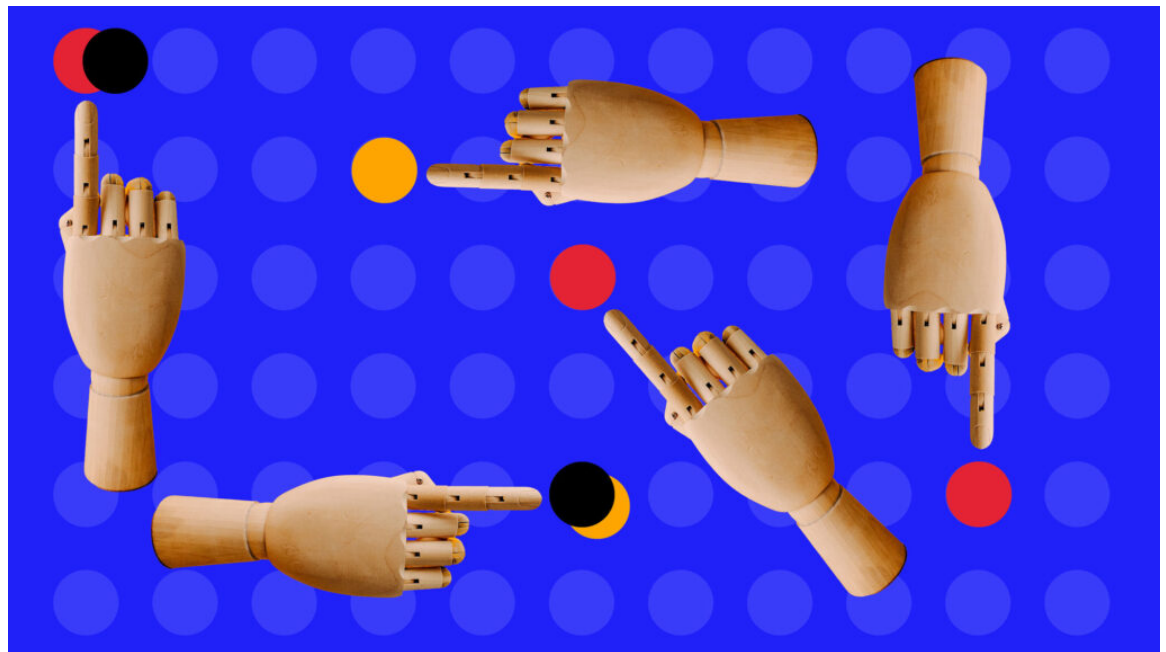


DECISION MAKING

# 7 Strategies for Better Group Decision-Making

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When you have a tough business problem to solve, you likely bring it to a group. After all, more minds are better than one, right? Not necessarily. Larger pools of knowledge are by no means a guarantee of better outcomes. Because of an over-reliance on hierarchy, an instinct to prevent dissent, and a desire to preserve harmony, many groups fall into *groupthink*.

Misconceived expert opinions can quickly distort a group decision. Individual biases can easily spread across the group and lead to outcomes far outside individual preferences. And most of these processes occur subconsciously.

This doesn't mean that groups shouldn't make decisions together, but you do need to create the right process for doing so. Based on behavioral and decision science research and years of application experience, we have identified seven simple strategies for more effective group decision making:

**Keep the group small when you need to make an important decision.** Large groups are much more likely to make biased decisions. For example, [research](#) shows that groups with seven or more members are more susceptible to confirmation bias. The larger the group, the greater the tendency for its members to research and evaluate information in a way that is consistent with pre-existing information and beliefs. By keeping the group to between three and five people, a size that people naturally gravitate toward when interacting, you can reduce these negative effects while still benefitting from multiple perspectives.

**Choose a heterogeneous group over a homogenous one (most of the time).** [Various studies](#) have found that groups consisting of individuals with homogeneous opinions and beliefs have a greater tendency toward biased decision making. Teams that have potentially opposing points of view can more effectively counter biases. However, [context matters](#). When trying to complete complex tasks that require diverse skills and perspectives, such as conducting research and designing processes, heterogeneous groups may substantially outperform homogeneous ones. But in repetitive tasks, requiring convergent thinking in structured environments, such as adhering to safety procedures in flying or healthcare, homogenous groups often do better. As a leader, you need first to understand the nature of the decision you're asking the group to make before you assemble a suitable team.

**Appoint a strategic dissenter (or even two).** One way to counter undesirable groupthink tendencies in teams is to appoint a "[devil's advocate](#)." This person is tasked with acting as a counterforce to the group's consensus. [Research](#) shows that empowering at least one person with the right to challenge the team's decision making process can lead to significant improvements in decision quality and outcomes. For larger groups with seven or more members, appoint at least two devil's advocates to be sure that a sole strategic dissenter isn't isolated by the rest of the group as a disruptive troublemaker.

**Collect opinions independently.** The collective knowledge of a group is only an advantage if it's used properly. To get the most out of your team's diverse capabilities, we recommend gathering opinions individually before people share their thoughts within the wider group. You can ask team members to record their ideas independently and anonymously in a shared document, for example. Then ask the group to assess the proposed ideas, again independently and anonymously, without assigning any of the suggestions to particular team members. By following such an iterative process [teams can counter biases](#) and resist groupthink. This process also makes sure that perceived seniority, alleged expertise, or hidden agendas don't play a role in what the group decides to do.

**Provide a safe space to speak up.** If you want people to share opinions and engage in constructive dissent, they need to [feel they can speak up](#) without fear of retribution. Actively encourage reflection on and discussion of divergent opinions, doubts, and experiences in a respectful manner. There are

[three basic elements](#) required to create a safe space and harness a group's diversity most effectively. First, focus feedback on the decision or discussed strategy, not on the individual. Second, express comments as a suggestion, not as a mandate. Third, express feedback in a way that shows you empathize with and appreciate the individuals working toward your joint goal.

**Don't over-rely on experts.** Experts can help groups make more informed decisions. However, [blind trust in expert opinions](#) can make a group susceptible to biases and distort the outcome. [Research](#) demonstrates that making them part of the decision-making can sway the team to adapt their opinions to those of the expert or make overconfident judgments. Therefore, invite experts to provide their opinion on a clearly defined topic, and position them as informed outsiders in relation to the group.

**Share collective responsibility.** Finally, the outcome of a decision may be influenced by elements as simple as the choice of the group's messenger. We often observe one single individual being responsible for selecting suitable group members, organizing the agenda, and communicating the results. When this is the case, individual biases can easily influence the decision of an entire team. [Research](#) shows that such negative tendencies can be effectively counteracted if different roles are assigned to different group members, based on their expertise. Moreover, all members should [feel accountable](#) for the group's decision making process and its final outcome. One way to do that is to ask the team to sign a joint responsibility statement at the outset, leading to a more balanced distribution of power and a more open exchange of ideas.

Of course, following these steps doesn't guarantee a great decision. However, the better the quality of the decision-making process and the interaction between the group members, the greater your chances of reaching a successful outcome.

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