

Tool 52: Set decision rules

Aim of the tool

To create clarity when a decision is made and to distinguish which decisions need what type of procedure.

When to use it?

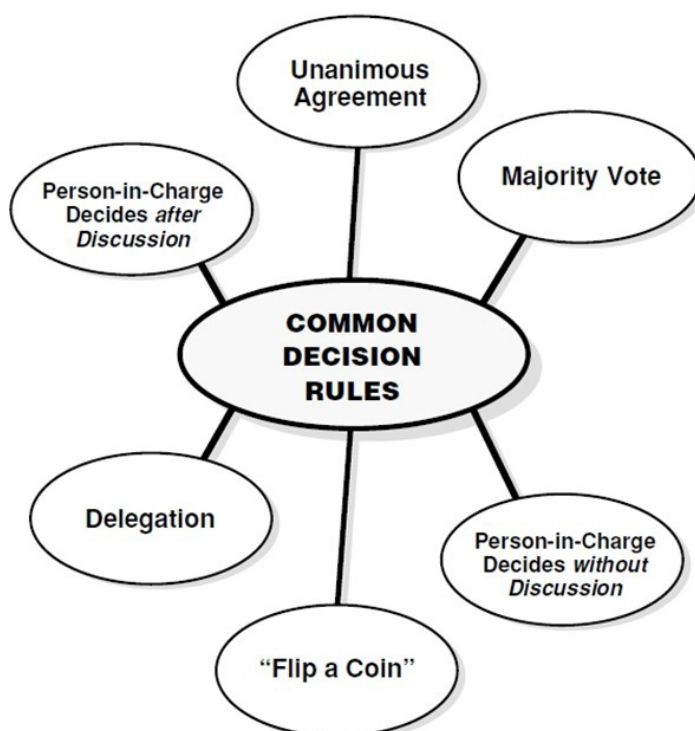
The commitment stage, when decisions should be made and actions need to be agreed upon.

What are decision rules?

A decision rule is a mechanism to know for sure when you have made a decision. In MSPs, the diversity of interests is large, making consensus difficult. Also, it is important to note that not all decisions require unanimity. This tool helps to distinguish which decisions need what type of procedure.

Setting decision rules clearly marks the shift from a group operating in the world of ideas, towards a group functioning into the world of action. Setting a clear decision rule prevents confusion, as well as the resulting frustration when group members perceive each other as passive (when not moving towards actions) or impulsive (when shifting towards action while no decisions were perceived to be made).

According to Kaner (2014), there are six common decision rules, each with different implications for stakeholder's participation.



The choice for a specific decision rule directly influences the group behaviour. Individual stakeholders will adjust the quantity and quality of their participation depending on how they perceive their actions can influence the decision.

If for instance, the “majority vote” has been selected as a decision rule, there will be a battle of opinions and active participation until 51% of the stakeholders agree. As a result of this decisionrule, as soon as the majority agrees, the opinions of the remaining minority are not relevant anymore.

This is very different than for instance the “unanimous agreement” rule which gives every stakeholder the right to block a decision. The “person-in-charge decides without discussion” rule, on the other hand, causes group members to be merely passively involved, since the ‘do what you are told’ atmosphere does not reward active participation. Whilst not advisable for MSPs, the latter type of decision rule can be appropriate in crises when it is critical to act fast.

Considering these six possible decision rules in your meeting design can help to avoid confusion amongst stakeholders. Also be aware that expectations about how decisions are made can differ from different background to background (culturally and professionally). Every stakeholder may hold assumptions regarding what decision-making procedure is appropriate. By making this explicit, the group can choose what works best for them in the given context.

Learn more

Kaner, Sam, Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger (2014, third edition) *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.