Collaborative Decision Making

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP™ TOOLKIT

In teams we use both **tactical** tools (to move specific tasks or project items forward and streamline systems) and **process** tools (to improve the way the team works together). Process tools build interpersonal skills in communication and collaboration.

Arguably some of the most important process tools are those involving collaborative decision making, as much of the work teams do is problem solving, coming together to make decisions, and then forming smaller or individual sub-committees to complete tasks.

In this toolkit, we have included an overarching description of the most common decision making tools and several specific exercises you can utilize with your team in order to help delegate, evaluate, and move forward with your projects.

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PROBLEM SOLVING & COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING

There are two main approaches to problem solving: analytical and creative. **Analytical** problem solving is useful to find a specific answer, as is often the default in healthcare where you are looking for the "right solution." **Creative** problem solving is most useful in times when innovation and idea generation are needed to look at the situation from different angles.

| ANALYTICAL PROBLEM SOLVING	CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING
DETERMINE **RIGHT ANSWER**	EXPLORE **OPPORTUNITIES**
Become aware of need	*Clarify the goal, wish, or challenge*
Identify the problem	*Explore perceptions/data/connections*
Analyze root causes	*Define problem*
Identify possible solutions to causes	*Generate ideas that might solve problem*
Evaluate/analyze solutions	*Select and refine ideas*
Select best solution	*Imagine possible outcomes/solutions*
Create action plan	*Explore potential assistance/resistance*

The danger of relying too heavily on analytical problem solving is that it assumes problems have a clearly superior solution. While that may work for identifying a client's medication, it has limited effectiveness in more complex situations, such as how to launch a new clinic initiative, or how to best partner with a patient to support their health. These have many answers and require innovative thought.

An important distinction between these two frameworks is that creative problem solving is most effective with **collaborative decision-making**, bringing diverse perspectives together to create new and transformative ideas in a team-wide inclusive process. It may take longer than other forms of decision-making, but it is a key element to transforming complex challenges.

Collaborative decision making is essential to high functioning teams as it helps not only create buy-in and support from all team members, but also increases the likelihood of finding an innovative solution to the challenges teams encounter.

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COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING MODEL

Collaborative decision-making is a process that takes teams collectively through divergent thinking to convergent thinking.
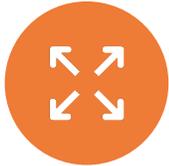
Divergent thinking is about creating a breadth of options. It is a process to generate outside-the-box ideas and to build off one another. When thinking divergently:

- Defer judgment
- Strive for quantity
- Keep an open conversation
- Combine/build on existing ideas

Convergent thinking narrows down options to make a decision. It improves on ideas, builds consensus, checks on criteria, and compares solutions. When thinking convergently:

- Be deliberate
- Check objectives
- Synthesize/clarify ideas
- Be affirmative
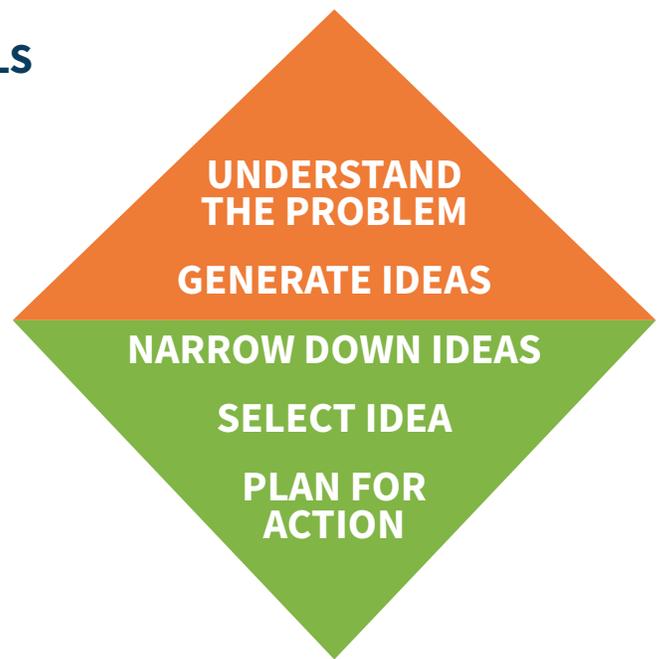
BASIC MODEL > HOW TO USE THESE TOOLS

This is the flow of collaborative decision-making.

