

**A Process for Collective Decision-Making:
As Applied In the Healthy Columbia Campaign**
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*Originally adapted from the works of Marshall Ganz, Harvard University; modified by Kate B. Hilton

RUNNING A COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Goals for this session:

- Learn and practice the collective decision making process
- Use this process to generate ideas for the Healthy South Carolina Campaign

WHY DOES OUR COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS MATTER?

Throughout the organizing process, we have talked about how different elements of our project display our values. Similarly, the way that we approach a collective decision-making process demonstrates our values. Are we creating a process in which everyone is heard **and also** one in which a decisive choice is made? Or do we fall into common traps: dismissing ideas too early, criticizing each other, arguing our own positions and refusing to see others...or the opposite: seeking so much agreement that we are unable to move forward?

The purpose of this section is to share some tools for collective decision-making that enable everyone's voice to be heard and valued.

Utilizing a well-defined collective decision-making process does not guarantee that everyone will agree or automatically come to consensus. Instead, such a process acknowledges the differences between members of a community and seeks to harness these differences to produce as creative an outcome as possible.

A collective decision-making process unfolds in six stages. As leaders of this process, it will be your role to help everyone stay in the same stage at the same time.

THE SIX STAGES OF COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING IN DETAIL

1. Identify Your Goal

Here, our ultimate goal is to choose a focus for the campaign. But there can also be sub-goals. When you complete the exercise that follows this section, the goal will be for pairs or groups to generate 1-2 ideas that they can propose to the larger group.



2. Identify Outcome Criteria

Criteria are how we decide whether an idea “measures up” to our collective expectations. A criterion refers to something we value—like contributing to people’s health. Having shared criteria is what allows us to make decision making a **collaborative** process. Instead of many people digging their heels in and arguing the virtues of their own preferences (which often happens, especially in large groups), we can assess every idea together against what we all agree is important. For this campaign, we already have a set of criteria against which we will test our ideas. The campaign must:

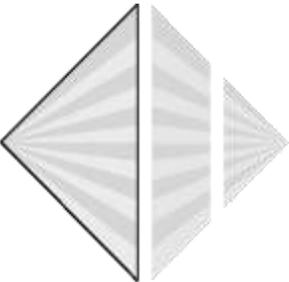
- Result in improved health, improved quality of care, and lower health care costs
- Start from the platform we have already build by addressing *both* what the community generated as themes at the August 16th Town Hall Meeting (see Appendix A at page 72) *and* build on the vision team's Story, Strategy and Structure (see pages 13-28 of this guide.)
- Use organizing to make the changes happen (take collective action and address power dynamics)
- Engages multiple constituencies, including the community members, health care workers, and payers (insurers, employers, government agencies)
- Result in changes or accomplishments that we can count, so we can assess our impact

3. Generate Alternatives (Open)

The “opening up” part of the decision process is when we generate as many ideas as possible. This process means really using the rules of brainstorming by focusing two things: **generating** the ideas, and **capturing** them for later processing. When you are generating ideas, you can think of it as “making as big a pile of stuff to work from” as possible. Focus on “opening up” as much as you can—be creative, think differently, throw wild ideas out there. Build on each other’s ideas as much as you can, using someone else’s creativity as a stimulus for your own. Now is not the time to evaluate, criticize, or shut down. Don’t let yourselves start thinking about “well, but that won't work because...” There will be plenty of time to evaluate later. It is also important to **use everyone’s** contributions. Don’t ignore members of the group or allow some members to dominate the conversation. Make sure to **capture** these ideas—they won’t help if you can’t remember them!

On the next page you will see some specific tools you can use to generate alternatives.



