

Maximizing Willingness: Facilitating Efficiency in Collaborative Decision-Making

Why Collaborative Decision-Making?

The principle of including people in decision-making can often be a hard sell because most people don't have successful experiences combining inclusivity with efficiency. If one person makes the decision, or a management team, or a majority vote, as the case may be, the process appears faster and more efficient, qualities highly sought after in the high-speed environment of modern workplaces in particular.

In my experience, however, such shortcuts can be costly later. Including needs and perspectives of all parties affected by the decision is not just about making the care for everyone visible. It's also about effectiveness, and about leaders and decision-makers having access to information critical to the success of whatever strategy they want to implement. When it comes to implementation, suddenly there can be a gap, a problem, an issue that is blocking the implementation. Often it's delayed because people are afraid to speak for fear of consequences, or are discouraged about being heard, or don't trust their needs and perspectives matter. A colleague told me a story that illustrates the high cost of such fear. A company he works with had to recall an entire shipment of a product because no one had the courage to tell the company owners of a defect in the production process that was discovered much earlier. Hundreds of thousands of dollars could have been saved!

Additionally, people who are not active participants in a decision, and are not happy with the results, are unlikely to be committed to the success of the strategy chosen, to the point of even engaging in what is commonly called "sabotage" - people in the field making changes or obstructing implementation of decisions and agreements.

Lastly, even if implementation can proceed, the absence of explicit buy-in up front for a decision can often show up indirectly as conflict, resentment, or sarcasm down the line, affecting morale and therefore productivity.

Despite these high costs, more often than not unilateral decision-making continues to be the norm. D., a small business owner, articulates clearly what may be an underlying reason for this practice.

D: ... I don't take the time to get the buy-in and really hear them ... because I feel that if I hear them I need to do what they want... [This] somehow takes power away from me... a little bit of fear comes up that I'm giving up some control.

Like D., the management of many organizations continues to employ unilateral decision-making out of a concern that the only alternative is abdicating power altogether. More and more,

leaders take measures to hear the perspectives, needs, suggestions, and preferences of those they supervise, and take such input seriously as they reach their own decisions. However, the final decision remains in the hands of the leaders, and others have no *ultimate* say in the decision. The following dialogue with D. took place in a class I taught about collaborative decision-making.

Miki: So let's look at this for a moment, this fear of giving up control... it will block you from making the choice to collaborate and share power ... so let's not skip over it. So tell me why it's important to you to have the control ... what does it give you?

D: It's about being able to take care of the company and these people and being able to pay them and give them jobs.

Miki: So do you see the beauty behind this desire for control? It comes from care. So take a moment to breathe in and sit with that care – the care for the business, the care for the people's sustainability of people to work there and tell me if you're experiencing any softening.

D: Yeah, it's really coming from a place of care, not just possessiveness.

Miki: And the sad paradox is the more you push around what you're wanting to control the less visible to others is your care. Does that make sense why that would be?

D: Yes, all they see is you trying to jam something down their throat.

In contrast with this use of power, some organizations and individuals within them are learning to embrace more explicit power sharing. Power and resources are used in such a way that everyone's voices and needs are included and they have an explicit say in the outcome. The process I describe below is based on this use of power, and is designed to provide a clear, principled, and structured approach to reaching collaborative decisions without losing efficiency.

Overview of the Process - Principles

Let's face it, most of us sit in many meetings simply waiting for them to be over. Energy can ebb when each person expresses their opinion, agrees or disagrees with whoever spoke before, and adds their own thoughts to it. All the while no new information is added to what's already on the table, and we are not making any progress towards a decision. Conversely, the fast pace and transparency of the process I am proposing often reduces anxiety and meeting fatigue by making visible to the group the progress towards a decision. In addition, in my experience groups have found this process to be highly interactive and engaging, even fun.

When mastered, this process can be completed within 5-10 minutes with small or large groups (I have used it with a group of 250 people). The usual outcome of this process is a decision everyone is on board with. Another possible outcome is a shared recognition that a collaborative decision cannot be made within a short amount of time. The group can then choose to change the time constraints, or willingly accept a non-collaborative decision-making process. Ultimately we can get any group to make a decision about anything; it's just a

question of how much time, skilled facilitation, and attention to connection with everyone's needs and perspectives is necessary in order to get there, and whether those resources are available in the moment.