In diverging exercises, the goal is expanding your knowledge and generating ideas by diving into the challenges, root causes, potential barriers, and solutions.

There are two stages to converging ideas. During the first stage, teams narrow focus, eliminating impractical or redundant ideas, and comparing and contrasting ideas based on different factors.

In the next stage, teams must make final decisions and select ideas in a fair and balanced manner, so that all participants contribute to the outcome.

Once a decision is made, teams create a plan with actionable next steps.

UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM

GENERATE IDEAS

NARROW DOWN IDEAS

SELECT IDEA

PLAN FOR ACTION

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WHO MAKES DECISIONS > CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATION

While collaborative decision making is important, there are several challenges with this approach.

First, individual self-interest can overcome the intention to support the common good. It is difficult for anyone to accurately value our own contributions, department, or institution as they relate to larger initiatives. Arguments over issues like allocations of budget or resources can be motivated and heavily influenced by selfish factors outside of what is best for overall team success.

Second, high levels of conflict and severe imbalances in power dynamics make it hard to convene a decision meeting with any authenticity. If people are expected to collaborate equally on a decision but are unable to in practice, the benefits of the process are negated.
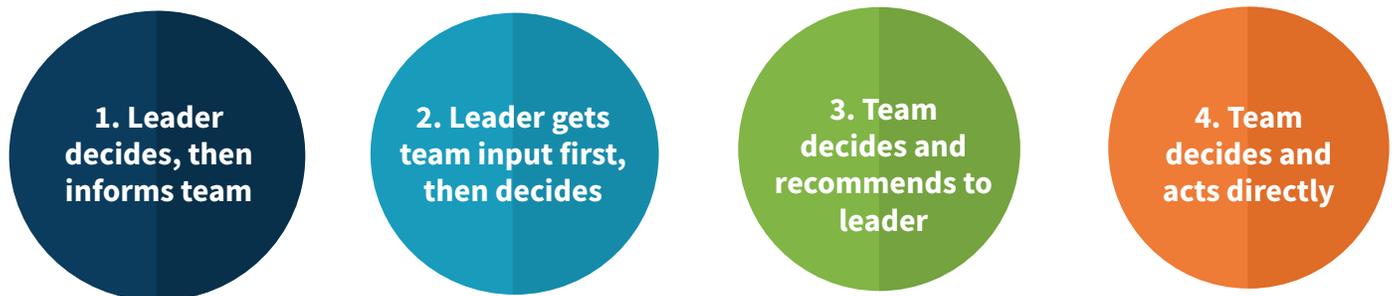
Finally, if those involved in making the decisions are not directly affected by the outcome of their decision, there is a risk that they won't invest the time and energy to weigh all of the ideas before making a selection.

Given these challenges, it is important to consider carefully whether collaborative decision making is necessary in each context, and to make sure the right stakeholders are at the table.

LEVELS OF EMPOWERMENT > ASSUMPTIONS AROUND DECISION MAKING

The following framework and tools listed in this toolkit are for collaborative decision making. This process may not always be possible on teams, particularly those that are heavily hierarchical. It is important to have a clear understanding of the levels of empowerment teams have to make decisions. Few things cause more confusion and distrust than lack of alignment about empowerment, so make sure the entire team is clear on expectations before diving into the process of collaborative decision making. Transparency is one of the best ways to prevent later frustration and conflict.

There are four levels of empowerment:

| 1. Leader decides, then informs team | 2. Leader gets team input first, then decides | 3. Team decides and recommends to leader | 4. Team decides and acts directly |

It is important to think about the kind of decision being made and which level of empowerment is needed. Not every problem needs to be solved with collaborative decision making, but if it does, then higher levels of empowerment will make the process much more successful.

It can be helpful to create a RACI Decision Making matrix to clarify how your team will make different types of decisions and determine who should be Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed.

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SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

If you have determined that collaborative decision making is required and possible for a given problem, then go through this brief checklist to make sure you are giving the process the best chance for a positive outcome.

