

Problem-Solving in a Group

With a few guidelines, your team can maximize its effectiveness

BY MAZIE LEFTWICH, PSY.D.

DEAR DR. MAZIE,

I work with a good group of people and we want to work together to solve problems and find solutions that we can all agree to and support. Would you give us some tips to go by? We're open to trying new things.

Arnold in Maryland



With a clinical background in applied psychology, Mazie is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and development.

For any group who wants to become a problem-solving team, I applaud you. It's not always easy, but if done correctly, the end result will almost always be better than decisions made in a vacuum. To be successful, there are some key principles that should be discussed and agreed upon in advance.

Principle #1: All participants are willing to contribute, while staying open and receptive to the suggestions of others.

Principle #2: An agreement is made that all opinions and perspectives will be treated with respect. While accepting different opinions can be challenging, more options will surface and the resulting combination of ideas will lead to the best solution.

Principle #3: The team must insist that all ideas be supported by facts and/or logic, while avoiding debates and arguments. This keeps discussions rational while allowing outside-the-box thinking.

Principle #4: Don't agree just for the sake of harmony. This principle is imperative, because a harmony seeker can potentially sabotage the team's efforts.

Principle #5: When strong differences occur, the team must not resort to evasive actions like voting with majority rule or coin tossing. Take a break and reconvene with a commitment to building consensus. This upholds the integrity of the team.

Principle #6: All team members should agree to support and encourage each other in the creative process, thereby creating an atmosphere of trust.

Principle #7: If a team member has been shy in expressing their ideas and opinions, institute processes to equalize input. One way is to write down ideas anonymously and read them at random. Thus, everyone's ideas are heard.



Principle #8: Team members must respect each other's time. This helps avoid circular or repetitive discussions and keeps meetings efficient.

Principle #9: Team leaders must remain fair and unbiased. If a team leader has direct supervisory authority over other team members, they must tread lightly or open discussion will be quickly stifled. If this happens, the creative solutions sought may never be found.

Principle #10: For those few occasions when the group cannot choose between numerous viable solutions, the leader becomes the ultimate decision-maker. This may happen if there are several excellent solutions, or when all the solutions have a negative aspect. Because of their leadership role in the organization, the team leader may have a deeper understanding of how the decision impacts the big picture. In this instance, the entire team must agree to support the chosen solution.

There are significant benefits to solving problems in a team setting. When done effectively, it builds morale and camaraderie. It also reinforces the value that each person brings to the table. By using these basic principles, you and your team can create synergy and experience success. ✪