

Decision Making Process Committee Process and Overview—2008

“Because several persons had expressed concern over using *Roberts Rules of Order*, particularly to ‘call the question,’ which ends discussion and brings the issue to a vote, and because others were generally dissatisfied with various decision processes used in the past, a committee was appointed by the Deacon Council in December 2007 to look at the decision making process” (Deacon Council Minutes 1/13/2008). The group included Boyd Rogers, Grace Evans, Kenny Gahagan, Suzanne Newton, and Becky Veazey. Nancy Petty was staff liaison with the group.

The group met multiple times over the course of several months. Initially group members began by exploring our own feelings and experiences and creating a vision of what we hope to accomplish. The group reviewed various decision processes used by Pullen in the past and the advantages, disadvantages, and outcomes. Group members researched and read various literature and practices regarding decision models in the spheres of business, government and non profit management, social organizing, and other faiths including Quakers, Mennonites, and others. We explored various meanings of consensus and the advantages and disadvantages to its use.

The group also sought broader input from the congregation in the form of a survey issued as part of the August 2008 *PullenNews*. We received 25 responses and their comments significantly informed our discussion and suggestions.

It became clear to the group that a consensus-based decision process was desirable. It also became clear that the unanimity, especially for decision processes involving the entire congregation, was not realistic. Based on our research, discussion, and careful consideration of input from others, the following suggestions/reflections are submitted to Deacon Council. These suggestions/reflections are made, not as recommendations to adopt and implement, but rather to begin to explore and continue to evolve our processes with the input of others.

I. Decision Making Covenant

This covenant is intended to be read jointly at the beginning of decision-making meetings to help the group focus on our purpose, help open us to the thinking of others, encourage us to contribute our thoughts, and help us commit to an effective process.

“We are a Christ-centered community seeking what is best for our church.

In our community we experience the presence of love and meet God in each other even while we struggle together to reach solutions.

Aware that there are a variety of ways of seeing, our duty to each other is to participate fully in the process, listening to each other with open minds and hearts until jointly we discern the direction we should take.

We trust the good intentions of all participants, believing that all the people want what is best for the church.”

II. Values and Beliefs

These values and beliefs came as a synthesis of a) what we gleaned from our research, b) our learnings from input from others and c) our own past experiences. We share these to help communicate some of the concepts that we believe will improve our decision processes.

1. Our belief and faith in God is what defines us. Our processes should be consistent with our belief and faith in God and with the church's values.
2. The community remains important throughout the process—all voices contribute. Maintaining the community is as important as any one decision. Consensus processes can help build community where votes sometimes divide.
3. Our process should reflect our lay-led tradition and the Baptist belief in the "priesthood of the believer" while acknowledging the role of the ministerial staff.
4. We seek to create an environment where people are comfortable speaking their truths and concerns even if it means disagreeing with others. It is important to structure congregational conversations to insure that each person can speak and be heard—we are talking with each other rather than "at" each other.
5. Recognizing that any or all of us may at some time hold a minority view, we therefore respect and appreciate those who, during any discussion, hold minority views.
6. We seek to develop solutions that meet the important interests of all, but we may not always have unanimity.
7. A process that values people leads to good decisions and a stronger community, and will engender internal commitments that are important to the long term success of decisions and their effective implementation.
8. Improving our decision making process will take time and patience as we learn "by doing" what practices are most effective.

III. Guidelines for Meetings

These values and beliefs led us to suggest the following guidelines for meetings:

1. The meeting structure/process sets a tone that influences the quality of the conversation and the decision.
2. How we physically structure our conversation space influences the quality of the conversation.
3. Facilitative leadership training is important for each new group of council and committee chairs.
4. We seek to provide factual, transparent, relevant information so that members can make informed decisions.
5. Any process should be flexible enough to reflect new information.
6. For a typical meeting we might:

- Have a scribe, and a facilitator who stays neutral on content and encourages listening.
- Distribute agenda ahead of time
- Provide relevant data in advance
- Begin with covenant, prayer, and song
- Have an opening statement of the purpose of the meeting and the process
- Identify where the current meeting falls in the total decision process and describe next steps
- Capture the ideas and interests of participants on a flip chart to insure that all are heard
- End with prayer and song