I discuss the process from the vantage point of a designated group facilitator. The same process can be used by decision-makers in a group or organization, provided attention is put into navigating power differences with care to create an environment where everyone's needs matter.

With some significant changes, the same process can also be used by any participant in a group. Such use requires a higher level of skill to make up for the absence of implicit entrustment from the group. For similar reasons, such use is more likely to stall, take longer, or end inconclusively. In the absence of structural power to provide a reason for others to listen, the only power available to the person attempting to navigate a group to collaborative decision making is the connection that s/he can forge with others.

NOTE: For the next two sections, I use excerpts from a live coaching session in which numerous people take the role of "Facilitator," practicing their skills in a mock scenario: A leadership group that meets monthly for two days is attempting to decide what to do on day two. In this mock scenario the group is divided as follows: about half of the group wants to go to another event for day two of a gathering; about half wants to stay with the original event; and two people want the group to stay together and are less attached to where that would be.

This process is based on the following premises, distinctions, and intentions.

1. **Distinction between needs and strategies.** Needs are distinguished from strategies in that needs refer to abstract qualities, aspirations, values, and goals rather than specific actions, people, time, location, or objects. Thus efficiency is a need, but a particular sequence of production steps is a strategy. Team cohesion is a need, but weekly staff meetings are a strategy. This distinction is key to the success of this collaborative decision-making process: we can include and address everyone's needs, because when we reach that level, needs are not in conflict; only strategies are in conflict.

In my experience, most people, most of the time, are not invested in their preferred outcome provided they are heard fully for what's behind their preferred outcome. When facilitating, listen carefully for three things:

- a. The preferred outcome or strategy
- b. The needs behind the preferred outcome
- c. The strength with which different people hold their preferred outcome (in general, if those with a strong preference work it out, others will likely go along)

2. **Distinction between preferred outcome and willingness.** Discussions often bog down because the conversation is focused on finding something that *everyone is happy* with instead of what *everyone can live* with. If we keep trying to get strategies that meet everybody's preferences we can easily generate endless discussion because preferences do not necessarily converge, although willingness often does. For example, some people may want a particular wording in an official document, because of a commitment to transparency. Others may be concerned about manageability in response to the potential increased volume of requests that would come from publishing that document. The former group may well be willing to live with *not* including some information in the document provided it's available upon request. Focusing on preferences tends to lead back to discordant strategies; focusing on the underlying needs helps people discern whether they can live with a particular strategy, even though it's not their preference.
3. **Collective ownership of needs.** You can keep inviting the group to consider *all* of the needs, and to uncouple the needs from the people who have expressed them. Collective ownership of all the needs is key to the possibility of reaching a decision within a short amount of time, because it de-polarizes a group and invites goodwill.
4. **Hearing others' needs supports shift in willingness.** Instead of arguing and convincing, in my experience one of the keys to collaborative decision-making is that people shift their positions and their willingness to live with a particular outcome when hearing other peoples' needs. And what makes it more likely to make room for being affected by hearing others' needs is the experience of knowing that our needs matter and are held with care.

Facilitator: So, I am now confused because I was going to the smallest group [the two that were primarily focused on staying together] and focusing there. I had an agenda-that they would shift. But now more of the group is shifting towards them. And that's a reversal of what I'd expected...

Group member 1: And that can pay off later in terms of their willingness to shift... Because you are creating a space where they are really having a sense that their needs matter so some of that anxiety is dissipating...

Group member 2: Yes, it's true... As one of the two people wanting to stay together, I have a little more openness... maybe not necessarily this time, but at another time... I am not as attached.

5. **Everyone matters.** The goal of the facilitator is to maximize connection and to maximize willingness rather than worry about fairness. For example, many more people in the group may favor a particular outcome, but a few people who favor another outcome feel very strongly about it, thus having less willingness to shift. You may choose the outcome that fewer people favor because everyone is willing to live with it.

Group Member: I liked the goodwill that turned up just by checking in with the smallest group. Now my gut says, "Go to the next biggest group. Check-in with their needs." Because that's going to turn up more goodwill and that is a GOOD thing. And the more goodwill is created, the more likely it is that a strategy pops into my head.

Miki: And there is also something that's really strategic about starting from the smallest group and then continuing...it's like training the majority to relax and not assume that just because they are in the majority they get what they want.

Group Member: Yes, and if you leave the smallest group out, they will feel even more marginalized. Then they will sabotage the result, no matter how much hard work you've done with everybody else.

