

**Decision-Making
Leader Resource**

Decision-Making Using the SODAS Process

The SODAS process was developed by Boys Town based on techniques first formed by Jan Roosa. The process is simple, adaptable and can be used by groups or individuals. SODAS is an acronym for 1) Situation, 2) Options, 3) Disadvantages, 4) Advantages, and 5) Solution. Effectively working the process in a group assumes that group members will be open to each other, listen without interrupting, and empathetic to each others needs, feelings, and concerns.

Define the SITUATION or the Decision That Needs to Be Made

If the situation is a non-problem (like choosing a theme for a dance or deciding on a destination for a trip), present information and clarify the details of the situation so that everyone has a common understanding. If the situation is a problem, clearly defining it may take longer. Ask clarifying questions, find out the root of strong feelings and the *reasons* behind them. A problem can't be solved if it is not clear *exactly* what it is. If a group is working on the process, make sure everyone clearly understands the situation at hand before proceeding.

Determine the OPTIONS Available

Brainstorm solutions to the situation or problem – as many as possible. At this stage, do not judge or reject any ideas. In group decision-making, this may be an opportunity for the kinds of suggestions that reduce tension and keep creativity high. In individual decision-making, this step is crucial to prevent a decision-maker from falling into an “either/or,” “black-and-white” mentality where they see only two solutions to a problem. If a large number of options were brainstormed, a smaller list of four or five can be selected for the continuation of the process.

Discuss the DISADVANTAGES and ADVANTAGES of Each Option

By discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each option, a picture of *why* one option might be better than another begins to emerge. In both group and individual decision-making, it is helpful to write down the results of the discussion or consideration. Remain calm and listen closely to everyone's opinion regarding the pros and cons of an option, then move on to the other options selected. Remember to

include both concrete/tangible factors and moral or value concerns. For example, stealing an item from a music store might be an option in the decision of selecting a tape or CD, but its greatest disadvantage is that it is immoral and illegal and goes against the value system of the decision-maker.

Finding a SOLUTION or Decision

Summarize the options, disadvantages, and advantages discussed or reflected upon and move toward articulating a solution or decision. Group decision-making may require some negotiation and clear communication skills. If a group member disagrees with the solution but is willing to live with it, make note of the disagreement but accept that each may learn something in the process. In an individual decision, once the decision is made, abide by it and refrain from "second-guessing." Set a time for a follow-up discussion (or personal reflection for an individual) to evaluate progress. This is as important as the whole process, for learning and growth often happens in hindsight or in the process of "working out the bugs."

The Decision-Making Process

What clothes will I wear? What will I do Friday night? Which educational program should I pursue? What do I want to do with my life? What will I order for dinner? Decisions, decisions, decisions! Our days are filled with decisions, many which we make with little if any effort. Other choices we agonize over for days or even months. In our daily lives, most decisions involve only ourselves, or a limited range of people around us. However, as a leader, the decisions for which we are responsible will often affect others in significant and far reaching ways.

A key aspect of leadership is decision-making, particularly involving groups. Effective decision-making involves determining:

- The purpose of the decision. Why are we making this decision?
- The criteria on which the decisions will be based. What's important and necessary to consider?
- The method or process which will be used to arrive at the decision. How will we make the decision?

Choosing an appropriate and effective decision-making process will go a long way in avoiding unnecessary conflict. In other words, if you develop and use good decision-making skills, you may not need to call upon your conflict resolution skills as often! When leading a group in making a decision, the following questions should be addressed before the decision is considered:

- What decision needs to be made?
- What is the basis or criteria on which we are making the decision?
- By whom will the decision be made; who will be involved and responsible for the decision?
- What method will be used in arriving at the decision?

Determining Criteria for a Decision

Before considering the choices, discuss and identify possible "criteria" which will be used in arriving at the final decision. The criteria chosen will provide a filter through which choices are considered. It is a tool for keeping "on track" and basing the discussion on clear objectives and values rather than arbitrary wishes or opinions. When a group clarifies basic criteria before approaching a decision it creates a

Explain that this was a simulation learning experience, and that more time would have been available in an actual situation. Post the questions below on newsprint, and use them as a guide in facilitating a discussion about their experience.

- How satisfied do you feel with the amount and quality of your participation in reaching the group decision?
- How much influence do you feel you had on the group's decision?
- How would you describe the group's atmosphere during the decision-making process?

Ask adult leaders to share their observations, emphasizing and affirming the good use of leadership skills.

Summary **(5 minutes)**

In closing, ask participants to identify what they see as the positive aspects of decision-making through consensus seeking. Also ask them to identify what they see as the challenges. Discuss with the group any upcoming group decisions for which consensus seeking is the most appropriate method; explain how and when the process will be used, and how they can participate.

Note: Once youth leaders understand the consensus seeking method of decision-making, provide them opportunities to use their understanding and skills as leaders in future group decisions.

"common ground" for an objective discussion. Various options may then be considered in light of the criteria rather than personal likes or dislikes. This in itself can minimize unnecessary conflict.

Often general guiding criteria are already suggested in a mission statement of an organization. If there is no established criteria, the group will need to determine what criteria will be used in reaching their decision. Questions which may help in identifying possible criteria include:

- What is important to use as a group?
- What do we want to remember when considering the choice?
- What are the issues or needs our decisions ought to address?
- Are there values which we feel are essential to consider in the decision?
- What will assure that this decision supports the purpose of our group?

Guiding criteria may include such general things as respect for individual dignity, equal opportunity for participants, safe and welcoming environment, modeling and promoting positive values, or simply having fun or helping others. Criteria may also be more specific such as low cost, meet new people, easy to organize, or physically challenging. Of course, even deciding on the criteria for a decision may involve some decision-making skills! To better understand the various factors involved in reaching a group decision, consider the following situation.

You are leading a group of ten youth. They all agree they want to do something fun together next weekend. Now the dilemma is trying to decide what they will do. Some of the group want to go hiking, some want to go to the movies, and others want to wander the shopping mall. Recent attempts to come to an agreement have only resulted in arguments.

This is a typical group decision-making situation, and without helpful skills and effective processes the situation can easily lead to conflict. A first step is to identify the criteria on which the decision will be made. It is important that everyone spend the time together as a group of ten. Do people want to get to know each other better by the end of the day? Do they want to get out and do something different and challenging? Or perhaps the basic criteria is that everyone has fun. The criteria chosen will influence the decision. For example, if "getting to know each other better" is important, then sitting in a movie theater with little interaction may not be the best choice based on the agreed upon criteria for this particular time together. Regardless of the criteria, a method for reaching the decision must be determined. Consider the possible ways this decision can be made.

At this point in order to complete your preparation for this session, please read the Handout: Methods of Decision-Making.