WHO IS AT THE TABLE? | Think about which stakeholders need to be involved in the decision. It should include not just those in traditional positions of power, but also those who are heavily impacted by the decision, or who may have more information about the potential impact of the implementation.

WHO IS LEADING THE DISCUSSION? | Often teams do not have full-time designated facilitators. This role can be shared among staff members, or assigned to a few team members who may do further training to deepen their facilitation skills around collaborative communication strategies.

IS THE PROBLEM CLEAR? | Meetings, particularly involving decision making, can get easily off track if the problem or desired outcomes are not clear from the beginning. Creating and distributing organized, descriptive meeting agendas and objectives ahead of time are good ideas to make sure the team members have time to prepare so that decisions can actually be made during the meeting.

ARE MATERIALS GATHERED? | First, determine what decision making tools are needed for your given problem, then look at the required preparation for those you plan to use. Print materials and worksheets ahead of time if needed. It may also be a good idea to have a "decision making kit" for your team with standard materials like pens, stickers, post-its, and so on.

BASIC VARIATIONS > ADAPTING TOOLS

We encourage you to try all of the following tools in this toolkit, and to modify and adapt them as you work. Some are better suited to specific situations, and variation keeps engagement of participants as you work through problem solving.

There are a few basic adaptations that you can do to any of these tools.

WHERE YOU COLLECT IDEAS

You can ask people to work independently on worksheets or write on flipcharts, whiteboards, sticky notes, or index cards. Each have distinct advantages:

- **Flipcharts** are easy to see by many people and can be kept for later use.
- **Whiteboards** are easy to see and easy to erase once you are done.
- **Sticky notes** make it easy to transition from brainstorming to clumping/categorizing ideas because you can move them to new locations after they are written down.
- **Index cards** are great for anonymity and more personal reflections.
- **Chatboxes** and **digital whiteboards** can work well in virtual spaces *and* be saved for later!

WHEN YOU COLLECT IDEAS

We all have limited time for meetings, and sometimes decision making can be a long drawn-out process, particularly when trying to achieve consensus. So if you know your time is limited, see if you can do some of the following steps in between meetings:

- **Circulate prompts** before a meeting to get people thinking about a topic beforehand.
- **Complete a worksheet** online in Google Docs or another shared resource.
- **Ask people to prepare 3-5 responses** or ideas before or after a meeting.
- Bring final voting or decision making into an **independent exercise** following the discussion.

INDEPENDENT VS. GROUP IDEA GENERATION

People can respond to questions independently, or you can have smaller groups of 3-5 work together and then share back what they have come up with. Group work can support participants who don't feel comfortable speaking up in large crowds. Think strategically about who you want to participate and why and use one of these facilitation techniques:

- Round Robins
- Group breakouts
- Partner exercises
- Writing prompts
- Popcorning

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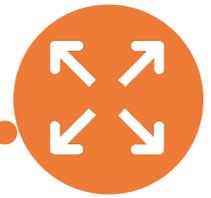
DIVERGING TOOLS

Divergent tools are about developing lots of different ideas for going about something—thinking in an expansive way and ensuring we don't miss an opportunity. It is always helpful to start using diverging tools by reminding the team of the ground rules for divergent thinking.

Keep an Open Conversation

Let ideas flow freely | Move quickly between ideas and team members, sharing the creative space.

Be humorous and creative | Don't take it too seriously or worry about having the right answer. Keep these conversations open and engaging.

Defer Judgement

No evaluation of ideas | Avoid starting the evaluation or reflection about ideas and their value

No debating | Avoid arguments about who is right or whether an idea belongs.

Strive for Quantity

Seek wild options | Look for and encourage ideas that are outside the box, including those that are perceived as "impossible" or "impractical."

Everyone participates | Make sure to include everyone in the discussion and offer a variety of tools so that people with different learning styles and levels of power feel engaged and able to share.

Combine and Build on Existing Ideas

"Yes, and" Approach | Instead of focusing on how you disagree, listen and build off of ideas already shared, finding common ground and expanding.

Check in to Synthesize | Make sure to check back with team members to make sure you are effectively capturing everything being shared and that you aren't missing anything!

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BRAINSTORMING

A technique for getting bigger and better ideas that puts a full range of ideas on the table before decisions are made.

