

Tips and Tools for PEPFAR Teams

Team Decision Making: The Gradients of Agreement

Decision making can be a big challenge with any team, especially when they involve interagency members and structures, and decision making authorities that are collectively shared. Even under the best of circumstances – when there is commitment to mission, shared values, and good intent – it is hard to blend the cultures and procedures of the different organizations. Working together and making collective decisions takes more time and effort.

Facilitating for Consensus

Consensus on a decision means that each team member says they buy-in to the decision and actively support its implementation, even if they did not think it was the very best decision.

For the PEPFAR country team, consensus is obviously needed during preparation of the Country Operations Plan (COP), the PEPFAR Strategy, and the Partnership Framework (PF), and the Framework Implementation Strategy.

The definition of consensus may be clear, but the part about “yes, I buy-in” and “no, I don’t buy-in” is a little more complicated.

One reason for the complication is that “yes” and “no” can have many different meanings. Yes might mean “I love this decision” or it might mean “I’ll support this decision even though I preferred a different proposal.” No might mean “I’m not yet convinced but getting there” or it might mean “I could never ever live with that decision.”

An expanded vocabulary to account for gradients of “yes” and “no” helps team members better describe their thinking and feelings about a proposal and be honest. Team members can register less-than-whole-hearted support without fearing that their statement will be interpreted as a veto. It also provides the team with a way to gauge support quickly and with less ambivalence tension.

Team Decision Making Gradients of Agreement

Enthusiastic Support

1. Fully support - *“I like it.”*
2. Endorsement with minor concerns - *“Basically I like it.”*

Lukewarm Support

3. Agree with reservations - *“I can live with it.”*
4. Abstain - *“I have no opinion.”*
5. Stand aside - *“I don’t like this, but I don’t want to hold up the group.”*

Meager Support

6. Disagreement, but willing to go with majority - *“I want my disagreement noted, but I’ll support the decision.”*
7. Disagreement, with request not to be involved in implementation - *“I don’t want to stop anyone else, but I don’t want to be involved in implementing it.”*

Strong Objection

8. Can’t support the proposal

Gradients of Agreement¹

The scale on the previous page has eight gradients of agreement. These eight gradients – from “Strong Objection” to “Enthusiastic Support” – provide team members with a wider choice of vocabulary to indicate their level of support for a proposal.

To illustrate how to use the gradients of agreement scale in team decision making, let’s categorize levels of team support as enthusiastic, lukewarm, meager, or ambiguous. If the majority of team members have strong objections, it is clear that there is no support for the proposal being considered.

Enthusiastic Support means that most team members register their support closer toward the top end of the scale. They fully endorse it, they endorse with a minor point of contention, or they agree with reservations. People often think that their group should always strive to attain the highest level of agreement. But few realize how much work it takes to find a line of thought that

incorporates all points of view. More often than not, enthusiastic support is hard to obtain. Higher levels of support, however, are critical for decisions that affect the whole team and where everyone is involved in implementing and representing the decision.

Lukewarm Support means that most members of the team cluster in the middle of the scale. They stand aside or abstain or agree with reservations. Their overall level of support is lukewarm, not enthusiastic. In most cases, lukewarm support is perfectly adequate – for example, when the decision only affects a few people or when the stakes are low.

Meager Support means that although some team members are clustered towards the top of the chart, others (40-50%) are clustered in the lower part of the chart. While it is obviously risky to implement a decision that is based on meager support, sometimes the risk is justified – in an emergency, for example. There are also non-emergency decisions that are inherently risky, and leaders are called upon to make risky decisions.

¹ This is the Community AT Work Gradients of Agreement Scale, 1996

Considerations for the Appropriate Level of Support and Investment of the Team

Here are some variables to consider when determining whether to seek enthusiastic support.

