage to persuade you, the decision doesn't fly.

Many leaders fear consensus decision making, thinking they will be isolated into a minority of one. But that rarely happens. If the issues are complex and several reasonable options exist, usually more than one person will advocate for each. If you get to the point at which the group is divided between two or more options and time is running out, people will often be willing to pass the final decision back to you. They'll understand better how difficult the decision is and how hard it would be to reach consensus, and they'll know you've heard all of the different points of view. Your team members may even be relieved to have you make the final decision.

Regardless of whether consensus is reached, you'll advance the cause of collaborative action by striving for it. If you do attain consensus, stakeholders will feel empowered and proud to have taken part in the process. If consensus isn't reached, you'll have demonstrated your commitment to collaborative decision making, and your team will likely support whatever you decide.

Delegating with constraints

One of the best ways to build a collaborative culture in your organization is to get out of the way and turn the decision-making responsibility over to the appropriate stakeholders. If you've built alignment on the important issues of vision, mission, values, and strategy, you should be able to trust your staff to make good decisions.

Decision-making models

Level of Stakeholder Ownership

Decide and Announce

Gather Input from Individuals and Decide

Gather Input from Team and Decide

Consensus

Delegate with Constraints

Level of Stakeholder Involvement

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As you move up the circles from left to right, the decision-making methods require more stakeholder involvement and inspire a greater sense of ownership in stakeholders.

To ensure successful delegation, be clear about the boundaries of the decision—the constraints in terms of dollars, time, resources, and so forth. Be explicit about criteria that an acceptable solution must meet. Also, if you must formally approve the decision, ask that the decision-making process include checkpoints at the end of each phase. In that way, you can be part of the consensus-building process and approve the group's definition and analysis of the problem before they work to find solutions. Delegation doesn't mean abdication. With good process design, you can enable a group to address an issue efficiently and effectively while still being part of the final decision.

Which option to use when

So, how do you know when to use which decision-making option? There's no precise answer. Much depends on the context and the specifics of the decision you're trying to make. But there are a number of factors you can weigh to help you decide.

Stakeholder buy-in. How much do key stakeholders need to be involved so that they can confidently support the decision's implementation?

Time available. How much time can be spent on making the decision?

Importance of the decision. How important is the issue to the people in your organization?

Information needed. Who has information or expertise that can contribute to making a quality decision?

Capability. How capable and experienced are people in operating as decision makers or as a decision-making team?

Teambuilding. What's the potential value of using this opportunity to create a stronger team?

As you use the various decision-making methods, you'll learn to make on-the-spot judgments about the appropriate level of involvement required for each decision. As the level of trust grows in your group or organization, the people you lead will be more willing to have you make decisions on their behalf. And you, in turn, will feel more comfortable delegating decisions to them.

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