6. **Facilitator as steward of the whole.** The ultimate outcome may be different than what anyone was initially favoring, including you. As part of the process, you will likely make proposals to the group based on what you hear from different people. However, even when making a proposal, remember that your goal is only to move the process forward towards finding something that works for all concerned.

Group Member: But as the facilitator, wouldn't you have an end result in mind that would look a certain way, or are you just there to support the group in making a decision?

Miki: Yes and no. By virtue of not being part of the group, I am constantly thinking about the question, "What strategy is most likely to fly?" whether I personally like it or not. If I wait for it to emerge from the group, that may take forever. I am completely not attached but I am constantly on the alert for it... having a (little) internal engineer that is constantly sitting there thinking, "Hmmm..."

7. **Stretching into willingness.** The strength of the invitation for people to stretch into willingness to live with an outcome that is *not* their preference varies based on several variables:
- a. How much stamina does the group have for remaining in uncertainty and continuing to explore options vs. how much urgency is there about reaching a decision? (the more urgency, the stronger the invitation)
 - b. How many people are favoring the outcome being proposed? (the more people, the stronger the invitation)
 - c. Where is there a willingness to shift? (the more some people have willingness to shift, the weaker the invitation to those who seem less likely to shift)
 - d. The purpose for which the group got together (the more production-oriented the group, the stronger the invitation).
8. **Distinction between willingness and compromise.** This distinction can be tricky, because the same strategy may be adopted in either case. In order to discern the difference, you can assess at least three factors:
- a. The degree to which people trust that their needs matter (without this trust, any shift in strategy is unlikely)
 - b. The degree to which people are able to hear the needs of other people
 - c. The degree to which people are able to integrate, accept, and care for the needs of other people.

The more these conditions are in place, the more easily people shift into willingness. The less these conditions are in place, the more likely people are to give up on their needs and agree to what they experience as a compromise, without true willingness.

While trying to maximize willingness, also check for cost. This process is not about a decision at all costs. In order to create something that works for everyone, invite people to stretch *to* willingness, but not *beyond* willingness. Often all you can offer the group is a reflection that the issue is too divided to make a decision without incurring "casualties" in terms of trust or goodwill.

Miki: In this case, I want to be open to accepting her willingness to just not go and let everyone else go. But if I am part of an ongoing group and she did that, I want to track it in some way for the future. Next month, if we have a decision, I am not as willing to accept her prioritizing others' needs, so I'll be sure to remind the group of this situation, and ensure that her needs/preferences are highlighted.

Group Member 1: What if you establish this really high threshold, "you can't imagine living without it" and somebody raises their hands still?

Miki: Then I say to the group, "So the reality of where we are is we can't right now make a decision that everybody can live with. That means either we lose some people or we take more time."

Group Member 2: But if they agree to lose some people, in some very broad sense we are right where we were at the beginning where we have essentially consensus rule, just with a little bit more connection.

Group Member 3: Not necessarily - because now we can acknowledge together that we couldn't figure out a way to get everyone's needs met.

Group Member 2: But if I am that one person I might not care about your acknowledgments. It's not enough for me. It feels more like, "oh, you left me behind."

Miki: So then, I can try something else if I am hearing that this is what's going on. I can say to the group: "So it's only one person but the strength of that is really big. If we move forward with a strategy that doesn't work for this person, it's a very high price right now for our group. Given this, I want to try to turn it around again and ask again for the people who were not willing to go along with that other strategy, knowing how costly it would be for this person..."

Group Member 2: When you put it that way I am actually willing to shift.

Miki: So, you see, I dart around until I find an opening.

Group Member 3: It seems really important to say that it would be so costly for that one person.

Group Member 2: Yes, by just saying that, I actually have a sense that you are willing to go out there for me and then I am less willing to disenfranchise the entire group...

Miki: Right, so then you come and say, "You know I am appreciating this but it's not costly enough that I would want to hold up the group," and then we have willingness. My primary search is for willingness. That's the commodity I am trying to maximize.

