

Decision-Making with Family Leaders

How decisions are made is one of the most important factors in how family leaders will feel about their experience at a table. More specifically, family leaders want to know how their participation will ultimately shape the decisions and outcomes of the group.



When family leader input is reflected in the decisions made by a table, the family leader typically feels empowered, as though their time and participation was worthwhile, and satisfied knowing they made a difference for other families. Unfortunately, in too many scenarios family leaders report feeling frustrated because they don't see their input shaping group decisions. In these scenarios, the family leader can end up feeling like they were included only for show and not because their voice was actually valued. This is deeply disempowering and makes family leaders feel like their time was wasted. This makes family leaders more skeptical of and less willing to participate in family engagement efforts moving forward.

Several factors go into shaping how a family leader will feel about the table's decision-making process and its ultimate outcomes. These include:

- Shared understanding of the decision-making power of the group.
- The decision-making process itself: Did everyone have input into choosing what decision-making process the group will use? How is the process implemented in practice?
- What approach is in place to screen decisions for whether they include family leaders input before they advance?



Shared understanding of what decision-making power the group has

From the onset, it is important that everyone at the table has a shared understanding of what power the table has to make decisions and over what. Much of this should be clarified in the goals and purpose of the table – why has the table been convened?

It is also important that everyone at the table is aware if:

- Certain decisions will ultimately be made by the convening organization instead of the table
- Everyone will be included in all decisions or some will be made by a smaller sub-group
- There is funding available to implement the decisions made by the table or if budget decisions will ultimately be made elsewhere.

This shared understanding helps ensure everyone at the table, including family leaders, has clear expectations of what power the table has to make decisions.

At the same time, when the table has the power to make decisions, it is essential that all participants have access to the same information with enough time to review it prior to meetings where decisions will be made. Oftentimes professionals/organizational representatives may have access to data not easily available to family leaders. If this data is relevant to the decisions before the table, it needs to be provided with enough advance notice for the family leaders to review and ask questions if needed.

The decision-making process

The two primary approaches to decision-making commonly used by tables are majority rule or consensus decision-making.

This table developed by Prevention Collaboration in Action, based on work from the Education Development Center, outlines the differences, pros/cons, and variations of each. There may also be a hybrid approach in which members vote on less weighty decisions while building consensus for more important ones.

METHOD	VOTING	CONSENSUS
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Majority determines decisions (with the group first defining "majority")	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Every partner voices a position.• All team members agree to support the ultimate decision, even with it's not everyone's favorite choice.
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Familiar, conventional, efficient• Considered "fair" by most• Useful when time constraints make reaching consensus difficult	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensures buy-in of all members, thus increasing the likelihood of success.• Members strive to make the best decision for the group, rather than competing for personal preferences.• All perspectives are taken into account.

METHOD	VOTING	CONSENSUS
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not allow for discussion of minority opinions • May not encourage full-group interaction • Creates winners and losers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-consuming • The larger the group, the more difficult to execute • Can be contentious • Sometimes tedious
Variations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plurality: A large block of members supports a given decision. • Range Voting: Each member scores each option, then the option with the highest average. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fist-to-Five: Team members use specific hand signals to: block consensus (fist), suggest changes (one finger), discuss minor issues (two fingers), pass without discussion (three fingers), affirm the decision (four fingers), or volunteer to take a lead in implementing the new decision (five fingers). • Red/Yellow/Green Colored Cards: A red card indicates opposition to the decision, a yellow card indicates reservations, and a green card signifies consent.
Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group many need to decide which individuals are "voting" members (e.g., based on length of participation, attendance at a minimum number of meetings). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpful to use an experienced facilitator to guide discussions • Helpful to record decision points on a flip chart to avoid ambiguity and ensure that everyone understand the different options

(Prevention Collaboration in Action. Decision-Making Models: Voting versus Consensus. Retrieved from: <https://healthandlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Decision-Making-Models-Voting-versus-Consensus.pdf>; Education Development Center, Inc. (2013). How do we make decisions? Retrieved from www.promoteprevent.org)

Neither approach is right or wrong. The important thing is that there is transparency in the decision-making process and the process is established prior to the point where decisions need to be made. Ideally, all participants at the table will be involved in determining which approach is adopted early in the table's formation.



Ensuring Family Leader Voice is Included

Whichever decision-making process is selected, it's important to build in a process to screen proposals for whether they include family leader input before they reach the final decision-making point.

How formal or informal this process is may vary by group, but ultimately it means taking a pause to consider whether whatever proposal is being put forward includes the input of family leaders at the table and whether it reflects and is true to the needs of those closest to the decision being made. If the group doesn't feel confident this is the case, then it is worth taking a moment to consider why and if there is another approach that might better include the perspectives and needs of families.



Ultimately, decision-making is where the power of tables to make change resides. Ensuring that family leaders are a part of that process will not only result in better decisions but also more positive experiences for those involved.

Ensuring Family Voice and Equity in Decision-Making Tool

Directions:

- Answer this set of questions for each decision on policies or programs impacting families that a table is about to consider.
- If the table does not feel confident family voice and equity are reflected in the proposal after responding to these questions, it is worth pausing to revisit why and what might need to be changed before the proposal moves forward to the final decision-making step.

Have the families closest to and most likely to be impacted by the decision being made been meaningfully involved in crafting the proposal?

Do the families engaged reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of those closest to and most likely to be impacted by the decision being made?

Does the proposal meet the expressed needs of the families closest to the decision being made?

Does the proposal address concerns raised by impacted families and incorporate feedback provided?

Is there an ongoing feedback loop embedded in the proposed decision and accountability to ensure family input continues to be incorporated during implementation?

Does this proposal advance racial equity by contributing to the closure of the opportunity gap and the well-being of children and families of color?

Does the proposal reflect a data component that is disaggregated by race/ethnicity and language on an ongoing basis? Will that data be used to inform policy/program decisions and implementation?

Who will most benefit from the proposed decision and why? Who does not benefit? What are the unintended consequences for communities of color?

Who has the power to implement this decision and how are they accountable to directly impacted families, and specifically families and communities of color?

Adapted from the MomsRising Early Learning Racial Equity Analysis and the Early Learning Action Alliance Racial Equity Tool