

# A Facilitator Decision-Making Model

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## Summary

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The Facilitator Decision-Making Model enables the facilitator to guide a group of participants through the process of making a decision. The model has 4 topics: Context, Content, Type of decision and Facilitation. Each topic gives guidance of what a facilitator needs to consider to enable a group to reach a supported decision.

## Introduction

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Being facilitators, we are regularly faced with a group of participants who need to make a decision. How to facilitate the decision-making process in the best way?

This article presents the Facilitator Decision-Making Model (FDMM). The objective of this model is to give guidance to a facilitator who has to facilitate a group that has to reach a supported decision. With this model facilitators are well equipped to enable the group to handle a decision-making situation, which may be easy or complex. Organizations often face complex situations where decisions are made in an easy straight-forward way or in what seems to be the most logical way. The FDMM offers guidance in easy and complex situations.

## Background

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This FDMM is the result of a workshop held during a conference of the Dutch Facilitation Academy on May 6, 2019. A group of facilitators participated in this workshop with the topic: "How to make a Decision Model for facilitators, that can be used when facilitating a group of participants who wants to make a decision". Being one of the trainers with the Facilitation Academy I designed and facilitated this workshop at the Conference, and used the output to define this FDMM.

This article cannot and does not aim to be complete. That is why additions, comments and remarks are welcomed, with the objective to grow our expertise

as facilitators. Please forward your comments to me: nel@facilitation-academy.nl.

## The Facilitator Decision-Making Model

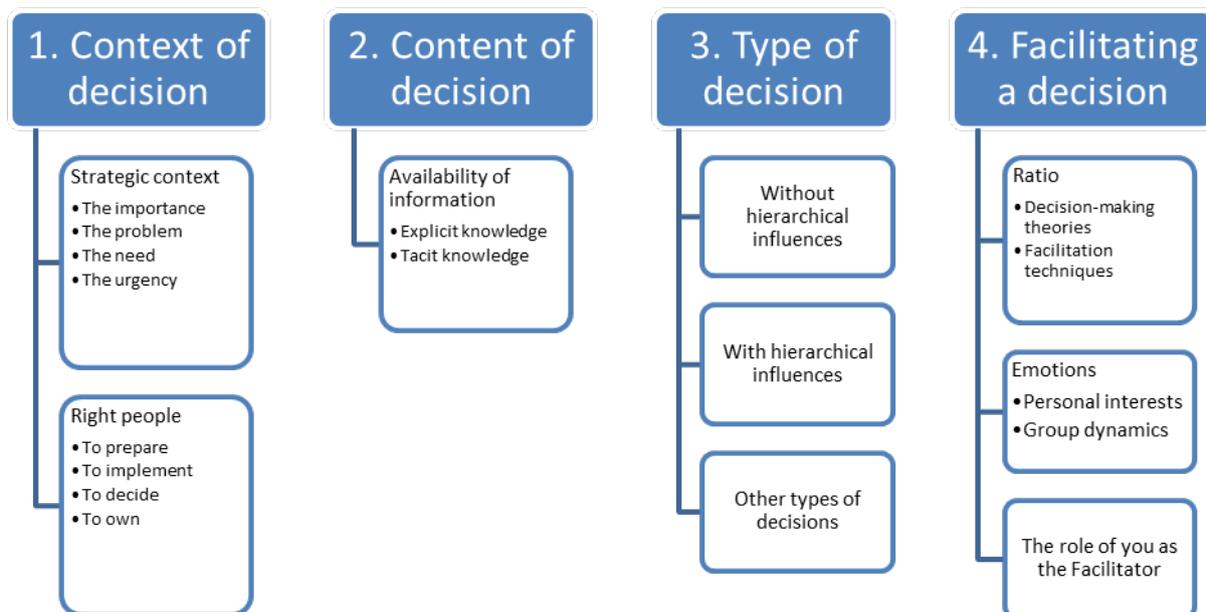
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The FMDD offers an approach to achieve a proper communication between the participants.

The approach focusses on 4 topics:

1. Context - awareness of the strategic context and the people involved
2. content - availability of the necessary explicit and tacit information
3. Decision - define/determine which type of decision is needed; hierarchical, non-hierarchical or any other type of decision
4. Process - use of a process for both ratio and emotional aspects, the facilitation techniques to lead the team to a decision, and your role as the facilitator

The 4 topics will be explained in the following chapters and are summarized in this overview.



THE FACILITATOR DECISION-MAKING MODEL

## Topic 1: Context of a decision

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When working with a team that has to make a decision, you need to find out if the context of the decision is clear for all participants. Often decisions are taken in a hurry, by the wrong people or not taking all context elements into consideration. If the context is not clear, the participants will not be able to make a decision in a proper way. As a facilitator it is your responsibility to prevent this.

You need to consider two elements:

- Strategy context
- Right people

### Strategic context

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You need to identify if the participants realise the importance of the decision within the strategic context of the company. They also need to know what problem the decision will solve, how important it is to make the decision, and should it be made now, in the meeting, or at a later phase?