9. **Openness.** You don't have to walk in having it all figured out. Entrust yourself to the truth of the moment, not to any predefined notion of what the outcome will be or how you will get there. This requires cultivating flexibility, a relaxed attitude about what will happen, and allows for creativity with regards to strategies that are likely to work for everyone. Hold the process tightly, and the outcome lightly.
10. **Strategic use of every word.** In this context, strategic means moving the process towards conclusion. This means, at the very least:
 - a. Say everything only once unless you learn from the group something you said was not clear. If you repeat yourself, it's more draining for both you and the group. I have been training myself for some time now to ask somebody else to paraphrase, rather than repeat.
 - b. Consider how what you're about to say or ask can truly move the group towards a decision. And when you're unsure or not clear about what to do or say next, return to the big-picture intention: either to get to a decision or to have clarity that the group can't make a decision in this moment.
 - c. Make sure that everything you say ends with a clear request to the group. Any statement without a request leaves too much room for confusion, and usually disperses the energy.
 - d. Emphasize making requests that people can respond to without speaking (e.g. "I would like to see a show of hands: who is in favor of the strategy that was just proposed"). Asking individuals to speak is the most expensive strategy in terms of use of time, so invest this cost only if you believe it will give you a lot of information.
 - e. Invite brevity from the group by specifying the length of time you want them to speak, knowing that whatever you ask for, people are likely to talk longer, because most people want to be heard. If you ask people to say a couple of sentences, for example, you are inviting more discussion than fits within the narrow parameters of the time constraints. If you invite people to say a couple of words, then you are likely to get your two sentences.
 - f. Minimize the chances of hearing information twice from people by asking people to only speak if they have something different to say.
11. **Full responsibility for the process.** In different moments you are likely to invite the group to support you. Such support can take the form of keeping time, helping you track needs, reflecting what needs are being heard, and coming up with strategies to address the needs. The more you trust collective ownership of needs, the more you can turn to the group to ask for more support in tracking the process. However, the ultimate responsibility for the process resides with you; you are the one who is explicitly there to look after the group as a whole.

Step-by-Step Implementation

The description below assumes that an issue that needs to be decided is on the table. This may be an item on the official agenda of a group, or an issue that arose in the moment.

1. **"Contract:"** Find out what amount of time the group is willing to give you to try to reach a decision. People are often anxious about having an open-ended process for making a decision. "Contracting" for, say, 5 minutes and then re-checking with the group really helps calm a lot of people.

If you are not an official facilitator, this step is absolutely critical. Otherwise the lack of entrustment will prevent people from responding to your requests as you present them, and the group will likely dissolve into discussion, advice, and dissent. If you are not confident in using this process, ask for more time. Whatever amount of time you ask for, make sure you have a time-keeper that will support you in finishing within the amount of time you contracted for. Practice before you use this process, because it's unlikely that a group will grant you more than 10 minutes unless you are the official facilitator, and even then their willingness to continue engaging in the way you propose will diminish rapidly over the allotted time. I once led a group through a complex decision in 10 minutes, but in order to do that I repeatedly had to remind people that they gave me their agreement and asked them to wait with their objections until after the 10 minutes were up. By then they all saw that a decision had actually been made.

Example: "I'd like to ask for 10 minutes of your time to see if we can reach a decision about this. I am confident that within 10 minutes we could either reach a decision or learn that we need more connection and time to create a decision that everyone can live with. Does anyone object to using 10 minutes in this way?"

If the group does not grant you the contract, you are unlikely to get a decision in any amount of time. But you may want to try again after a few more minutes have passed. The longer a discussion continues without decision, the more willing the group is likely to grant you the contract.

2. **Information gathering and initial proposal:** What do you as facilitator need to know to come up with a proposal to make to the group? At this stage, often one or more ideas are being discussed without resolution. In order to move out of discussion mode as soon as possible, shift towards asking for a show of hands for the information you need. For each idea, gather two pieces of information: how many people have this idea as their preferred strategy, and how many people feel strongly about wanting it.

Although this may seem counter-intuitive, start with the idea that has the largest number of people who feel strongly about wanting it, regardless of how many people overall favor it. This is because the goal is to minimize potential objections. Even if other proposals have more supporters, where there is strongest support for a proposal there are likely to be more objections to other proposals.

3. **Hearing needs behind objections:** In order to maintain the efficient flow, solicit objections, and reflect back your understanding of people's needs as expressed by their

objection. Make sure you get it to their satisfaction, not yours! A person is heard only when they experience being heard, regardless of whether you believe that you hear them. Part of the efficiency comes from asking explicitly each time for something different from what was already said, so all the needs can surface without repetition. Continue in this way until you believe you have enough information to craft a proposal that has a chance of being accepted, or until you are concerned that people who disagree may experience this segment as "too long." You can then shift attention to hearing some needs from those who are supportive of the proposal.

