



The Decision-Making Process

Your board team will have to make dozens of decisions all the way from deciding meeting times to deciding to build a new building.

Good decisions aren't made "by the seat of your pants." Good decisions are made through a logical, common-sense process that includes plenty of pertinent information, expert advice, experience, vision and exchange of ideas among members of the board team.

Politics, special interests and personal bias are realities that always come into play when a board attempts to make a team decision, but with a well-understood and followed decision-making process, those elements can be controlled and the board team can make good decisions.

You can't deliberate an issue by the numbers, but each deliberation with the rest of your board team should have some common elements, including:

A model for making decisions

1) Define the issue clearly. First make sure that all members of the board team are on the same channel. You could deliberate for hours an issue that deserves only a few minutes if all board members aren't clear about what the issue really is. The best way to avoid that is to get a motion on the table right away so everyone can focus on that specific motion. The chairperson should make it clear to all what a positive or a negative vote means. If you are not clear about the intent or meaning of the motion, ask the maker of the motion to clarify.

2) Look at the information. Good information is the only way a board team can understand enough about the issues to make good decisions. Your experience is a prime source of valuable information. Other board members will have valuable information and insights.

But board members are not on the front line with the daily business of the library and probably have limited expertise in library management. That means you have to rely on information from a variety of other people. The director and committee reports are standard sources for information about the issues that come before the board. Call on outside experts when necessary.

Board members aren't appointed for their expertise and experience in running a library, but rather their ability to ask the right questions, draw upon their experience and leadership skills and make good, informed decisions for the good of the library and community.

3) Consider the alternatives. Approach every issue with an open mind, believing that there is more than one side to every issue. What seems obvious at first glance may prove to have serious consequences down the road. Play the "devil's advocate," ask the tough questions and encourage other members of the team to voice opinions even though they may not agree with the majority.



Even a strong recommendation from the director or a board committee must not be accepted without a hard look at the possible alternatives. The director and committees should be expected to deliver a list of alternatives they have considered in arriving at their final recommendation.

4) Seek assistance. You should expect a recommendation from your director on all issues before the board. Never be afraid to seek help from outside the board from attorneys and other specialists who can help you make the decision. Just remember that no matter who recommends what or who advises you how to vote, the board has the ultimate responsibility and liability for the decisions they make. You can't blame others for your poor decisions.

5) Bounce the issue off your mission and long-range goals. All that you do should be in line with the mission of the library. Every decision the board makes should be in line with the long-range plan of the library and somehow advance the mission. You should also be able to say that every decision is for the greatest good of those who use the library.

6) Project the consequences. This is where the board member's vision comes in. A board decision cannot be made in isolation from all other things going on in the library. You must consider how this decision will affect people, programs and plans. How will the community be affected by your decision? Are there possible legal problems with this decision? Will a decision to spend money in one area mean that less money will be available for other areas?

A decision today could well have consequences for years to come. For example, a decision to build a new building would be very short-sighted if it did not take into consideration the cost of upkeep and maintenance for the life of the building.

7) Vote. IC 5-14-1.5-3. This is where you put it all together and voice your own individual decision on the issue. Set aside personal bias and emotions and cast the vote for what you think is the best decision for the library.

No matter how carefully you make your decision, the other board members' decisions may not agree with yours. Just as you are obligated to make your best individual decision, you also have a strong obligation to accept the decision of the majority of the board team no matter how you voted.

You and your board will not always make the best decisions because there are roadblocks waiting for you. Understanding the roadblocks will help you make more good decisions than bad ones.

Poor information is a major cause of poor board decisions. Not asking the right questions, listening to the wrong people or simply letting your ego lead you to believe you know all you need to know about the issue, can lead quickly to a poor decision. Plenty of good information is your first line of defense against poor decisions.

Avoiding poor decisions

Not allowing time for good deliberation of an issue will result in a poor decision. Items put on the agenda at the last minute should be a red flag that says there is danger of a poor decision here. Cutting off debate before all board members have a good opportunity to discuss the issue may deprive the board of insights needed for a good decision.

Pressure from individuals or special interest groups often results in poor decisions from board members who simply want to get out from under the pressure -- no matter the cost. The key to removing this roadblock is a policy that says we listen to all segments and then make all decisions based on what's best for all who use the library.

Emotions often trip up trustees and lead to poor decisions. At some time most boards will have heated debate over an issue. But board members must recognize when debate has gone beyond spirited discussion and fallen into a personal attack, anger and argument. When that happens, it's time to break or table the issue until all cool down. Voting on an issue when board members have forgotten the facts and are operating on emotions will result in a poor decision.

Many of the decisions your board team makes will be done by consensus. Consensus simply means that all board members accept a decision on an issue even though each board member may not completely agree with the decision.

Working for consensus of the board team

To reach consensus, an issue is discussed until agreement among all board members is reached. This is a more time-consuming and difficult method of decision making, but it has very great advantages over the majority vote. Consensus avoids conflict and splits among board members. Coming to consensus also forces a board to discuss an issue more thoroughly to bring all members into line.

Compromise is at the heart of arriving at consensus on any issue. Although the decision is not the one you would make if it were yours alone, it should be a decision that you can live with, knowing that none of the board members has won or lost, but all have compromised.

A formal vote may follow the consensus agreement to be recorded in the meeting minutes, or the minutes may simply say that consensus of all board members was reached on the issue. (**Caution: Some issues require a formal vote.**)

Simple issues, such as taking a recess during the meeting or setting the next meeting date, might easily be done by consensus. Sometimes more difficult issues can be handled by consensus.

It is not possible to arrive at consensus on all issues, but all board decisions will be better decisions if board members at least use the process of attempting to arrive at consensus on all issues.

