The Bridgespan Group

Five Ways that Nonprofits Can Make Decision Making More Inclusive—and More Effective

By Mike Ciccarone, Preeta Nayak, Yonatan Araia, and Bradley Seeman

Effective leaders are decisive and confident—and almost always surrounded by a strong team of advisors. Their ability to call on specialized expertise and multiple perspectives helps to shape more effective decisions and manage their consequences. More recently, though, many nonprofits have become acutely aware that their leaders and advisors—the decision makers—don't fully reflect the rest of their organizations or their communities. More inclusive decision making could better factor identity and lived experience into decisions, and also entrust decision making to a broader set of leaders. It would ultimately drive more equitable progress toward nonprofits' missions.

When decision-making authority and roles are distributed more broadly across an organization, and decision processes are well understood, it can sharpen decisions, improve follow through, and spur learning and growth. Inclusive decision making done right is essential to decision making done well. A growing body of research from the business world also shows that more diverse perspectives can result in better decisions. It brings relevant information to the table and better guards against the biases that can lead decision makers astray. But it hasn't always been a priority for nonprofits.

Until 2020. That's when the social sector stepped up to respond to COVID-19—and the racial disparities in the pandemic's health outcomes and economic impacts—as well as to the nationwide protests against police violence and a broader awareness of racial injustice in the United States. The reckoning echoed an ongoing shift in mindsets globally to lift up the voices and power of the communities most directly experiencing inequities across a broad swathe of social issues.

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In our conversations with nonprofit leaders and their teams, the desire to turn reflection into action came through. Many nonprofits are seeking ways to open up their decision processes to better reflect the racial diversity within the organization, and among those they serve. "We need to think about how we get better as an organization so that those closest to the effect of the decision have voice and are involved," says Elizabeth Whitford, CEO of School's Out Washington, which works to ensure equitable access to high-quality, expanded learning programs in all the state's communities.

Over the past several years, School's Out Washington has deliberated on its decision-making processes as part of a broader review of its internal equity and inclusion practices. More recently, the organization engaged Every Level Leadership to coach its leaders, redesign the structure and authority of the racial equity committee, and support staff in shifting to a more equitable culture. "It's important to make a dual investment," Whitford added. "Without deep equity work and reflection as a leader, a tool like RAPID [see below] won't get you there."

Others are seeking to improve decision making as their organizations grow or change. Social sector leaders like Ananda Valenzuela and Vu Le have strongly criticized top-down processes in the nonprofit world, arguing that decisions should be made by the person most closely linked to the decision, or by the person with the most energy, skill, and experience to make it. "When I started here, I was running the organization with one other employee," says Julie Cordua, CEO of the nonprofit Thorn, which builds technology to defend children from sexual abuse. "Now it's a $25 million organization with lots of employees and stakeholders around the world. So my job as a leader is different. You want more people making decisions, and you want why and how they're making these decisions to be transparent."

Having more voices at the table can be vital to hearing a diversity of perspectives. However, when we talk about inclusive decision making, we're also talking about decision power and roles being distributed more broadly across the organization. This article, based on The Bridgespan Group's work with scores of local, national, and global nonprofits and NGOs around decision making, looks at five promising approaches for making decisions in ways that are both inclusive *and* effective, leading to more equitable outcomes.

1. Map roles for key decisions and make sure you're hearing the full range of perspectives

"The idea of making decision roles explicit really matters," says Markita Morris-Louis, incoming CEO (and currently chief strategy officer) of Compass Working Capital, which focuses on financial coaching for residents of public and subsidized housing. The organization uses a tool called RAPID®[1]—developed by Bain & Company and used by a wide range of nonprofits, including Bridgespan itself—to make decisions. "Every employee

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1   RAPID is a registered trademark of Bain & Company.

is trained in RAPID as part of our onboarding," Morris-Louis adds. "Everyone understands the language—you can walk into a meeting, and people can say who has what role in a decision."

RAPID—described in greater detail in "The RAPID Decision-Making Tool for Nonprofits"—is a way to assign roles in a decision process. The letters in the acronym provide an easy way to think about five important roles in most decision processes: Recommend, Agree, Perform, provide Input, and Decide. The tool helps clarify who provides input on a decision, who shapes the decision and ultimately decides on it, and who carries out the decision once it is made. Many teams have an "aha" moment when they realize that everything doesn't just come down to the "D," or decision maker. Other roles are also critical. We've found it to be easily adaptable to different situations, team sizes, and types of organizations. And, despite the name, the framework's focus is clarity and accountability more than speed itself.

Consider the example of One Million Degrees, which helps low-income community college students succeed in school, work, and life. The organization grows through partnerships, so decisions about whether to enter into a new partnership are vital. PuraCarina González, director of innovation and strategic initiatives, explains that as the organization grew, the CEO understood that she could no longer decide on new partners primarily by herself. Launching partnerships had become more complex, and important information and responsibility sat with the program teams that would bring a new partnership to life.

