

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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February 1, 2018

### Why Unity Is Not a Good Goal

*Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.*

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.

I frequently hear church leaders say that their goal when making decisions is unity or unanimity. Somehow, unity and unanimity in a leadership team's decisions are viewed by most of us as resounding affirmations of the validity of the decision. But, when it comes to making important decisions, unity and unanimity are terrible goals. The most important thing in making a decision is to come to a correct or proper decision. No amount of church-speak or fuzzy, warm feelings about unity will turn a poor decision into a good decision. So, if unity and unanimity are poor goals, what should be our goal for decision-making in the church? That's something to talk about.

I find it helpful to think of decision-making in church leadership teams as a three-step process. First, define the decision-making goal. Second, go through a decision-making process. And third, unite around the ensuing decision. Allow me to briefly address each step.

Our Decision-Making Goal: I believe the goal for any decision-making team is to identify the *best decision possible under the circumstances*. When a team knows and behaves as though the best decision possible under the circumstances is the goal rather than unity or unanimity, it encourages and creates a culture of research, robust dialog, sharing of different viewpoints and, in the end, voting on the proposed idea on its own merits rather than voting for unity or unanimity. So many times, in the aftermath of a disastrous decision, individual church leaders have told me that they were not really in favor of the decision they voted for, but they voted for it because they didn't want to stand in the way of board unity. Very few people want to be "that guy," the person who stands in the way of unity – "that guy" who is the one "nay" on an otherwise unanimous decision. So we pull out early from the decision-making process, hold back on sharing legitimate concerns,

and end up voting for what turns out to be a disastrous course of action. It's pretty easy to vote for unity. It's hard work to discern the best decision possible under the circumstances. But it's worth it in the end.

The Decision-Making Process: Every team has a decision-making process whether it is clearly defined or over time evolved into "that's how we make decisions here." It is helpful for leadership teams to have a shared, clearly articulated decision-making process. It does not need to be complex, but needs to be clear as well as flexible enough to address a wide variety of decisions. I suggest that it be in writing, not to be rigid, but to be clear and to help us remember it. Here are some examples of things that could be a part of your decision-making process:

- Is this issue clearly addressed in Scripture and does Scripture clearly define a process to be followed or outcome to be attained? The key word in the previous sentence is the adverb "clearly." A possible inference from an obscure verse is not "clearly."
- Is this a preference issue (should we paint the exterior wall light green or gray)? If so, is a majority vote sufficient or do we want or expect the Holy Spirit to bring us to the same individual preferences (and not to despair and throwing in the towel) after prayer and fasting or months of deliberation? Is this decision a Kingdom issue or should we just decide and move on?
- Is this a high-risk or low-risk decision? If we try it and it doesn't work out, can it be abandoned with little loss? Consider any likely potential outcomes, but don't get frozen by a 1-in-a-million chance of something unpleasant.
- Is this an actual emergency or can we be more deliberate?
- Everyone on the team must speak individually to their thoughts about any significant decision to be made. "I agree with Steve" does not qualify as speaking individually.
- We should fully, robustly and tactfully debate ideas. We should never attack the person holding the idea – ever. In the information gathering and deciding stages, conflict over ideas is good; personal conflict is bad.
- Should a staff member have the responsibility and authority to go ahead and make this decision rather than have the entire leadership team debate this?
- Remember, the best decision possible under the circumstances may not come from anyone on the team. It's important that we leaders are aware of the things we don't know or understand and invite others to join us "in the room" to help us come to the best decision possible under the circumstances in those situations. See the Something to Talk About article "The Answer Is in the Room" in the November 1, 2015, issue of the Zipline.

Unity Around the Decision: There is a difference between unity and unanimity.

Unanimity can be defined as everyone agreeing completely without dissent – more simply, it's everyone agreeing with or disagreeing with the proposed course of action. The pursuit of unanimity (unanimous voting outcomes) is a recipe for disaster in many

circumstances for it often results in people voting how they think the group would want them to vote to get the desired outcome (a unanimous vote) rather than voting how they actually think and feel about the issue under consideration. Any pressure in a deliberative body toward unanimity, whether explicit or assumed, can result in fraudulent outcomes – people don't vote how they really think and feel – in a word, they lie. We think and say that we are in agreement, and have data (votes) to prove it; but, the vote does not reflect the reality of the voters' actual thoughts and feelings.

Unity is what we want at the end of the process. Allow me to illustrate. Some of the best ideas that my home church has embraced over the years include quite a few about which I was not too keen at the time. Many times I had reservations, concerns, questions, doubts about supporting data, and, at times, just thought there was a better way to go because I'm wired that way. Even after robust discussion and debate, my thoughts and feelings were not in line with those of the rest of the leadership team. What to do? Since "unity" was not the goal, I could with a clear conscience share that I wasn't too excited about the proposed course of action and had doubts, but could see that it was plausible, it could work, failure wouldn't be catastrophic and there was a Plan B in case things didn't work out. Under those circumstances, I was happy to support the rest of the team in what appeared to be the best decision possible under the circumstances, lined up with them, and owned and supported the decision of the board as though it was my own. I didn't stand on the sidelines as a doubter; rather, I jumped in and did all I could to ensure the outcome that we desired. It was "our decision." As it turned out, they were pretty good decisions, too.

Every once in a while, after a difficult decision, someone in the congregation will ask me what I personally thought about a decision by our board. My response? The board's decision *is* my decision. My personal thoughts one way or the other are irrelevant once the board has decided. I never tell people that I was personally against or for a decision made by our board – every decision we make is our decision, and we are united behind it.

Here's one way to move from debate and discussion to unity. After a divided vote or a vote about which you are not enthusiastic, ask this question: Can we unite around this outcome? If we can, we are united and I can vote "yes." If we cannot, we have more exploring work to do.

Here are some ideas to guide your conversation:

- Do the preceding paragraphs spark any thoughts in your own minds? With what do you agree and what do you find problematic?
- How does our team make difficult decisions? Do we emphasize unity or discovering the best decision possible under the circumstances? Something else? Any examples?

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- Have you ever kept your concerns or reservations about a decision to yourself because you didn't want to be "that guy" who prevented unity (whether real or feigned)?
- Do the structures and processes in our meetings yield themselves to thorough discussions of significant issues? Are there things that we do that hinder us from taking the time to thoroughly investigate potential courses of action before deciding to tally votes? Do we waste our time on trivial matters rather than investing our time on things of true importance?
- Do we have any documents that state or strongly infer that our decision-making goal is unity or unanimity rather than the best possible decision under the circumstances? Should we change them?

Whenever I write or talk about unity, I'm always reminded of the prayer of Jesus that His followers would be one (John 17). I believe this should be especially true of leaders in a local church. So, yes, one can say that unity actually is our goal, but we need to be careful about what we are united around. To be unified around a poor or unwise decision is nothing to celebrate. To be clear that we wish to be unified around the best decisions possible under the circumstances is a good thing. And that's something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.  
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