Step 1 Announce you will be using brainstorming, and review the ground rules for divergent thinking.

Step 2 Clarify the topic being brainstormed. Allow a few minutes of silence while people think of options.

Step 3 Ask members to let their ideas flow. The actual brainstorming can be spontaneous (extroverted) or structured. Two variations for structured brainstorming are:

- **Round Robin style:** each person shares one idea until you have gone around the team. Then start the second round. Continue until out of ideas.
- **Post-It note brainstorming:** participants write each brainstorm on a Post-It note. All Post-It notes are collected and placed on a flip chart. Similar ideas can be grouped.

Step 4 Record ideas as they're generated. Do not discuss or elaborate on them. Keep it moving.

Step 5 When people have run out of ideas, allow for a few minutes of thinking time and reflection. Sometimes the best ideas emerge in the second round.

Step 6 When there are no further suggestions, discuss each brainstormed idea in detail so that it's fully developed and clearly understood. Combine similar ideas that are simply worded differently.

MIND MAPPING

A free-flowing, visual method of organizing information and thought processes. This can be an extremely easy way to capture thoughts in a visual manner that works to trigger other thoughts and ideas.
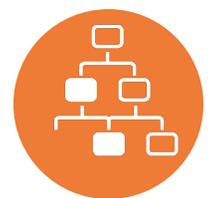
Step 1 Write your focus idea in a circle in the center of the page.

Step 2 Write key ideas or thoughts on lines connected to the center focus. The first branches are key ideas and related ideas are connected as sub-branches. Write key words only and avoid phrases.

*Tip: Using colors can help to separate and organize categories of thoughts.

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FORCE FIELD ANALYSIS
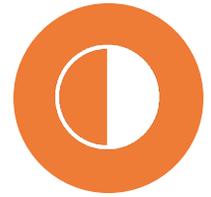
This is a way to view two opposing sides of an issue. It is used when you need to determine all of the factors that might be impacting a problem in order to clarify what the group needs to do to succeed.

The most familiar force field analysis is pros and cons, but there are many variations you can use in its place.

Step 1   Focus on the positive aspects first. What is going well?

Step 2   Record ideas as they're generated. Combine similar ideas that are simply worded differently. Remind your team that this is to explore what challenges they may be facing, not to decide which path to take. Encourage as many ideas as possible.

VARIATIONS | POSITIVES and NEGATIVES

PLUS (things we are doing well)	DELTA (things we could improve)
HOPES	FEARS
ASSETS	LIABILITIES
STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH
KEEP	CHANGE/GET RID OF
BEST CASE SCENARIO	WORST CASE SCENARIO

GAP ANALYSIS

A free-flowing, visual method of organizing information and thought processes. This is another extremely easy way to capture thoughts in a visual manner that works to trigger other thoughts and ideas.

PRESENT STATE | WHERE ARE WE NOW?   >   **GAP | HOW DO WE GET THERE?**   <   **FUTURE STATE | WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE?**

Step 1   Identify the desired future state

Step 2   Acknowledge the present state

Step 3   Focus on the middle: the gap. Ask questions and write down responses as they are generated.

- What are the missing resources or steps that need to be taken?
- Are there barriers that are creating this gap?
- What are the root causes?
- What effect are these gaps having on these issues?

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BRAIN WRITING

During this idea-generation technique, participants do not have to talk to each other. They write their own ideas down on a brainwriting worksheet (see example below).

Each person is given a worksheet with a specific prompt or challenge the team is facing.

Step 1   To begin, write the problem statement in the top space provided, followed by three ideas across the top row (idea A, B, and C).

Step 2   When you have written down three ideas, place the worksheet in the middle of the table. Pick up a worksheet someone else has completed. Do not continue on the worksheet you just used.

Step 3   Three more ideas are now written down across the second row. These can be new ideas or stimulated by those already written down. They can also be additions to, or combinations of, previous ideas. Proceed until worksheet is completely filled out.
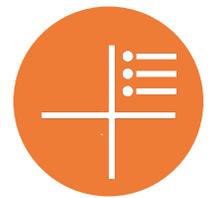
TOPIC/CHALLENGE:

ROUND 1:

ROUND 2:

ROUND 3:

FOUR CORNERS

This idea generation technique is autonomous and ideal for times when people may be arriving in stages or if there is down time between sessions. Ask participants to write on large sheets of paper hung in various spots around the room. There are different prompts on each paper and markers at each station.

