

New Causes of Death Consensus Task: A Teaching Activity for Individual and Team Decision-Making

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Abstract. The purpose of the present research was to design an activity for classroom use when teaching organizational behavior concepts related to individual and team decision making. We modified Taylor's (1988) classic causes of death consensus task involving ratings of the frequency of specific causes of death. Using updated data on causes of death in the United States in 2022 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2024a), we designed an activity for students asking them to rank order the most common causes of death both individually and in teams in order to compare individual and group error relative to the CDC data. We provide instructions for educators and facilitators to administer the activity and suggestions for guiding classroom discussion. We believe this is a useful and engaging activity for demonstrating organizational behavior concepts in college or university undergraduate and graduate settings, which we discuss, along with areas for future research.

Keywords: causes of death, rater error, perceptual errors, individual decision-making, team decision-making, consensus.

1. Introduction

Decision making by consensus is a process that involves gathering input from all stakeholders, valuing their perspectives, and reaching a mutually agreeable solution. This approach not only fosters a sense of ownership and buy-in from team members but also leverages the collective intelligence of the group. Teams generally produce more new knowledge than individuals (Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007) and by harnessing diverse viewpoints, organizations can make better-informed decisions, mitigate risks, and seize opportunities that may have otherwise been overlooked. The consensus decision making process involves 1) introducing the problem, 2) clarifying questions, 3) discussion, 4) establishing a basic direction for the team, 5) synthesizing or modifying a proposal, 6) formally calling for consensus, and 7) recording the decision (Scandura, 2019).

Consensus decision-making is a collaborative process whereby group members work together to develop proposals that achieve broad acceptance.

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Compared to simple unanimity decision-making, consensus is reached when all parties assent to a decision, even if some members may not fully agree with all aspects of it. This decision-making method emphasizes thoughtful deliberation, which allows diverse perspectives to be incorporated and allows for decision making which reflect the group's collective thoughts and feelings. Another purpose is to avoid the division that often is associated with majority rule voting and this type of decision-making is especially effective in contexts where strategic importance and core values are at stake (Maddon, 2017).

Consensus tasks have gained popularity in management education for teaching both individual and team decision-making concepts (McCleese & Flott, 2023; McCleese & Maclin, 2024). These tasks are designed to simulate real-world scenarios where students must collaborate to reach a common agreement, thereby enhancing their decision-making skills. Consensus tasks are widely used in management classes due to their effectiveness in fostering critical thinking, communication, and collaboration among students. They are particularly valued for their ability to illustrate the dynamics of team decision-making and the importance of diverse perspectives. One benefit of consensus activities is enhanced critical thinking. By engaging in consensus tasks, students are required to critically evaluate different viewpoints and justify their decisions, which enhances their analytical skills. Another benefit of consensus activities is improved communication because the tasks promote open dialogue and active listening, essential skills for effective team collaboration. Consensus activities also allow for a real-world application of the decision-making processes, preparing students for future managerial roles where collaborative decision-making is crucial (www.theleadershipmission.com).

Taylor (1988) created three classic team consensus tasks that involved a forced rank ordering of 15-item lists of information on three specific topics (crimes, causes of death, and stressors). The activities ask students to rank items individually and in teams. Team error was consistently lower than individual error in each of the activities. Although these activities were designed for teaching concepts in management courses, they also can be useful for demonstrating organizational behavior concepts in both undergraduate and graduate settings, particularly topics related to individual and team decision making. Consensus activities may also be useful for other purposes, such as icebreakers (due to the level of in-depth conversations they ignite) or as team-building activities in the workplace to demonstrate the importance of team contributions to improve organizational decision-making.

McCleese and Flott (2023) recently developed an updated version of Taylor's (1988) stress consensus task, which asked students to rank order the relative severity of Holmes and Rahe's (1967) Social Re-adjustment Rating Scale using items from Scully, Tosi, and Banning's (2000) Life Event Checklist, which re-weighted Holmes and Rahe's (1967) stressors. The purpose of their research was to provide an up-to-date activity for students and managers to use, given social