PHASE: GENERATE ALTERNATIVES	Tool	Goal	What to Do or Say
<p style="text-align: center;">OPEN</p> 	Narrow Opening → Propose Something	To get discussion started. To offer a straw man as a basis of exploring an issue area.	“Ok, we’ve identified a problem area here. Would anyone like to offer a proposal? After we talk about it a bit, we may need to recycle back to clarify the problem.”
	Mid-Size Opening → Make a List	To give each person a chance to engage (in a small group). To develop an initial map of an issue area. To have a small list for starting discussion.	“Let’s go around the room once, and get each person’s favorite idea.”
	Wide Opening → Brainstorm	To enable the group’s creativity. To open a wide range of thinking To collect and build a lot of ideas	“Let’s take 10 minutes to catch any ideas we have – even if they are off the wall. “

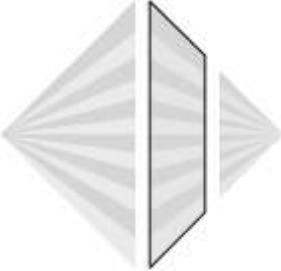
4. Evaluate Alternatives (Narrow)

In that whole pile of ideas you generate, which ones have real promise? Which are you collectively really excited about? This step means whittling down your large pool of ideas through a collaborative process of **using decision criteria together**. The team tests each idea against the set of shared criteria, with the goal of choosing the ideas that best meet these shared criteria. Using the established criteria as a framework helps the team avoid polarizing, where one subgroup or passionate individual advocates for or against particular ideas and the team gets stuck in conflict. Despite this framework, your group may still enter into debate, and that’s okay. Group members may disagree about how well particular ideas fit within established criteria. While you evaluate, don’t lose sight of your creativity—as you go, you can continue to alter ideas to help them meet more criteria. What the group should avoid is advocating for a particular idea because individuals or a subgroup personally prefer it for reasons not among the group’s criteria. If you find the group is really attracted to a particular idea that does not score well on its criteria, you can certainly ask—is there some hidden criterion here that’s really



important to us that we missed? **But it's critical to get those on the table so that we're all using them to assess every idea.**

The chart below shows some tools you can use in this stage of the process.

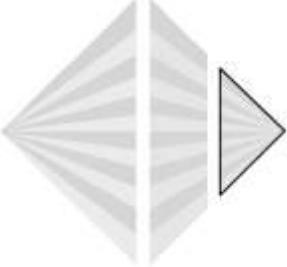
PHASE: EVALUATE ALTERNATIVES	Tool	Goal	What to Do or Say
<p style="text-align: center;">NARROW</p> 	<p>Combine duplicate or overlapping proposals</p>	<p>Take out the redundancy.</p>	<p>“We have a long list here. Let’s see if we can shorten it by combining similar or overlapping items, but without losing any ideas. Do you see any candidates for this?”</p>
	<p>Weighted Voting (N/3)</p> <p>Use a dot poll for choices, allowing each participant to have (number of choices/3) dots to vote with.</p>	<p>To focus the group’s attention on the choices it thinks are most important, but not necessarily ready to decide upon.</p>	<p>“Ok, let’s see which of these ideas we want to spend more time with. There are 11 in our list, so please spend 4 votes among them.”</p>
	<p>Advocate</p>	<p>To bring out the strengths and reasoning behind each proposal. Encourage participants to refer to <i>group’s own criteria</i> when making their case.</p>	<p>“We are considering dropping some of the proposals that didn’t receive many of your votes. Before we do that, would anyone like to explain why we might want to consider them further?”</p>

5. Decide (Close)

This step refers to reaching a collective agreement about the best option(s). Once we have assessed each item against the criteria there will often be some that can clearly come off the list and others that look pretty good. Your group should use a collective process—to narrow down to one or two (or however many you need to proceed). It's perfectly ok for us not to be completely in agreement. You can expect that some people will be disappointed by the outcome. But also we expect everyone to feel they genuinely had a voice and were heard by the entire group. As you close, the group should check to see if everyone agrees, and make sure that those who still have reservations are genuinely willing to “try this out” and see what is learned.



There are specific techniques you can use at this stage, listed below.