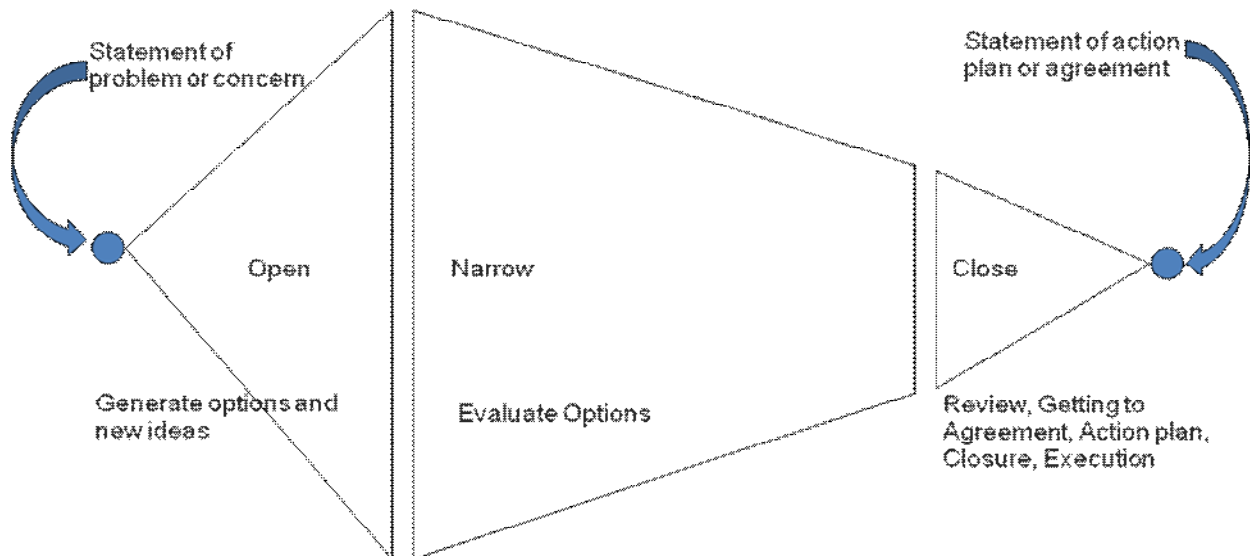
7. The degree of consensus needed is in direct proportion to the degree of commitment needed to the outcome by the group or congregation to make the decision successful.

8. The primary time Robert's Rules are useful is after the group has developed a strong consensus on the desired direction (in the final stage of the decision model) as the *formal* affirmation of consensus. Voting without first developing consensus potentially damages relationships.

IV. Process Models

This model is a visual example of a process that follows the principles we are suggesting.

Process Model



This general shape applies in a long-term process, but also works when/if a single agenda item is being discussed during a meeting.

1. Stating the problem/concern

- It is important to be specific when stating the concern or problem, and to use concrete terms so that everyone will understand the problem and agree on what the problem is.

- The problem should not be stated in terms of a solution, but rather the gap between present and desired conditions. To state the problem as a solution might prevent the exploration of other effective solutions.

2. The Open Phase is

- For analyzing the concern/problem and generating options for addressing it.
- For evaluating the concern/problem to determine whether it is a single question or multiple questions.
- For separating the concern/problem from any proposed solution brought at the same time, since this phase is specifically for brainstorming options.

3. The Narrow Phase (the facilitator should be sure everyone knows the discussion is leaving the open phase and entering the narrow phase)

- The Narrow Phase is for evaluating the options presented in the open phase.
- The Narrow Phase will eliminate some options and further develop consensus about the options participants still want to consider.
- The goal is to reach consensus on an approach if possible. This approach could include multiple solutions.

4. The Close Phase

- During the Close Phase, participants may vote to affirm the consensus if one has been reached, or if only options acceptable to everyone have been reached.
- If multiple conflicting options are still on the table, participants may utilize voting as a way to move beyond any impasse that exists.
- The outcome of the Close Phase is an action plan for moving forward based on the decision.

5. For a process that spans more than one meeting, each meeting should begin with a review of what has transpired to date.

6. If a new option arises during the narrowing phase, it is the responsibility of the facilitator and/or moderator to ask if there is value in reverting to the Open Phase to examine the new option. If there is consensus, then the Open Phase is revisited to consider this and other new options.

7. Consensus should be reached at each transition before moving on. Everyone should be made aware when the process is in either opening, narrowing, or closing.

8. Within any meeting, addressing a routine agenda item requires simply naming the item. The opening phase might be as simple as asking if there are questions about the item. The narrowing phase might be discussion related to that item. Closing could be a call for consensus or a vote.

9. The shape is useful for guiding any type of meeting, whether to discuss a large decision before the church or to conduct a council or committee meeting.

- The statement of problem/concern is a call to order, stating the purpose of the meeting.
- The opening is for setting the agenda, stating process ground rules, and asking for additional agenda items.
- The narrowing is for conducting the meeting itself.

- The closing is for a summary of decisions made, action items or next steps, the time and date of the next meeting, and adjournment.

Another potential process model is this one used for decision making/problem solving. Both use similar approaches.