Since the goal of this process is to create convergence, any time you sense that some people may have shifted in their openness or willingness, or in their attachment to their own preferred outcome as needs are expressed, check this out explicitly. This is powerful feedback both for you and for the group. Convergence might come from unexpected corners. In addition, if indeed a convergence is happening, and everyone sees that some people are moved by hearing what's important to others, this in itself brings them closer together, and turns up the volume on general goodwill, along with collective ownership of everyone's needs. For example: "Hearing this now, how many people have more of an interest in finding a way for us to increase our visibility in the market?" Make sure that you are not yet asking for willingness to go along with any particular strategy. The convergence at this stage is primarily about collective ownership of needs, so that everyone can sense that they are not the only one caring about their needs.

Facilitator (to coach): We don't really know what the needs are for each of the three groups. There is likely to be pain in the group of two or the other minority... So I am thinking that I will ask the two people about their needs, because there are only two of them and I am willing to make that investment.

Miki: I like the way that you are applying reasoning to it. It's not like there is always a right answer.

Facilitator: So for those 2 of you who have a preference for staying together, I would like the group to hear very briefly why that's important to you. Is either of you willing to share this information in a few words?

Group Member 1: Throughout our session so far, there have been people coming in and out of the group and I just want the cohesion, staying together for once, please.

Facilitator: So unity is very important to you?

Group Member 1: Yes.

4. **Hearing needs behind proposal:** The same process can be repeated to uncover the needs that are addressed by the original proposal.
5. **Recap all needs heard:** Since the goal is to bring the entire group to collective ownership of all the needs, state the needs, without reference to who expressed them and what strategies they represent; only the needs: "Here are all that needs that we have uncovered so far: a, b, c, d, e." Any time you relate a need to a strategy or to a particular

person you invite more conflict and polarization and delay the collective ownership of all the needs.

Group Member: I also think that it probably helps everyone because they are getting that even though their needs haven't been named yet, the fact that the facilitator's going back to the first need sends a message that everything is going to be included.

Miki: Yes, and if you forget to mention someone's need, you lose a lot of their goodwill. If you are not confident that you can track it, either solicit help from the group by saying: "This is what I remember. Does anybody remember any other needs that have been mentioned?" Or write it on a flip chart as you go, and then it's visible to everyone. And you can repeatedly invite the group to consider the puzzle: "If we are going to reach a decision that everybody can live with, it's going to have to address all these needs."

6. **Search for strategy:** If the group is engaged and you trust their collective ownership, you can invite people explicitly to step out of holding only their needs. "Does anyone have a strategy that you believe can address all the needs we heard in the group?" If a proposal does not address a need that was named before, give it back to the person who proposed it. Repeat as often as necessary the needs you are holding with the group, and name the need(s) you believe are not being addressed by the strategy in question. Don't wait for the person who named that need to have to object again. This increases trust in the group; people know that their needs are held and they don't have to be so vigilant about them.

For example, in the process of exploring a new production procedure, a team may examine various strategies and the objections that come up. Here are some of the needs they may discover:

- a. order and coherence in the production sequence
- b. staying on the cutting edge of the industry
- c. respect
- d. ease of implementation
- e. sustainability for the company

Initially, there may be two strategies on the table. One strategy may be to invite a newly hired production manager with an advanced degree in engineering to design the implementation. This strategy is likely to address a, b, and d above, but not c, and e (this person may be familiar with state of the art processes, but not as fluent with the internal systems within the company in order to know who to involve in the planning and what the ramifications are for the sustainability of the company). Another strategy may be to adopt some of the steps of the proposed procedure, assess their effect, and then decide again about other steps. This strategy is likely to address a, c, and e, but not necessarily b and d.

After hearing all the needs, the team may craft a different proposal which may be to ask the new hire to partner with a senior production worker and with a representative from finance. The two additional members of the implementation committee are there to

ensure that the needs for respect and sustainability are addressed alongside the other needs.