#### **The importance**

The importance of the decision within the strategic context needs to be clear. The participants should be able to communicate and share the place of the decision within the context of the vision or strategy, or any other area within the procedures of the company. Together with the context, the participants must be able to identify the conditions and criteria. If you, as the facilitator, feel the participants are not able to explain this context, you need to find a way to facilitate that awareness, or draw the conclusion that these participants are not able to make a decision.

#### **The problem**

The participants need to give a clear definition of the problem for which a decision is needed, together with the objective of the decision; why does the team need a decision and what does it solve? In other words: Why, What, When, Who, Where. If the participants fail to define the problem and objective, you need to find a way to facilitate this, or make the participants conclude they cannot prepare and/or make a decision.

#### **The need**

The objective and problem definition of the decision have to show the pain, the need and the importance of it. Furthermore, the facilitator should sense if the group dynamics show a higher or lower need to reach a decision. If the participants do not show a clear need, you will have to facilitate visualizing the

level of necessity, or draw the conclusion that the group is not able to express this desire, meaning these participants do not feel the need to make a decision at all.

### **The urgency**

How urgent is the decision and does it have to be made in the meeting or can it be made at a later stage? At what stage in the project is the decision to be made, when can or should it be taken? If the decision does not have to be taken during the meeting, you can facilitate the participants to prepare for it, and make the decision at a later stage.

### **Right people**

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Furthermore, you need to identify if the right people are in the meeting. Everybody who needs to be involved in the implementation phase, as well as the 'owner' of the decision, must participate. If the right people are not in the room or not involved, you can facilitate the participants to prepare the decision, but the group cannot make the decision.

### **To prepare**

The facilitator should check if all participants do play a role in the decision-making process and if all participants who should play a role are present. The facilitator should let all participants involved confirm that the roles and responsibilities in the decision-making process are clear for the participants in the room and the stakeholders (who might not be present). If participants who should be involved are not present, it might be that the discussion needs to be postponed, so all can join. Also, if there are participants present who are not or should not be involved in the decision-making process, you need to be aware of that, because it is possible that their opinion cannot play a role in the process, and you need to guide their non-involvement in the right way.

### **To implement**

Very often a decision is made without the people who are actually involved in making it happen, even though will execute and implement the decision. The facilitator needs to check with the participants if these people should or should not take part in process.

### **To decide**

The facilitator must be sure that the participants present in the room are the right persons, who are allowed to help making and/or make the decision.

## To own

There will always be a manager or participant who 'owns' the decision and is responsible for making the implementation happen and its consequences. If such a person is not present in the process, you can only facilitate the participants in preparing for a decision.

## Topic 2: Content of a decision

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A key element of a decision is the content of the available information. The facilitator needs to check and double-check if all participants feel they have enough information about the problem. Everybody should have access to the same information, facts, suggestions and thoughts around the problem.

The following two elements have to be available and understood:

- Explicit knowledge: all written, verbal, visual or in any other format available information
- Tacit knowledge: all knowledge, experiences, expertise and skills the participants have themselves.

The facilitator must take the utmost care of the information being sufficiently understood by all participants. In case of a high level of complexity of the problem and/or decision, this is of extra importance. If this requirement is not met, the facilitator will have to suggest postponing the decision, until the full understanding of the content of the information can be confirmed.

## Topic 3: Type of decision

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Having the context and content in place, the next step is to find out which type of decision is needed and how participants want to reach the decision. The facilitator has to know this, because it defines the facilitation steps to be taken. The next three circumstances define the type of decision:

- A decision that must be taken with hierarchical influences
- A decision that can be taken without hierarchical influence
- Other types of decisions.

### **A decision that must be taken with hierarchical influence**

It could be that a decision must be taken with hierarchical influence, because of the presence of the following persons/circumstances:

- a College + (Works) Council
- a team of managers
- a superior with hierarchical power (can be a veto-decision)
- an external authority
- a person who has a mandate and authorizations
- a manager who puts pressure on the decision
- lobbying - informal circuit - social media - at the coffee machine - backroom deals
- an objective jury with strict rules, judgment and a verdict
- the one who pays decides

### **A decision that can be taken without hierarchical influences**

A decision can be taken without hierarchical influence, because of the following circumstances:

- Decisions made unanimously - all agree
- Majority vote - most votes count (e.g. organizing a referendum)
- A compromise, which is a deal between different parties, where each party gives up part of their demand; participants agree to disagree
- Consensus, which is a generally accepted opinion or decision among a group of people in the best interest of the whole

### **Other types of decisions**

A decision to be taken under other types of circumstances:

- A suggestion that pops-up; a so-called 'pop-up-decision'
- Decision by the one who is writing (the person who is 'holding the pen')
- Decision by intuition
- Fate
- Coincidence
- A mathematical calculated decision
- A forced decision where there are no alternatives, no choices

## **Topic 4: Facilitating a decision**

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In facilitating a decision-making process, there are 3 key elements to consider:

- The ratio: rules, processes, techniques, decisions
- The emotions: people, team dynamics, etc.
- Your role as the facilitator

## The ratio

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The process that you choose to facilitate the team heavily depends on the type of decision that needs to be made. As a facilitator you should know the types of decisions and process steps with each type of decision. It is not the objective of this article to clarify how the process steps are to be taken and what the facilitation techniques look like for each type of decision, as this should be part of the expertise of you as the facilitator. If needed, check the internet. As the facilitator you need to explain and check for agreement on the type of decision that is needed, and the process steps and the facilitation techniques you will use to lead the team to their decision.