IDEAS FOR PROMPTS:

What are our greatest assets?

What are our greatest challenges?

What practical steps could get us closer to our goals?

What is holding us back?

Step 1   Write the directions somewhere clearly visible.

Step 2   Participants go up to each page and add at least three ideas under each prompt. Have participants work in silence until a set period of time has passed or until everyone has arrived and had a chance to work on at least two prompts.

Step 3   Ask for volunteers to read (or summarize) the ideas generated on each page out to the group.

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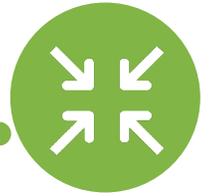
CONVERGING TOOLS

Converging is all about refining and clarifying ideas. The primary aims of converging tools are to make sure that decisions are made collaboratively with everyone feeling their voice has been heard, and that potential options or obstacles have been evaluated logically and consistently. The ground rules for converging tools are listed below.

Be Deliberate

Choose process intentionally | Think about what information or tool is needed to make decisions and select the appropriate technique. Don't fall back on habit or default processes.

State intentions explicitly | Acknowledge power dynamics and clarify the level of empowerment openly with group. It is important to identify whether the purpose of the discussion is to make a decision collaboratively or simply share ideas.

Synthesize and Clarify Ideas

Combine and build | Find similarities between ideas generated and combine or build off of these ideas.

Refine and modify | Make adjustments to ideas based on practical constraints or other ideas suggested.

Check Objectives

Return to initial goals | After diverging, teams can lose track of the intentions or purpose of the discussion, so review those prior to making decisions.

Reflect on Practicality | Make sure to bring back practical obstacles (time constraints, budget, etc.) into the discussion as you clarify ideas.

Be Affirmative

Address idea, not the individual | Avoid personal criticisms when narrowing down ideas, focusing on challenges or obstacles, and not whether an idea is "good."

Encourage full participation and consensus building | Use appropriate tools to make sure that decisions feel collaborative and inclusive in order to ensure full team buy-in.

The following tools are listed in sequence, to help you through the two converging stages: first, tools to help narrow down ideas, and second, tools to help select one decision.

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ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS

This is a method to help the team differentiate between the fundamental issues that arise and the symptoms of the problem. It is most helpful for examining underlying causes when there is an obstacle that seems to be impeding the work from moving forward.

One example of a model for this is a fishbone framework (see below). In this example, the head is the effect you are seeing, the ribs representing the categories of possible causes, and along each rib represents what the causes might be. The most common categories of causes are **environment, people, materials**, and **methods**.

Step 1   Identify the problem, then describe the symptoms (how you know it is a problem). *Example: We aren't getting work done on time. The last few deadlines passed without completion and we are behind on project. Gotten calls from coach and faculty advisor.*

Step 2   Think about the categories of causes and write them on top of the rib, then add the causes along each rib. *Example:*

Category - Environment. Lack of designated team space to store work and problems saving files in shared folder.

Category - Materials. Tools and worksheets are confusing and hard to use.

Category - Method. Lack of clear communication and roles, no one responsible to submit work.

CATEGORY

PROBLEM

CAUSE

*Note: This tool helps team members understand an issue better but requires further narrowing to make a decision.
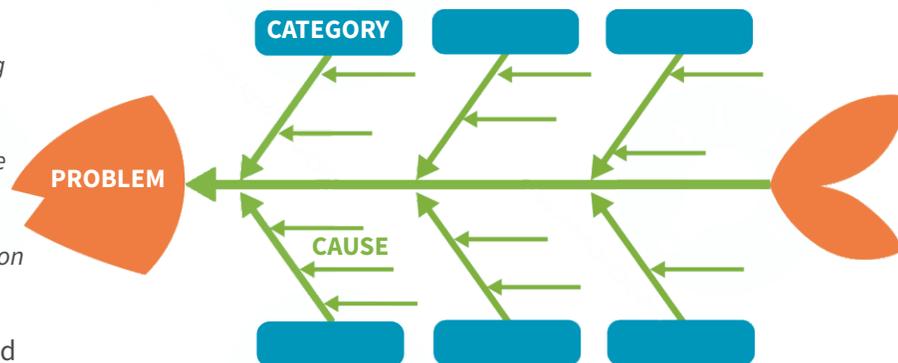
CATEGORIZING

When there are many ideas and we need to find common themes, popular ideas, or simply reduce the number of ideas to examine, we use categorizing, or "clumping."

