

4-H Volunteer Leaders' Series

Making Group Decisions

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Problem-Solving Approach

One of the first decisions a new group makes is what decision-making style to use during meetings. Often groups use an informal procedure that appears like a group of people talking together. Though the procedure is flexible, there is a general agreement on how to discuss information and make decisions. There is usually a list of items to cover or an agenda. Everyone has the responsibility of keeping the discussion moving and of making decisions. This is the problem-solving approach.

Using this approach in your club means group leaders and members can concentrate their most creative thinking on the problems rather than on the proper way to make and dispose of motions and amendments.

- Emphasis will be on resolving differences and arriving at the best possible solution for the entire group.
- When a conflict arises, final decisions can be delayed until more adequate solutions are designed by the group.
- In a cooperative effort, members come to see the need for some "give and take." What is best for an individual is not always best for the entire group.

- When agreement is reached, it is ratified simply by a show of hands or a voice vote of those in favor and those opposed.

Decisions your club reaches by general agreement can be as effective, or more effective, than voting.

1. Describe the Issue or Problem

The first step is to describe the issue or problem that needs group decision or action. State the problem clearly so that everyone knows what is under discussion. For example: "Tonight we need to discuss our participation in the county fair parade." At times it is helpful to state the problem in writing so group members have a clear understanding of the issues to be decided.

2. Collect Necessary Facts

The second step is to collect all necessary facts and ideas about the problem. Decisions are reached more readily when problems are clearly defined and well understood. Make careful distinctions between facts and opinions. Facts concerning the county fair parade would include the time, date, place, types of entries (floats, decorated bikes, horse groups), etc. "Boy, a float is a lot of work and it's always hot on fair parade day," expresses an opinion, not fact.



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It is important that members have a complete and accurate picture in order to make wise decisions. Many decisions are made right on the spot, without additional information and often with little discussion. However, if more information is needed, it is wise to wait until members obtain it. Perhaps go on to another item of business while members collect information – maybe the date or the theme. It is usually beneficial to involve the members in obtaining the needed information.

3. List Possible Solutions

The third step is to make a list of all possible solutions or courses of action. Most 4-H clubs tend to center attention either on the first proposal mentioned or what was done in previous years rather than explore all of the possibilities. After exploring a variety of alternatives, group members can combine their thinking to arrive at a solution that has the most member support. The president should keep the discussion going until the group appears satisfied all possible courses of action have been explored.

Review goals from time to time to keep the discussion centered on the group's objectives. Ask, "How can this decision help us to meet our goals?"

For complex problems, record suggestions on a chalkboard so the important points are available to everyone.

4. Select Best Solution

After exploring the various alternatives, the club is ready for the next step – review the possibilities and select the best solution. Formulate a final decision by eliminating, combining or revising items on the list. The process usually generates interest and participation from group members.

As a leader you can talk with the club about working out a solution without the complication of motions and amendments. This is useful in clubs with a large percentage of younger members or when members have little or no training in parliamentary procedure. After a discussion, members usually catch on to the new approach quickly.

However, if someone forgets or makes a motion to push a point of view, the president can review the procedure the group has agreed to follow and ask that the motion be held until the group completes the discussion. Then, if the member is not pleased with the outcome, the president can entertain the motion.

5. Carry Through

When the solution is reached, read it to the group so everyone is clear on what is proposed. At this point, either accept the decision through an expression of consensus or by a vote on a motion. For example, after the reading of a final version the president can say, "All in favor of this proposal say 'Aye' – opposed 'No'." When the interest of the entire group is taken into account, there is seldom opposition at this point. If the club wants a more formal procedure, the president may ask if someone will state the proposal in the form of a motion. After a second and the opportunity for additional discussion, a vote is taken.

Don't stop at this point. Make plans to implement the decision! When a decision calls for action, the president can spell out the work to be done, outline the steps to be taken, and finally, appoint the members to carry out the decision.

Evaluate Efforts

The last step, evaluation, although often forgotten, is important to future planning. If good records are kept and suggestions for improvement made, the job will be easier in the future. A good question for evaluating is: "What would we do differently if we had to do it again?" "Why?"

You Have a Choice

More formal groups generally use parliamentary procedure which has well-established decision-making procedures. Larger groups sometimes use parliamentary procedure because they feel it provides for more orderly meetings. If you use this method, have all officers and advisors familiar with the process so meetings can move along smoothly.

In 4-H, both parliamentary procedure and some form of problem-solving process are used and both work. The style of decision making a group uses depends on the group, members' interests and what the leaders and members feel most comfortable with. Your club may choose to use parliamentary procedure, the problem-solving method or a combination of the two.

Summary of Steps

1. Describe the problem or issue before the club.
2. Collect all necessary information.
3. List all possible solutions.
4. Review alternatives and select best solution.
5. Carry through on the decision.
6. Evaluate the results.

Advantages of Problem Solving

Many groups feel that the problem-solving process has the following advantages:

- Group discussions can result in higher quality decisions.
- Each member has maximum opportunity to participate.
- Decisions reflect the feeling of the total group.
- Conflict is easier to resolve.
- Group decisions lead to group action. People support what they create.

Reprinted for use in Arkansas from materials developed by the University of Missouri - Columbia, 4H Youth Program.

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