

From Problem To Solution in 4 Steps: Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making

By Lyndsay Swinton

Got a problem to solve? This facilitator's guide to participatory decision making will get you from problem to solution in 4 steps. With a bit of guidance, groups can effectively evaluate alternative solutions, systematically work out what trade-offs exist and agree a working solution. Here are the four steps...

4 Step Guide to Participatory Decision Making

1. Develop decision criteria
2. Develop a scorecard
3. Evaluate the alternatives
4. Make the decision

Step 1 - Develop Decision Criteria

How do you make a decision? Usually there are some key factors or criteria that are important and influence which option you choose. Affordability or cost is one common factor, but there are many, many more things that affect the choices you make.

Decision criteria are what a group uses to measure the feasibility of the potential alternatives. Try to limit the number of criteria - more doesn't mean better, it just means more. The most effective decision making criteria are those that are critical to the problem, communicate relevance to the business and create the most satisfaction if fulfilled.

Criteria Category	Possible Criteria
Financial Targets	Return on Investment (ROI) Net Present Value (NPV)

	Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) Hurdle Rate or Internal Rate of Return (IRR) Revenue Budget Staff Costs
Implementation Requirements	Time to market Complexity Staff availability Work effort Technology Requirements Breakeven timing Cultural fit Organisational competency Degree of past success
Strategic Fit	Fits priorities Enhances brand Increases customer affinity

Usually, one criterion carries more weight or importance than others. In this case, the group should differentiate and rank the levels of importance.

Essential: All these criteria must be met

High Priority: One or more criteria must be met

Important: Can be used as tie-breaker.

Step 2 - Develop a Scorecard

The second step is to develop a scorecard. Don't be tempted to skip this stage even if you think it's complicated or time-wasting. Properly done, a scorecard defines and describes the criteria measures, making thought processes more transparent and memorable. In short, developing a scorecard forces you to consider what is important and articulate what you consider acceptable, or not.

Scoring mechanisms generally fall into one of three types;

Binary - requires a yes/no, either/or type answer

Quantitative - require a numerical answer

Qualitative - use words to describe the answer.

For example

Binary	Yes	No
Internal Rate of Return?	> 15%	< 15%

Quantitative	Most Favourable	Okay	Least Favourable
Internal Rate of Return?	> 15%	11-14%	< 10%

Qualitative	Most Favourable	Okay	Least Favourable
Impact on Brand?	Lifts brand Key target market	Neutral impact to brand Existing market	Risk to brand Less desirable market

You can combine the different scoring mechanisms as you require;

Criteria Definition	Measure		
	Most Favourable	Okay	Least Favourable
Productivity gain?	Yes		No
Project Cost?	< £15K	£15K-£20K	> £20K
Completion Time	< 3months	3-6 months	> 6 months
Team Involvement	Low	Medium	High

Step 3 - Evaluate the Alternatives

The third step is to list your alternative solutions and evaluate them against your criteria. Remember that your first alternative is always to do nothing - change isn't always your best option! At least for now.

		Alternative 1 - do nothing	Alternative 2	Alternative 3
ESSENTIAL	Duration	Favourable	Favourable	Okay
	Timing	Least Favourable	Favourable	Most Favourable
	Return on Investment	Least Favourable	Okay	Okay
HIGH PRIORITY	Meets legal requirements	Least Favourable	Favourable	Favourable
	Employee Satisfaction	Least Favourable	Okay	Okay
IMPORTANT	Fits strategic priorities	Okay	Favourable	Okay

Step 4 - Make the Decision

The easy bit! All the hard thinking has already been done, now it's time to see which alternative scores most favourably. Have all the essential criteria been met? How many of the High Priority criteria have been met? In the event of a tie, which of the important criteria have been met? By now at least one alternative will be coming out as a strong contender for the decision.

Before you start action planning based on the strongest alternative, take some time away from the decision making process and "sleep on it". If it still feels like the best way forward, then it probably is.

Although this decision making process is very systematised, by changing a few criteria or changing the priority, you may come up with a different conclusion. Sometimes what you think is essential is actually merely important. Avoid changing the results to suit your favourite alternative, but be open to reviewing the steps in the process and the decisions made at each point, and amending if necessary.

This 4 step facilitator's guide to participatory decision making gets you efficiently from problem to solution. [Enabling groups to make decisions](#) generates buy-in and increases the success of the solution. The more the process is used, the quicker and more effective it becomes, until your group become a problem solving machine.

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