So One Million Degrees began to use RAPID to assign roles for most of these decisions. "Ideally the Recommender is the person who found the partnership or has the best understanding of the potential opportunity. Typically, it is the person who has been the lead on communication with the external party and is doing research to move the conversation forward. We discuss which internal stakeholders we need to bring into the process much sooner, including those who will be doing the work—they provide the Input. In terms of the decision itself, if the leadership team is not aligned on the way forward, we all recognize that the CEO is the final Decider. But at that point the CEO has all the information at hand."

Because decision-making tools such as RAPID make decision roles explicit, they expose how power flows through the organization. "When you lay out your decision-making process, it makes your hierarchy very transparent," says one leader we talked to. "And maybe some staff don't want there to be hierarchy in organizations, or want to be in a flatter one." Amid cultural and generational change, some of the nonprofits and NGOs we work with are struggling with what the "right" amount of hierarchy is. But every organization should be willing to lift the veil and be transparent about how it makes important decisions.

Open conversations about what that transparency reveals will be especially important for nonprofits whose leadership teams are not representative of their staff or broader community—in terms of race and other markers of identity such as gender, ethnicity, language, class, or caste. In these cases, decision-making processes are at greater risk of excluding stakeholders from marginalized groups and of reproducing inequities.

2. Push the decision to the right level of the organization

Many decisions should probably *not* rest with the executive director or leadership team. By thinking about the different types of decisions it makes, an organization can push whole categories of decisions away from a handful of senior leaders and toward team members who know more about the subject matter or are closer to the implementation of those decisions.

For example, Thorn has a written charter for its leadership team that lays out what the group is responsible for deciding: primarily decisions related to setting multiyear strategy, managing organization-wide risk, and coordinating critical priorities related to people and culture. Everything else is for an individual leader or another team. Says Cordua: "As a leadership team, we need to figure out how many decisions to *not* make—and have someone closer to the issue make them."

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Other teams have defined decision purviews as well. Thorn's programmatic teams have clear decision rights over the strategy and resources related to their areas of focus. For developing new offerings, Thorn's product team defines *what* will be built, and the engineering team decides *how* it will be built.

Different contexts may also involve a different decision-making process. Not everything has to move at the same speed. For most world-spanning decisions at one global network focused on poverty and humanitarian aid, each regional affiliate gets one vote. The process takes a lot of time. However, for its disaster-relief efforts, when speed is paramount, its humanitarian committee makes and implements decisions very quickly. This small group—which has knowledge of what's happening on the ground, and which regional affiliates select—has the authority to move resources from other parts of the network in order to address the disaster. By creating a process in advance and providing a charter for the group, the NGO avoids having to create an ad hoc process for urgent decisions.

This mindset of distributing decision making can be particularly powerful for organizations seeking to develop a stronger bench of leaders across the organization. It naturally distributes decision-making power and starts to train future leaders for greater decision-making authority to come.

3. Set up new decision makers for success

Experienced decision makers often rely on important assets in making their decisions—access to information, a broad view of what else is happening in the organization, and a culture or power structure that supports their right to make that decision. New decision makers need those same assets—and, most importantly, the safety to actually make decisions.

Whitford of School's Out Washington describes how important it was to create an environment where new decision makers could succeed. "The culture had been that many of our staff felt uncomfortable making even small decisions—like spending money for food," she says. "They worried they would get in trouble for making the wrong decisions. You can delegate decisions, but if you don't have a feeling of safety in the organization, it's tough."

Whitford also notes that her own style created challenges in pushing decision making away from the top. "I have a tendency for being fairly relaxed and flexible," she explains. "But it meant I was unwittingly putting the risks on managers to figure out the gray areas and where the lines were." So the organization has put more structure around this transfer of decision-making responsibility—freedom within a framework. Decision makers create work plans describing who they are getting input from and what kind of decisions they expect to make. And the leadership team helps them understand where their authority lies—what's in scope and what's not. That might include setting guardrails for a decision (think budgets, for example) and then stepping back to let managers make decisions within those constraints.

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Similarly, new decision makers benefit from clear criteria for making a decision. In setting up its decision process on partnerships, One Million Degrees "created a set of key questions to guide the decision," explains González. "Does the partnership strengthen our work with our target student population? How does it connect to our strategic plan? Can the project be executed within our current staff capacity, or is there enough time built in to ramp up our team?"

This redistribution of decision-making power can relieve many leaders of the "decision fatigue," as Vu Le calls it, that drains them when all questions come to a handful of leaders. But it also requires that they step up in a different way and act as coaches for new decision makers. Morris-Louis of Compass Working Capital emphasizes that this kind of coaching isn't just about getting individual decisions right. "It is about building competence, building the bench, developing future leaders."