PHASE: DECIDE	Tool	Goal	What to Do or Say
<p style="text-align: center;">CLOSE</p> 	<p>Negative Poll / Eliminate</p>	<p>To verify that you have agreement on a decision.</p> <p>May focus on eliminating those that received no advocacy or clearly do not meet the agreed-to criteria</p>	<p>“Does anyone not agree that we can take this item off the list”</p> <p>“Is there anyone who is not ok with combining items C and F?”</p>
	<p>Build Up/Eliminate</p>	<p>To gain agreement on a proposal by drawing acceptable elements from other proposals.</p>	<p>“What do you really need to have from option C that we could pull into option A so that it works for you?”</p> <p>“Bob is having trouble with the timeline on option B. Is there some way we can address his concerns?”</p>
	<p>Straw Poll</p>	<p>To see how close the group is to agreement on a decision.</p> <p>To focus on problem areas of a proposal.</p>	<p>“So, who is comfortable with the proposal as developed so far? Show thumbs up, down, or sideways.”</p> <p>“I see some thumbs down. Let’s find out about those.”</p>
	<p>Both/And</p>	<p>To avoid win/lose decisions.</p> <p>To get the best of multiple proposals.</p>	<p>“Is there yet some way to support both proposals?”</p>

6. Learn from the Decision

This last step—learning from our decision-making—is often the most overlooked step. It can be engaged in two critical ways: (1) our immediate reflections after we have made the decision about what worked well and didn’t work well in our collective decision-making process; (2) planning ahead to learn from our decision as we take action; and (3) learning from the choice we made.



First, how effectively did we engage in the process? In this reflection we address questions such as: Did we agree to the purpose of the process? Did we collectively understand the criteria, and were they adequate? Did we productively brainstorm, or were we critical of one another's suggestions? Did we evaluate alternatives in an honest but respectful way? Was it a close vote, and if so, how did that make us feel? How can we enable ourselves collectively to accept group's decision and move forward?

Second, before we begin executing our decision, we plan ahead. What kinds of feedback, information, and data we can be attentive to as we roll out our decision? This is the essence of great strategizing— alertness and learning from what happens, and being flexible and responsive in how we act.

Finally, how do we know we made a good decision? Once we go forward with it, we experience all kinds of consequences and other forms of feedback about whether it was a good decision. The feedback we receive as we proceed with our choice allows us to become much better decision makers in the future. The next time we face similar choices, we may be open new alternatives we would have never previously considered.

TEAM DYNAMICS AND TEAM EFFECTIVENESS: THREE BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

We know that the best teams have certain qualities that allow them to succeed. In addition to using the stages of collective decision making to structure their process, teams need to create an atmosphere of psychological safety, open-mindedness, playfulness, and energy in order to engage in the creative work of strategizing.

A strategy is a hypothesis about how the world works (or will work) rather than an action plan set in stone. That is why we emphasize embracing ambiguity and guesswork, taking the leap of trying out ideas, and learning from your decisions. In research about collective decision-making, we look for three behavioral signs to indicate a team that uses the right spirit of creativity and learning in their strategizing.

- 1.) Can they handle anxiety? When they don't really know how to proceed, can they sustain hopefulness, note the places where they are unsure, and keep generating ideas? Or do they get stuck, increasingly frustrated, unable to move forward?
- 2.) Do they express understanding that a strategy is an experiment and that it is about trying out ideas? In the group discussion, can you hear language of playfulness and new ideas? Or do they talk about doing the same thing for the millionth time?
- 3.) Finally, do they self-correct and learn? Does a team member ever say "Guys, we're evaluating, we should still be generating ideas?" or "Hey, we haven't heard from Mike yet"? Are those process corrections greeted by the rest of the team with appreciation rather than resistance? When the team tries something out and it's not working, do they readily say "Okay, let's try something else and see what we learn?"



TEAMWORK: COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING

GOALS

- Learn the collective-decision making process by practicing it in a group.
- Present the larger group with possible ideas for the Healthy South Carolina Campaign.