Overall Importance of the Result	Expected Longevity of the Result	Difficulty of the Issue at Hand	Need for Stakeholder Buy-In	Empowerment of Team Members
Enthusiastic support is desirable whenever the stakes are so high that the consequences of failure would be severe.	Some decisions are not easily reversible and are worth spending whatever time it takes to get them right (e.g. the selection of an implementing partner). Decisions with a short lifespan may not require significant time investments to reach.	The tougher the issue, the more time and effort a team should expect to expend. Routine problems, by contrast, don’t require long drawn-out discussions.	When many people have a stake in the outcome of the decision, it is worth the effort to include everyone’s thinking in the development of that decision. When a decision affects only a few people, the process need not be as inclusive.	When members will be expected to use their own judgment and creativity to implement a decision, the more they will need to understand the reasoning behind that decision. The process of seeking enthusiastic support pushes people to think through the logic of the issues at hand.

When a team is faced with meager support for a proposal, its challenge is to evaluate whether it is wiser to slow down and search for a better idea, or whether it is wiser to act quickly and take the risk.

Ambiguous Support means that team members are all over the scale in response to an issue or a proposal. Ambiguous support can mean that the original problem was poorly defined. In other words, a team can't agree on a decision if they don't agree on the problem. Ambiguous results suggest that the team could benefit from more discussion. Yet many teams would treat this result as indicating unanimity, since no vetoes were exercised.

Here are some suggestions for using this tool to test for the level of team agreement on any topic or proposal:

There are two ways to consider using the gradients. First, you may use the gradients at the beginning of a team meeting to see the initial level of support and agreement on the issue before you engage in lengthy discussions. Obviously if there is enthusiastic support, you can quickly move on to other topics. If there is lukewarm, meager, or ambiguous support, you will then know where to focus your discussion.

The second time to use the gradients is after you've invested time in exploring the issue and have given all members adequate time to express their ideas, excitement, or concerns. The collaborative dialogue takes time and requires skillful expression and listening. After you've had this time of exchange, then you can re-poll and see where the team is leaning. If there has been significant movement or coalescing of support then you may be ready for a final decision. If not, it indicates the need for more time and work to address the concerns that have been raised.

When using the gradients of agreement, it helps to write the gradients on a flipchart and hang it in the meeting room. After a group has used the gradients a few times, they can use numbers to represent the different gradients – e.g., 1 for “fully support” and 8 for “strongly object” as in the following example:

Gradients of Agreement

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
X	X		X	X			
X	X						
X							

Suggested steps:

1. Clearly state the topic or proposal being discussed. Remember a team may have very scattered results if the topic and focus of the discussion is vague or poorly understood.
2. Ask team members to express their level of support at this time in the process. There are a variety of ways to capture their level of support:
 - Ask for a show of hands – “Please raise your hand if you are at #1, endorsement.” Then repeat for #2, etc.
 - Individual statements - Go around the room, one person at a time, and ask each person to state which gradient he or she prefers, and why. At this point you don't want group discussion; only listening for understanding.
 - Simultaneous declaration – Have each person write the gradient (word or number) of his or her preference in block letters on a large piece of paper. On cue, have everyone hold up his/her card. Record the data.
 - Secret ballot – Have each person write his/her preference on a slip of paper. When everyone has finished, collect the ballots and tally the results.

If you are conducting the first poll before in-depth discussion, be sure to let people know that the first poll is a preliminary round and that it will be followed by a brief discussion and then a final poll. After a brief, time-limited discussion, poll again. This method lets a person see where others stand before he or she registers a final preference.

Conclusion

The Gradients of Agreement is not just a voting process. Using the language of the gradients combined with collaborative dialogue will allow a group to quickly see the level of support for a proposal to ensure that each member has the

opportunity to express his or her ideas and better understand what is important to each member. Through this collaborative decision-making process, the team will build a solution that has a broad, enthusiastic level of support and will enhance the commitment and likely success of the resulting decision.

Additional Reading

How to Make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems, and Make Decisions, David Straus. (Available from www.amazon.com)

Facilitator's Guide to participatory Decision-Making, Sam Kaner (Available from www.amazon.com)