Step 1   Either move or circle ideas into similar clusters, asking for clarification and confirmation as you go. (*Example: "Can we say both of these ideas are about policy change? What else belongs there?"*)

Step 2   When you are finished, name the categories aloud and write them down. Look to see which categories have the most ideas in them (signifying potentially a larger interest among participants), or have individuals continue the converging process with another tool.

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CRITERIA MATRIX

This can help assess a set of ideas to determine which suggestions are most likely to offer the best solutions. It can help bring objectivity to decision making and make sure you are getting at the best options.

Step 1   Create a chart listing the factors to consider in the columns at the top and write the ideas the team has in rows on the left.

Step 2

Complete the chart as a team and score the ideas from 1 to 5 by how well they fit the factors. Then tally up the final totals and rank the choices based on how well they meet your factors.

SCORING:

    5- Completely meets criteria
    3- Mostly meets criteria
    1- Barely meets criteria
    0- Does not meet criteria
    X- Criteria not applicable

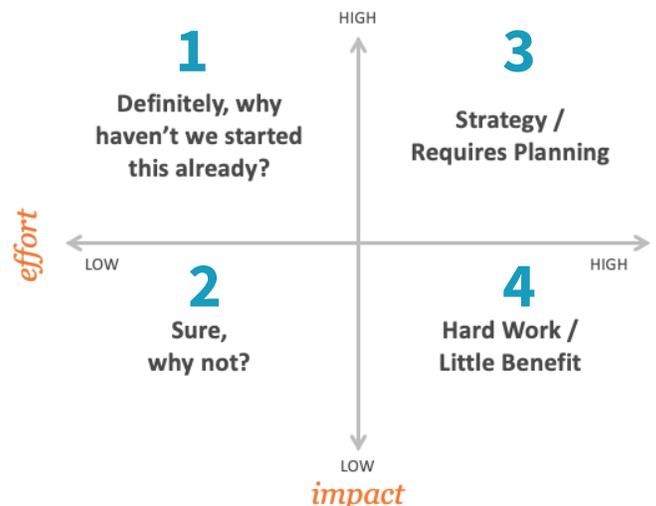|	ADEQUATE TIME	WITHIN BUDGET	SUFFICIENT RESOURCES	RELEVANT TO MISSION	INTERESTING/INTRIGUING		
IDEA 1							
IDEA 2							
IDEA 3							
IDEA 4							

IMPACT/EFFORT GRID
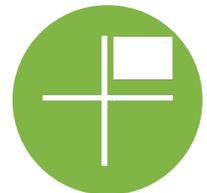
This grid helps narrow down ideas by assessing each idea against the potential impact of the project and the effort it will take to complete the goal. It provides criteria to assess a set of ideas in order to determine which option(s) are most likely to offer the best solutions. Each idea is objectively judged against the same criteria.

Step 1

Gather all ideas generated in a brainstorming process and begin to categorize them by both their potential impact and the effort (resources, time, money, energy) that it would take to implement.

    1. Easy to do and yields a big improvement
    2. Easy to do but yields a small improvement
    3. Difficult to do but yields a big improvement
    4. Difficult to do but yields a small improvement

Step 2   Make necessary plans to immediately implement ideas in area 1. Discard all ideas in area 4.

Step 3

Looking at areas 3 and 2, begin to narrow down further to see which ideas to take on and create action plans for.

HIGH

1 Definitely, why haven't we started this already?

3 Strategy / Requires Planning

effort

LOW   HIGH

2 Sure, why not?

4 Hard Work / Little Benefit

LOW

impact

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CONSENSUS BUILDING

This tool is used when it is important to the group that everyone feels good about the outcome and total buy-in matters around a decision.

