Stepladder Technique: Making Better Group Decisions

Simple steps for group decision-making.

Making decisions within a group can often be challenging.

When things go well, they can go very well. However, when things go wrong, you can end up mired in conflict. Some people may fight for recognition and position, others may be over-critical or disruptive, while others may sit quietly and not contribute anything to the overall effort. Because of this, groups can often spin out of control and make worse decisions than individuals working on their own.

When this happens, it's easy to see why some people throw their hands up in frustration and give up. However, when a group works in the right way, it really works. Groups that function effectively together can outperform individuals and make much better decisions.

But how do you make your group effective? How do you get all group members to contribute and inspire one another to create great ideas and solutions?

The Stepladder Technique is a useful method for encouraging individual participation in group decision making.

What is the Stepladder Technique?

The Stepladder Technique is a simple tool that manages how members enter the decision-making group. Developed by Steven Rogelberg, Janet Barnes-Farrell and Charles Lowe in 1992, it encourages all members to contribute on an individual level **before** being influenced by anyone else. This results in a wider variety of ideas, it prevents people from "hiding" within the group, and it helps people avoid being "stepped on" or overpowered by stronger, louder group members.

All of this helps the group make better decisions.

How to Use the Tool

The Stepladder Technique has five basic steps. Here's how it works.

Step 1: Before getting together as a group, present the task or problem to all members. Give everyone sufficient time to think about what needs to be done and to form their own opinions on how to best accomplish the task or solve the problem.

Step 2: Form a core group of two members. Have them discuss the problem.

Step 3: Add a third group member to the core group. The third member presents ideas to the first two members BEFORE hearing the ideas that have already been discussed. After all three members have laid out their solutions and ideas, they discuss their options together.

Step 4: Repeat the same process by adding a fourth member, and so on, to the group. Allow time for discussion after each additional member has presented his or her ideas.

Step 5: Reach a final decision only after all members have been brought in and presented their ideas.

Note: The Stepladder Technique is similar to the Delphi Method, another tool that's often used in groups to prevent Groupthink and to encourage participation. While both tools have the same objective, they differ in a few key ways:

- In the Delphi Method, an objective facilitator or leader manages the group. In the Stepladder Technique, all members are equal.
- The Delphi Method keeps members anonymous. The facilitator manages the flow of information, and members may have no idea who else is in the group. The Stepladder Technique involves face-to-face meetings, so everyone knows who the other members are.
- The Delphi Method is a lengthy process, while the Stepladder Technique is much quicker.
- The Delphi Method is often used for major decisions that need input from a large number of people. The Stepladder Technique works best with smaller groups that make a wide range of decisions.

Tip: Groups can begin to lose their effectiveness and ability to make good quality decisions if they have too many members. Keep your group small – four to seven team members – to maximize effectiveness.

Key Points

The Stepladder Technique is a step-by-step approach that helps you ensure that all members of a group participate and are heard.

The technique allows shy, quiet people to present their ideas before other group members can influence them, and it allows everyone to hear many different viewpoints before reaching a final decision.

This information is derived from the Mindtools website. To view this online, visit http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_89.htm. For more information on Groupthink, visit http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_82.htm. For more information on the Delphi Technique, visit http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_95.htm.