

Frustrated by tedious and unproductive meetings? These 2 proven strategies can help teams work smarter

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the problem of ineffective team decision making — characterised by unproductive meetings, conflict, and poor outcomes — and examines the organisational culture factors that enable or hinder it. Drawing on original survey-based research conducted with 35 New Zealand-based decision-making teams, the authors argue that psychological safety and independent thinking are the two primary cultural enablers of effective team decision making. Key findings indicate that over 60% of participants who reported high psychological safety also reported high-quality decision outcomes, and that encouraging independent thinking prior to group deliberation improved information processing and solution quality. Findings on inclusion were mixed: procedural inclusion (appropriate participation) was associated with effective decision making, while social belonging was not. Longer team tenure was also positively correlated with effective outcomes. The article concludes that leaders play a central role in cultivating these conditions through modelling vulnerability, structuring pre-meeting contributions, and framing decision making as a collective process rather than an individual competition.

Key Insights

1. Psychological safety — the ability to share ideas without fear of negative consequences — was positively associated with effective team decision making, with over 60% of high-safety respondents also reporting high-quality decision outcomes.
2. Independent thinking, defined as sharing perspectives before being exposed to others' views, improved information processing and led to more innovative solutions; this was further strengthened by psychologically safe environments.
3. Inclusion findings were mixed: procedural inclusion (being brought into the decision process when able to add value) supported effective decision making, while social belonging ('feeling truly part of the team') did not show a significant relationship with decision quality.
4. Longer team tenure was positively associated with effective decision making, suggesting that familiarity with colleagues is particularly valuable in ambiguous and changing work environments.

Practical Takeaways

- Allowing team members to contribute perspectives individually — via polls or pre-meeting written input — before group deliberation may reduce conformity pressures and improve the range of ideas considered.
- Leaders framing decision making as a collective process rather than a win/loss dynamic for individuals may reduce defensiveness and support more open information sharing.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article is grounded in original empirical research rather than pure opinion, provides specific quantitative findings, and distinguishes nuanced sub-dimensions of inclusion rather than treating it as a monolithic concept. The research question is practically relevant and clearly articulated. **Limitations:** The sample is small (35 teams) and geographically restricted to New Zealand, which substantially limits generalisability. The study relies entirely on self-reported recall of past decisions, introducing memory bias and social desirability effects. The cross-sectional survey design prevents causal inference — findings are correlational only. The article is authored partly in collaboration with a commercial entity (DOT Scorecard), which raises questions about potential conflicts of interest, though this is disclosed. The transition from findings to prescriptive leadership guidance at the article's conclusion exceeds what the methodology strictly supports.

Organizational Practice

The article describes survey research conducted with 35 New Zealand-based decision-making teams. Participants recalled complex decisions made by their groups and assessed whether effective decision making occurred. Practices described include pre-meeting written contributions or polls to capture independent thinking before group exposure, and leader modelling of vulnerability and openness to support psychological safety.

Strategic Implications

The distinction between procedural inclusion and social belonging as separate constructs with different relationships to decision quality points to a possible gap in how organisations frame inclusion initiatives — conflating belonging with participation may misallocate intervention effort. The positive association between team tenure and decision quality raises questions about the trade-offs of frequent team restructuring, a common feature of agile and matrix-based organisations. The small and geographically limited sample suggests replication across broader organisational and cultural contexts before the findings are treated as generalisable.

Validation Status: passed
