



# How does it feel to be wrong?

## Tactics for better team decision-making

Drew Browne

**E**ffective team decision-making hinges on a leader's skill in creating an environment where employees feel empowered to think differently and express divergent views. For business owners whose competitive advantage is their ability to out-think the competition, such skills need to be better understood. It starts with learning how to think better in a team environment and for leaders—avoiding the default of ‘trusting your gut’.

### Getting it wrong

What does it feel like when you recognise that you were wrong—for instance, in drawing an incorrect conclusion? If you are running a business, you most likely understand the power of teamwork when working through problems and looking for creative solutions. However the power of team-based decision-making stems from the team members and how that team approaches the thinking process—and this depends on the culture that the leader allows to exist.

### Pitfalls for team decision-making

The following outlines a process for poor team decision-making:

- Start with the assumption that the majority view is correct.
- Support this assumption by concentrating on the issues the majority is focused on.
- Actively search out information that corroborates this view.

- Filter the discussion through this narrow perspective, without looking for the bias in the way the issue is being framed.
- Avoid considering alternative views.
- Look for ways to convince yourself of the truth of the decision you are supporting.
- Where possible, seek to reinforce the group dynamic with known or malleable personalities.

Note that often, the input of the most ‘agreeable personalities’ is welcomed and prioritised at the expense of the less forthright.

The pattern described above may be relatable to many business owners who recognise this approach as a poor way to achieve an outcome. However, when they are inside the team discussion such insight is not so obvious, or the reticence of the team and the agenda of the leader may be setting the group up for failure.

### The information bubble

It is worth remembering that many of us are influenced by ‘information bubbles’, characterised by consensus-seeking and ‘groupthink’. Factors such as deeply religious, cultural or political backgrounds can shape our thinking and dictate who we choose as friends and colleagues—namely, people who agree with us. Add to that the social media algorithms that reinforce our existing beliefs and flame divisive discourse and it is a wonder we can remember how to make considered decisions at all.

It is innately human to seek to surround ourselves with comfort in

both things, ideas and personalities. Rarely do we seek to foster relationships with people who hold very different viewpoints.

### Not everyone in a group wants your opinion

When working with a committee or advisory group for instance, it can seem like what is expected is to agree with the majority and that members are routinely groomed into accepting the group's pre-existing agenda. Our image of business leaders often does not align with this notion, but it is important to recognise that when working with individuals who are not inclined to reflect on how they think in a group environment, the decision-making process is likely to be significantly flawed.

### Consensus has a life of its own

If you are a team leader and need to access the best thinking and insights from your team members, be wary of the default position of consensus thinking. It can rob a business of unique insights and opportunities when group members seek comfort over conflict.

Consensus, once established, puts a stop to additional independent thought and reflection. When the majority view goes unchallenged, we tend not to see other solutions or opportunities—even those close at hand. Team leaders may not consciously foster consensus thinking in their teams—but their actions in permitting such an environment to exist is enough to sustain it.

Once team members feel the group consensus has been reached—or confirmed, if it had actually been established ahead of time—they either suppress any differing opinion or simply fail to look for evidence that does not support the group's position. We can call this lazy thinking or the result of collective timidity—either way, the quality of the decisions reached will, at best, be brittle and underexamined, and at worst, insufficient to produce a sustainable competitive edge. The outcome of starting with consensus is that a team loses the skills to see and find the best solutions.

### What should a leader do?

The following steps can be explored by team leaders to reduce the inevitable pull of groupthink and consensus bias in their teams.

- Ask team members to brainstorm privately ahead of time and submit their thoughts in writing before the meeting.
- Expect unconscious bias, understand the influence of information bubbles and the discomfort in deviating from 'the way we have always done it'.
- Require different opinions and information about the problem being discussed.
- Nominate individual team members to champion a deliberately different opinion.
- Reward diverse opinions and viewpoints.
- And if you are the leader—speak last.

### Good practice is better than good intentions

When working in an environment in which strong ideas are held, such as a committee, advisory board, or accountability group, we are often unaware of a tendency to start to mimic or absorb the thoughts and behaviours of others. We may unconsciously come around to thinking like the majority, unaware that we are selecting information that confirms the 'echo chamber' of our good intentions—and reinforces bad habits.

Simply put, we miss the opportunity to experience what it feels like to be wrong and to become comfortable with that feeling. Had someone spoken up with a valid but contrary view, the spell of the consensus may have been broken. Speaking up with a different opinion encourages group members to think for themselves again.

### The last word

Leaders need to implement deliberate group practices to grow better, high-performing teams. While it can be difficult to speak up at times, especially for those who are less experienced or less senior in a particular field, there are teachable skills for both leaders and team members to help combat the natural inclination towards seeking consensus and comfort over conflict. A culture where 'it is ok to be wrong' will invite diverse perspectives and lay the groundwork for smarter, more innovative teams. **FS**



#### The quote

*Rarely do we seek to foster relationships with people who hold very different viewpoints.*



**Drew Browne,**  
Sapience  
Financial

Drew Browne is owner and senior financial adviser at Sapience Financial. An award-winning writer, speaker, financial adviser, and professional mentor, he works with small-business owners and their families to help them better manage life's risks. Having worked in financial services for over 17 years, Drew's background in law and professional advice have earned him a reputation as a no-nonsense adviser and a formidable advocate for his clients, friends and supporters.