

Decision Conferencing

Introduction

Generating a sense of common purpose and agreeing the way forward is often desired in organisations but not always achieved. The reasons are many: local concerns may conflict with the aims of the organisation, personalities may clash, individuals may be too averse to taking risks, plans that are best for each unit in the organisation may not be collectively best.

Whatever the reason, there may be a place for an improved approach to decision making, so people can arrive at a shared understanding of the issues, develop a sense of common purpose and achieve commitment to action. Those are the purposes of Decision Conferencing.

What is Decision Conferencing?

Decision Conferencing is a series of intensive working meetings, called decision conferences, attended by groups of people who are concerned about some complex issues facing their organisation. There are no prepared presentations or fixed agenda; the meetings are conducted as live, working sessions lasting from one to three days.

A unique feature is the creation, on-the-spot, of a computer-based model which incorporates data and the judgements of the participants in the groups. The model is often based on multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA), which provides ample scope for representing both the many conflicting objectives expressed by participants, and the inevitable uncertainty about future consequences.

The model is a 'tool for thinking' enabling participants to see the logical consequences of differing viewpoints, and to develop higher-level perspectives on the issues. By examining the implications of the model, then changing it and trying out different assumptions, participants develop a shared understanding and reach agreement about the way forward.

Stages in a Typical Decision Conference

Four stages typify most decision conferences, though every event is different. The first phase is a broad exploration of the issues. In the second stage, a model is constructed of participants' judgements about the issues, incorporating available data. All key perspectives are included in the model, which is continuously projected so all participants can oversee every aspect of creating the model.

In the third stage, the model combines these perspectives, reveals the collective consequences of individual views, and provides a basis for extensive exploration of the model, always done on-line. Discrepancies between model results and members' judgements are examined, causing new intuitions to emerge, new insights to be generated and new perspectives to be revealed.

Revisions are made and further discrepancies explored; after several iterations the new results and changed intuitions are more in harmony. Then the group moves on to the fourth stage summarising key issues and conclusions, formulating next steps and, if desired, agreeing an action plan or set of recommendations. The facilitator prepares a report of the event's products

after the meeting and circulates it to all participants. A follow-through meeting is often held to deal with afterthoughts, additional data and new ideas.

The Role of Facilitators

The group is aided by two facilitators from outside the organisation who are experienced in working with groups. The main tasks of the facilitators are to see and understand the group life, and to intervene, when appropriate, to help the group stay in the present and maintain a task orientation to its work.

The facilitators attend to the processes occurring in the group, provide structure for the group's tasks, but refrain from contributing to content. They structure the discussions, helping participants to identify the issues and think creatively and imaginatively. The facilitators help participants in how to think about the issues without suggesting what to think.

The Benefits of Decision Conferencing

The marriage in Decision Conferencing of information technology, group processes and modelling of issues provides value-added to a meeting that is more than the sum of its parts. Follow-up studies, conducted by the Decision Analysis Unit at the London School of Economics and by the Decision Techtronics Group at the State University of New York, of decision conferences in the United Kingdom and the United States, for organisations in both the private and public sectors, consistently show higher ratings from participants for decision conferences than for traditional meetings.

Organisations using Decision Conferencing report that the process helps them to arrive at better and more acceptable solutions than can be achieved using usual procedures, and agreement is reached more quickly. Many decision conferences have broken through stalemates created previously by lack of consensus, by the complexity of the problem, by vagueness and conflict of objectives, by ownership in 'fiefdoms', and by failure to think creatively and freshly about the issues.

Why Decision Conferencing Works

Decision Conferencing is effective for several reasons. First, participants are selected to represent all key perspectives on the issues, so agreed actions are unlikely to be stopped by someone else arguing that the group failed to consider a major factor. Second, with no fixed agenda or prepared presentations, the meeting becomes 'live', the group works in the 'here-and-now', and participants get to grips with the real issues that help to build consensus about the way forward.

Third, the model plays a crucial role in generating commitment. All model inputs are generated by the participants and nothing is imposed, so that the final model is the creation of the group, thereby 'owned' by participants. Perhaps most important, the model helps to minimise the threat to individuality posed by the group life: the model reveals higher-level perspectives that can resolve differences in individual views, and through sensitivity analysis shows agreement about the way forward in spite of differences of opinion about details.

Fourth, computer modelling helps to take the heat out of disagreements. The model allows participants to try different judgements without commitment, to see the results, and then to change their views. Instant play-back of results which can be seen by all participants helps to generate new perspectives, and to stimulate new insights about the issues.

A Short History of Decision Conferencing

Decision Conferencing was developed in the late 1970s by Dr Cameron Peterson and his colleagues at Decisions and Designs, Inc., largely as a response to the difficulty in conducting a single decision analysis for a problem with multiple stakeholders, each of whom takes a different perspective on the issues.

The approach was taken up in 1981 at the LSE's Decision Analysis Unit by Dr Larry Phillips, who integrated into the facilitator's role many of the findings about groups from work at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The service and supporting software continued to be developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s at the LSE and now through Catalyze Limited.

As Decision Conferencing spread around the globe, facilitators felt a need to share experiences, so they created the International Decision Conferencing Forum, which meets annually, and the UK Decision Conferencing Forum, which gathers twice a year. Decision Conferencing is now offered by about 20 organisations located in the United Kingdom, the United States, Portugal, Australia and Hungary.

When is Decision Conferencing appropriate?

Decision conferencing can be applied to most major issues facing private organisations, government departments, charities and voluntary organisations. Topics typically cover operations, planning or strategy. For example, organisations have used Decision Conferencing to develop corporate plans and strategies; to evaluate alternative visions for the future; to prioritise R&D projects and create added value; to design factories, ships and computer systems; to resolve conflict between groups; to allocate limited resources across budget categories; to evaluate the effectiveness of government policies, schemes and projects; to improve utilisation of existing buildings and plant; to determine the most effective use of an advertising budget; to assess alternative sites for a technological development; to deal with a crisis imposed by potentially damaging claims in a professional journal; to develop a strategy to respond to a new government initiative and to create a new policy for health care provision.

Any issue that would benefit from a meeting of minds in the organisation can be effectively resolved with Decision Conferencing, which provides a way for 'many heads to be better than one.'

Guidelines

Experience shows that Decision Conferencing works best in organisations when four conditions are met reasonably well. First, the style of decision making in the organisation should allow for consultation and deliberation, time allowing. Second, the organisation should be open to change, for decision conferencing is usually experienced as a very different way to deal with complex issues.

Third, a climate of problem solving should exist, so that options can be freely explored. Finally, authority and accountability should be well-distributed throughout the organisation, neither concentrated at the top nor totally distributed toward the bottom. When these conditions are met, Decision Conferencing can release the creative potential of groups in ways that enable both the individual and the organisation to benefit.