For your information, here are some examples of theories of decision-making, which each have their own process steps and facilitation techniques:

- Design Thinking
- Deep Democracy
- Lean start-up; learning by doing (Plan Do Act Retro)
- Delphi
- DMUU - Decision-making Under Uncertainty
- Value Based Analysis
- Scenario model
- Voting
- Decision based on pre-defined criteria
- COCD Box
- Thinking hats of De Bono – change perspectives while making decisions
- Debating techniques

As a facilitator you have to be aware of the many processes and techniques to facilitate the different parts of these decision-making theories. There are many to be found on the internet; here are some examples of facilitation techniques:

- Take a walk – in pairs go outside and walk around the area talking about the topic
- Take a break – decisions are often made at the coffee machine
- Have the people stand up while giving their arguments, those who agree stand behind the person, those who disagree stand further away from the person
- Have several rounds of arguments
- Make a list of all pros and cons of possible decisions and discuss these
- Ask participants to pitch their arguments (others are not allowed to interrupt)
- Ask 'Why' 5 times

- Participants pretend to be someone else and look at the topic from their point of view (roleplaying)
- Organize a game with a winner
- Have an idea box
- Ask the participants what is keeping them from making a decision, then ask them to 'Kill your darlings, kill your 'love baby''
- Sleep it over – do not take the decision until the next day

The theory, process and techniques must be transparent so everybody can understand, see and follow the steps. The participants and stakeholders must agree to the process. Only then you can facilitate the team towards a decision.

After the decision is made it needs to be written down in such a way that it is absolutely clear what the decision is. The facilitator needs to double-check with all participants if the way the decision is formulated is transparent, clear and without any possible misinterpretations.

Decisions may have positive and negative consequences. The facilitator could facilitate this overview by asking the participants to think about these consequences. The negative consequences could be supported by adding actions to them to prevent these from happening.

With a clearly defined decision (and actioned negative consequences), a next step in the meeting should be to define the execution of the decision. The facilitator can facilitate this by asking the participants to make a list of actions, the action owners and timing of the actions.

## The emotions

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The facilitator is to take care of the personal dynamics with respect to emotions, well-being of the individual participants and interactions within the group dynamics in the decision-making process, as they all have their own interests. Below are the very diverse types of interests you should anticipate, be aware of and act upon:

### **Personal interests**

Examples of participant interests and questions to be answered in the decision-making process:

- Do they feel safe in the group
- How equal are the participants with respect to hierarchy and interests
- Do the participants have any decision power, or are they without
- Do the participants feel their opinions count, are they listened to
- Do the participants trust each other

- Are the participants concerned about their job/role/position
- Do the participants suffer from 'tunnel vision'?
- Are they stubborn in keeping their own opinion, are they willing to leave their 'Ivory Tower'?
- Are they only looking for WIIFM: 'What Is In It For Me?'
- Do they feel the threat of competition
- How committed are they towards the topic
- Do they feel ownership of the decision
- Does the culture of the organization play a role
- Is there a risk of boycotting/undermining the decision
- Is there a risk of losing support if it all takes too long to implement?

### **Group Dynamics**

The facilitator should at the same time anticipate, be aware of and act upon group dynamics, such as:

- The size of the group (with the risk of chaos in the decision-making process with larger teams)
- The effect of group pressure
- The effect of time pressure
- The combination of the different characters and thinking styles of the participants
- Is the group accepting the opinion of the 'silent ones' as part of the final decision
- The maturity of the group; Tuckman theory - forming, storming, norming, performing
- Is there trust, safety in the group
- Energy 'sugar-level' of the participants, may depend of time of day and differ per person
- Are there individuals who speak up more than others, there may be participants who are professional speakers, able to inspire and convince others (using e.g. ethos, pathos and logos)
- Is the group able to have a proper debate

### **Your role as the facilitator**

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And finally; being the facilitator, key elements in how you guide the decision-making process of the participants are: your own role, attitude, behavior, expertise, knowledge, experience, etc.

## Conclusion

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The Facilitator Decision-Making model enables the facilitator to guide a group of participants through the process of making a decision. The model gives 4 topics that play a key role: Context, Content, Type of decision and Facilitation.

## Thank you

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The Facilitation Academy would like to thank you as a reader in the interest that you have given this topic. The FDMM will help you in your role as facilitator standing in front of a team that needs to make a decision. Good luck!

The Facilitation Academy would also like to thank the participating facilitators who contributed to the content of the workshop which lead to the FDMM: Gonne Kleine, GertJan van den Dries, Adda van Zanden, Saskia Nayee, Suzanne Thiessen, Camille Boyer, Tsjitske Stoer, Anja Vonk, Jaap van den Burg, Judith de Jong, Hetty Krijnen, Peter de Jong, Barbara Scheld, Eveline Moolenaars.

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