7. **Invitation to stretching:** Use a proposal that came from the group if it addresses sufficiently the needs, or craft a new proposal yourself incorporating as many needs as possible. More often than not even if the group doesn't find a strategy, you can find one that people can live with if you remain relaxed and flexible. Once you have a proposal, present it to the group, and invite people to stretch into willingness: "Here is a proposal that I believe everyone might be willing to live with even though it may not be their preference." If there is a lot of contention in the group, you might tie the proposal more explicitly to the needs you believe it addresses. The proposal acts as a sort of group empathy - you essentially try it out to see if the proposed strategy indeed addresses sufficient needs to become a decision.

Note: If you are the one to craft the new proposal, and if, in addition to being facilitator, you are also the person with structural power, and if you have even a modicum of attachment to outcome, it helps tremendously if you can make visible how you are changing your original proposal to address new needs you heard during the previous steps. People are unlikely to notice on their own that you are including their needs unless you make it explicit. For example, D., the business owner (see beginning of this article), wanted to introduce a new process for getting things done, and she was concerned that one of the employees would be anxious about it because of needing a certain kind of order, knowing what she needs to do in a clear sequence. If D. integrates this need, she might then say: "This is the original change I wanted to make, and now, hearing that you need order, I am adjusting it in this way ... that I believe will give you more of the order that you want. Do you sense that this tweak addresses your need sufficiently for you to be able to live with it?"

8. **Explore new proposal:** Repeat steps 3-7 with the new proposal. More often than not, the process ends here.
9. **Holding the dilemma:** If no decision is emerging still, invite the group into the dilemma: There is too much controversy for the amount of time contracted for. Before turning to other options (see #11 below), you can issue a final invitation: "Hearing that we are almost out of time, how many of you feel strongly enough about your position that you are willing to hold back the group and the decision to address your needs?" Make sure you convey clearly that this is a request for information, not an attempt to coerce them. In particular, try to convey a welcoming intention towards those needs that people feel strongly about, and rigorously ensure that people don't stretch beyond willingness. If anyone stretches beyond willingness, you're right back to power-over. If you're not sure that they can tell the difference, you might say something like: "I'm noticing that no one expressed an objection to what I'm proposing, and I'm actually feeling uneasy about it because I really want to make sure that if you said 'yes' it's because this is really something you can live with. I'd rather you said 'no' and we can work it out." Especially in this kind of moment, where there can be so much pressure to just produce a decision,

wait, slow down, and ask again if necessary, until you are really sure. This way you convey to people that their needs matter.

Group Member: So what would it look like to invite people to stretch into willingness?

Miki: At this point, it's not possible for everyone to have their preferred strategy. That's absolutely clear. So then the question is where is there most willingness. The invitation may be: "We are running out of the 10 minutes that we have contracted for. It's not possible for everybody to have their preferred strategy and we want to consider all needs. With all this in mind, are you willing to stretch to accept this strategy even though it's not your preferred strategy?" I say this phrase as often as necessary for people to really get it: "... even though this may not be your preference." It's because people forget that preference and willingness are not the same. They just forget it.

Group Member: It seems like part of what you are doing is educating the group, as well as facilitating. , "So these are all the needs that are on the table. Any decision we come to, if we want to maintain connection, we are going to need to be including all these needs."

Miki: Right. Let's say if my strategy is that we all go—inviting everybody to go, then I want to name that this strategy leaves certain needs unattended to and that I want to come up with an alternate strategy for how we are going to attend to this need, even if later. I want to keep holding all of the needs even if I can't fit them into this strategy.

10. Recognizing present limits: If at this point there is still a lack of willingness to stretch, an immediate decision cannot be reached without casualties. As facilitator, you can negotiate for more time if you have some trust that more mutual understanding can open up creative solutions. You also have at least two additional options:

- a. If a decision is essential to reach, other methods can be used (you decide, leaders decide, majority vote, casting a die, etc.) knowing full well the cost of reaching a decision at least some people are not able to live with. If the group entrusts the decision to you, remind them that you've heard all the needs and that you will make every effort to include as many needs as possible to reach a strategy. Whatever the decision-making method, make sure to acknowledge the cost of such an outcome, and still work to minimize the cost.
- b. If the decision can be postponed, invite a few people who feel strongly about their preferred outcome to a smaller meeting, where more attention can be placed on articulating needs in full and ensuring that others hear and take ownership of all the needs. If the group is small enough (3-5 people representing the diversity of views in the group), and they work out the details and come back to the group with a proposal on how to address all of the concerns, then this creates a robust proposal that is much more likely to be accepted by the group.