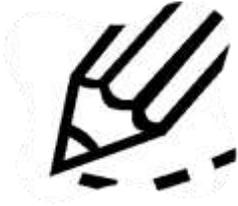
AGENDA

TOTAL TIME: 50 min.

1. Gather in your team. Choose a timekeeper and a note taker. Review the agenda 1 min.
2. Take some time as individuals to **generate 1-3 ideas for the campaign.** 5 min.

Focus on an outcome of the campaign, and or 2 tactics that will help your team members get a clear sense of your idea(s)
3. **Brainstorm ideas as a group.** 10 min.
4. **Narrow the ideas using weighted voting** 2 min.
5. **Evaluate these ideas against the criteria** 20 min.
6. **Make a decision** 7 min
7. **Learn from the process** 5 min





WORKSHEET: DEVELOPING COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

1: Gather in your team; assign note taker, and review agenda (1min)

The note taker will want to have flipchart paper ready for your group brainstorming session.

2: Take some time as individuals to generate 1-3 ideas for the campaign (5 min.)

Think about what you want the campaign to accomplish. What are different tactics that could allow the campaign to reach its goals? If you're having trouble getting started, you may want to take a look the notes from the 29203 Town Hall Meeting (see Appendix A at page 72) *and* build on the vision team's Story, Strategy and Structure (see pages 13-28 of this guide.) You can use the space below to brainstorm.

Idea 1

Idea 2

Idea 3



Step 3: Brainstorm ideas as a group (10 min.)

Have the note taker write your ideas down on flipchart paper so that everyone can see them. Report out all your ideas, briefly, in a round-robin format (one person adds an idea to the list at a time, going around the table). Add ideas only if they are not already up there. Have your note taker jot down the ideas on the flipchart as you go. Be conscious of your team dynamic—don't evaluate yet, but rather try to generate as many ideas as possible. Build on each others' ideas, add things inspired by others, nothing is too "silly" to include.

Step 4: Narrow the ideas using weighted voting (2 min.)

Have the note taker distribute three sticky dots to each person. When the note taker says "Go!" team members "vote" by placing their sticky dots next to ideas on the flipchart paper. You can choose to distribute all three dots to one idea or distribute them among more than one. Don't talk as you do this step—just vote!

Step 5: Evaluate these ideas against the criteria (20 min.)

Pick the three ideas with the highest number of votes. Now you will evaluate them against the criteria. As a reminder, here are the criteria:

- 1. Result in improved health, improved quality of care, and lower health care costs**
- 2. Start from the platform we have already build by addressing *both* what the community generated as themes at the August 16th Town Hall Meeting (see Appendix A at page 72) *and* build on the vision team's Story, Strategy and Structure (see pages 13-28 of this guide.)**
- 3. Use organizing to make the changes happen (take collective action and address power dynamics)**
- 4. Engages multiple constituencies, including the community members, health care workers, and payers (insurers, employers, government agencies)**
- 5. Result in changes or accomplishments that we can count, so we can assess our impact**

If you turn to the grid on the next page, you will see these same criteria listed across the top. Write your three ideas in the left hand column. Now go through each category and give the idea a "0" if it does not meet the criterion at all, a "1" if it does to some extent and a "2" if it does so very well. You can add up the points against each idea (and enter in the last column), and look for the ones that have high scores. As you go through this process, take some time to combine related or complementary ideas. Can any ideas be merged or modified to make their scores higher?



Step 6: Make a decision (7 min.)

Choose the strongest idea. Select one person from your team to present your idea to the larger group and spend the remainder of your time assisting that person to prepare for the group presentation.

Be sure your presentation covers the following IN 3 MINUTES:

- 1.) What is your core idea?
- 2.) What are the strengths that you're especially excited about with respect to our criteria?
- 3.) Where would you ask others to help you improve it?

Step 7: Learn from the process (5 min.)

This is an often-overlooked but vital step. What did you learn by going through this process? Spend 1 minute in silence reflecting on how the decision-making process unfolded, and then spend 4 minutes as a group identifying your main learnings.