Step 1   Make sure that all voices are heard and that everyone gets a chance to explain their viewpoints. Utilize a Round Robin to make sure everyone speaks, or ask people to write down their thoughts on notecards if it is a sensitive issue.

Step 2   A facilitator helps group test out options, weigh advantages and disadvantages, raise concerns, and merge ideas through dialogue and conversation.

MULTI VOTING

This is used when you want to narrow down a list of brainstorming ideas, select one single idea, or prioritize goals. Votes can either be weighed, such as ranked-choice voting, where participants are asked to prioritize selections, or they can be equal, where there is no order to the choices they select.

Step 1   Clarify items being voted on to ensure everyone has a common understanding of the idea. Keep in mind any relevant criteria when voting.

Tip*:   Conduct criteria matrix if needed prior to vote to assure best options are selected.

Step 2   Using colored sticky dots, hand out a strip of four to seven dots to each person. Divide the number of items on list by three to determine the number of dots (e.g.: 15 choices = 5 votes each). Ask participants to cast their "votes" by placing dots on their top choices listed.

Variations:

- Allow participants put more than one vote on one idea or can restrict them to selecting different choices.
- Have different colors represent "first choice," "second choice," and so on to create ranked-choice voting.
- Have participants submit a virtual ballot with choices, either in order of preference or with no order selected.

Step 3   When everyone has voted, tally the dots in order to arrive at a majority decision or discard ideas with 0-3 votes, reduce number of choices, and repeat process until down to one idea.

With ranked-choice, first preference votes count more (e,g,: 1st choice=3 pts, 2nd choice = 2 pts, 3rd choice = 1 pt.). This requires more math, but answers are more accurate to participants' interests and may be better suited to big decisions.

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SIMPLE VOTING

This is used to get quick decisions made with clear outcomes. They are best when there are clear, straight forward options or if it is acceptable to not have total consensus.

OPTIONS   Members write on slips of paper and submit anonymously (for longer or more complex answers)

Members use one dot each (with their name on it) to vote (for signing individuals up for something)

Show of hands (for looking for majority or quantity)

Eyes closed and show of hands (for looking for majority but concerned about peer pressure)

REFERENCES

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Wilson, M. A. Collaborative decision making: building consensus group decisions for project success. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2003—North America, Baltimore, MD. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute. 2003.

ADDITIONAL PCP RESOURCES

Our **Teaming Toolkit** will help teams better understand the need for teaming and the stages of team development, and our **Team Launch Toolkit** can help you get started.

For more process and tactical teaming tools, check out our **Team Building Toolkit** and **Meeting Management Toolkit**, or if your team is ready to get started on a project, use our **Action Planning Toolkit** to plan your next steps! Find support with feedback and evaluation in our **Team Effectiveness Toolkit**.

For further leadership development and support with facilitating meetings, refer to our **Facilitation Toolkit** and **Conflict Transformation Toolkit**.

ABOUT RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP™

Relational Leadership™ is a healthcare leadership competency model built upon decades of social psychology research into people, their motivations, how they learn and work, and the unique ways in which they influence and are influenced by others when in groups. It is ultimately a strategy to work together to achieve better results, grounded in the premise that all team members should grow and develop as leaders, working together interdependently towards a common vision. Each of the four Relational Leadership™ domains—Manage Self, Foster Teamwork, Coach & Develop, and Accelerate Change—operate on the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels to change how we approach learning, work, and collaboration.

COMPLETE LIST OF RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP TOOLKITS

Relational Leadership™ Framework	Conflict Transformation Toolkit	Leadership Transitions Toolkit
Team Starter Kit	Teaming Toolkit	Active Listening Toolkit
Team & Project Launch Toolkit	Meeting Management Toolkit	Coaching Toolkit
Narrative Leadership Toolkit	Team Building Toolkit	Training Toolkit
Identity Toolkit	Collaborative Decision Making Toolkit	Change Framework Toolkit
Equity Toolkit	Facilitation Toolkit	Decision Makers Toolkit
Resilience Toolkit	Team Effectiveness Toolkit	

ADVOCACY PROJECT RESOURCES

Communications Strategy	Community Convening	Action Planning
Community Inventory	Project Sustainability	Health Equity & Social Determinants of Health

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