At different points in the process it may be tempting to hear from everyone, or at least from more people, instead of focusing on a show of hands. While this approach deeply enhances a sense of "we" in the group and increases trust and mutual understanding, it is unlikely to work when you want to reach a decision in a short amount of time. Keep it handy for those times when you have reached an explicit agreement with the group to shift focus and open up the

process for a longer period of time. If such flexibility exists, a wide range of other strategies can be used, and more responsibility for the process can shift to the group.

Is There a Bias in this Process?

Basing decisions on people's willingness to stretch has one main weakness - it is skewed in the direction of the people with the least capacity to stretch. Three considerations come to mind about this apparent limitation.

1. Often the strength of the intensity around one's preferred outcome is the result of not trusting that one's needs matter. Over time, if a person experiences the group's willingness to lean in their direction, the tightness may relax and more willingness to shift can develop.
2. At the same time, if you work with a group over time, watch out for some people always being the ones to stretch into willingness. This in itself then becomes a cost to the group's functioning. When you sense this may be happening, bring it back to the group. You may say: "I've seen that for the fifth time in the last two months Susan is agreeing to something that is not her preference because other people have expressed a strong preference. So at this moment I want to put more priority on Susan's needs being addressed, and I'm no longer as willing to accept her stretching. I want us to look at this some more so we can come up with something that will work without Susan having to stretch any more." Stay open, however, to the possibility that Susan herself may be quite comfortable with stretching.
3. Lastly, although it may seem "unfair" to have some people stretch more than others, overall this is what I want in my world anyway: where the need is strongest, that's where I want to lean. I want to increase my capacity to accept and relax about people having strong opinions, needs, and wishes. It's part of my vision for a world that works for all.

Some Needed Skills

Supporting a group to reach collaborative decisions efficiently requires a high degree of inner clarity and capacity to think quickly and adapt to rapidly changing conditions. I have found an increasing capacity for such clarity and presence through practicing the skills of nonviolent communication (NVC). The most relevant NVC skills for facilitating decision-making are clarity about levels of willingness necessary to reach a decision, the ability to discern and reflect underlying needs behind specific strategies, and transparent expression.¹

Thresholds

The main skill necessary for this process is varying the level of willingness you invite people to stretch into - what threshold they have to cross in order to express a "No". For example,

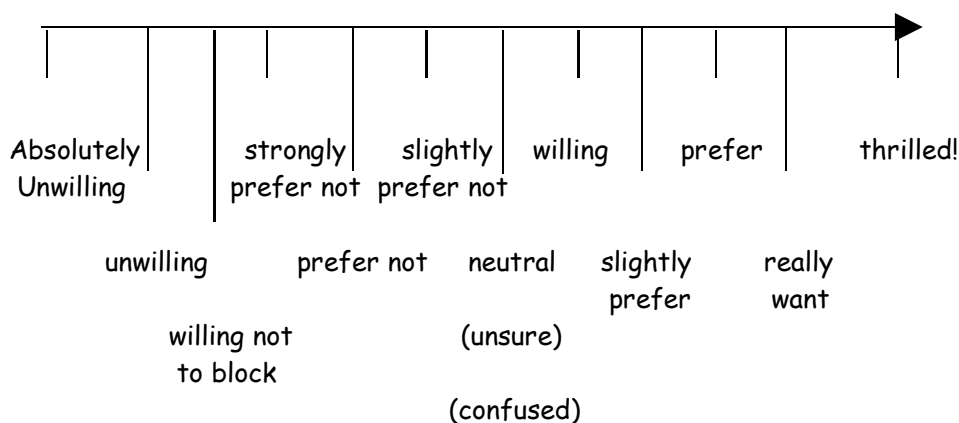
¹ For a general introduction to NVC, see Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. For specific skills needed for group facilitation see Miki Kashtan, "The Gift of Self: The Art of Transparent Facilitation" in *The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation*, edited by Sandor Schumann.

you will get different responses if you ask "Is there anyone who absolutely cannot imagine living with the proposed strategy and would leave the group if we decided this way?" or if you ask "Is there anyone who has even a minor discomfort with the proposed strategy?" Here are some variables to consider when varying thresholds:

1. Amount of time and group stamina available for reaching a decision: If you have more time and the group has stamina, it means that together you have more capacity to interact with objections, and thus openness to hearing more of them. In order to make the expression of objections easier, *lower* the threshold.
2. Significance of the strategy for the people who proposed it: The more important a strategy is for those who proposed it, the more important it is to invite stretching into willingness from those who may not have it as their preference, thus making the threshold *higher*.
3. The degree to which people trust that their needs matter: If you are confident that people trust that their needs matter, then they are more likely to speak up for themselves and cross a *higher* threshold in order to express an objection. If you are working with a group you don't know, or where you have a concern that people may be timid or polite and accept a strategy that doesn't work for them, *lower* the threshold.

However, varying thresholds is far from a science. The above are only considerations, not rules! In the final analysis what I use most is my intuition in the moment. But intuition can be cultivated over time with practice and with a rigorous commitment to receiving and integrating feedback.

Below is a basic set of thresholds for making requests in groups. The exact placement of the various thresholds may vary from person to person - you can order them however you want. Additionally, you can include other thresholds that fit your experience or the groups you are working with that are not indicated in this diagram. Some of these thresholds are only relevant in a longer, fuller process designed for a more optimal decision that requires more time, and thus I don't use them in this article.



When people continue to revert to discussion while you are trying to move towards a decision, you can usually stop them by using a very high threshold such as: "Can you wait as I'm seeing there is a lot of charge about this and I'm not confident that we can reach a decision within the timeframe?"

One particular threshold that can create movement around a stuck decision is putting a timeframe on the decision. Instead of asking people if they are absolutely unwilling to live with the decision in an indefinite way, ask them if they are absolutely unwilling to live with it for a period of time and then reevaluate. People often have more willingness to try something out for a while knowing they don't have to live with it forever.

Often groups get stuck in making decisions because people don't know how to manage what level of willingness they want in order to settle into a decision. If, for example, instead of asking "Is there anyone who is not willing to live with this proposal?" you ask "Is there anybody whose needs would not be met if we do this?" you will have very different results. I, for example, could almost invariably think of needs of mine that would not be met by just about any strategy proposed... Thus, this kind of question can generate more discussion, more discussion, more discussion. As you practice working with thresholds of willing, experiment with how to avoid the discussion by setting clearly what you want to hear back from people to move the process along.

Working with Needs, Including Your Own

Making this process flow smoothly requires the capacity to elicit and reflect people's needs which are behind the strategies and opinions they present.

Most people are not accustomed to making the distinction between strategies and needs, and are also usually uncomfortable expressing needs. If asked for their needs, they are likely to supply a strategy, express a "should," or become tongue-tied. As a facilitator, you can sharpen their focus by inviting them to point their attention to the underlying needs without using the word "need." You can, instead, ask questions such as:

"What's important to you about this?"

"What's at the heart of this for you?"

"What difference does this make?"

One way of increasing efficiency is by reflecting back to people what they want, what has led them to speak. People are much more willing to stop speaking if they experience themselves being heard. Focus on offering your reflection in the form of a question. For example: "I want to be clear that I got what's important to you. Is it that you want to maximize innovation in this company?"

If you are also a member of the group, your own needs are also part of the process and you will need to include them. This requires facility in discerning your own needs and separating

them from any outcome you are favoring. Aim to include your needs in the eventual outcome, no more and no less than anyone else's needs.

Transparency

In my experience I have found that transparency often supports establishing and maintaining trust in the group. In particular, any time you are making a choice about going with this or that proposal, name the needs you believe it addresses, and express clearly why you are choosing it, especially if . Given the high commitment to majority rule that exists in the culture, this is especially key if you are choosing to put a minority position on the table. For example, you might say: "Although fewer people want to keep the way we now do production of the magazine, on the basis of what I've heard so far I sense that the needs for continuity and integrity are really important to them, and thus I would like to try to see if there is willingness to delay the changes until further connection?"

Key Points to Remember

When facilitating a group, especially when there is high charge about reaching a decision, a lot happens that may take significant energy to follow. Accordingly, when I begin this process, I want to be able to focus on just a few core ideas to help me navigate the process.

I want to keep reminding people of the difference between their immediate energy for (or against) a proposed outcome, and what they can live with given the overall goals of the group, what they hear from others in the group, and the consequences over time. I want to remember, and remind others, that the key to opening up a stuck moment lies in connection with needs instead of working only with strategies. I want to keep inviting everyone into collective ownership of all the needs necessary for an outcome that works for all. And I want to remember that it's not about what's fair; it's only about what's possible.