Srikanth Viswanathan, CEO at [Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy,](#) whose mission is to transform quality of life in India's cities and towns, thinks similarly. As the organization has grown, he is focusing more and more on empowering senior leaders with "hard" authority over budgets and spending, and with "softer" experiences leading relationships with government officials and donors.

He emphasizes that when new managers take on formal decision power over programs and budgets, it's critical to continue to build their confidence and provide support. "If I turn up as CEO every week and say—'I'm just going to review your project'— they get put off. They're not just looking for performance management conversations. They are looking for a sounding board and a coach. They are looking for someone with whom they can candidly share the frustrations and challenges, both within the organization and outside it. We create a safe space for open, honest communications."

Viswanathan spends a significant portion of his time in these conversations. His goal is to coach leaders so that they embody the mission and the organization and make decisions of their own based on context and data, rather than deferring to formal authority.

4. Up your game on authentic input

It's important to distinguish between gathering input to help make a decision and informing staff and constituents about that decision. In addition, how decision makers weigh and resolve differences of opinion from stakeholders—including across lines of identity—is important to effectiveness. Genuinely asking for input can provide vital information and new perspectives, build trust, and strengthen staff and other stakeholder support for the decision that got made. However, going through the *motions* of seeking input can have the opposite effect. People will feel that their time has been wasted and will feel less engaged with the decision. And, notes School's Out Washington's Whitford, "If we're asking for input, we need to be able to change our mind."

Compass Working Capital is trying to get better at tapping into the knowledge and experience of its client advisory board to inform decisions that will have an impact on the client experience. For example, as the organization has shifted to remote services, it planned to build a coaching app to replicate an in-person coach's advice on a user's smartphone with automated content and financial tips. "When we got client input, it turns out we had the wrong idea," explains Morris-Louis.

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"They didn't need a coaching app. They wanted an engagement app, with a picture of their coach and the ability to text their coach." It turned out that deepening relationships with coaches was more important than automating the coaching to reach more clients. The client board used to meet quarterly, but Morris-Louis says that "now we're using their input so much that we're meeting closer to monthly."

Sometimes, when a decision is important enough, it's worth designing a new process to gather input. A national advocacy group got several large unsolicited gifts—adding up to millions of dollars. "Because of the size of the gifts, we felt a responsibility beyond the leadership team," explains the chief operating officer (COO). "Our CEO would make the decision, and the board would need to approve it. But we knew we needed to talk to staff, our affiliates across the country, external partners, our board—because this decision could set up the thinking for how the organization is run in the future."

The organization created a structured process, including an all-staff meeting and a shared Google doc, so people could see one another's suggestions. Leadership stressed that the purpose was idea generation. The organization then conducted a workshop about the criteria for making the decision, which included potential impact on the communities it serves, financial sustainability over at least five years, and organizational capabilities. The leadership team engaged a small board advisory committee to narrow down the list of 300 ideas and regularly updated its stakeholders to solicit feedback.

"Initially, some members of the leadership team were asking, 'What's the big new thing we're going to do?'" explains the COO. "But we realized that the way to use the money to really drive impact was not with something new to us but with the things we had experience and expertise in." Ultimately, the organization decided to use the new funds both to invest in its core capabilities and to double down in two potentially high-impact areas of existing work. While the process was hard work, and didn't put the organization on a whole new path, the COO reflects that "this decision-making process got us to the common ground—and support—we were looking for."

Let's also be clear on one of the risks that our interviewees raised with us. When leaders seek input, however good their intentions, they can inadvertently create burdens for those whom they reach out to. In 2020, for example, as social consciousness of racial injustice rose in the United States, nonprofits pushed to hear more from people of color in their organizations and their communities, particularly from Black leaders and team members. Unfortunately, the volume of requests could be overwhelming, and it was stressful for individuals who were asked to contribute on top of their current responsibilities and without additional compensation.

5. Explicitly consider the equity implications of the decision

While inclusion and equity often go hand in hand, an inclusive decision-making process will not automatically lead to equitable outcomes. To more intentionally advance equity, nonprofits can directly examine the potential impacts of a decision across lines of identity and other determinants of inequitable outcomes.

Monisha Kapila, the co-CEO of ProInspire, which provides programming and resources for social sector leaders to advance racial equity, emphasizes that her team regularly steps back to reflect on the impact of a decision on people and communities inside and outside the organization. "We ask, 'Where are we replicating social power structures in this decision, and should we think about something different?' We look at who has the power, who should be responsible for the decisions, and ask, 'Can we make sure that we're not replicating power structures that are harmful?'"

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To do this analysis, ProInspire and its clients regularly turn to racial equity impact assessment tools (REIA) from Race Forward or the Race Matters Institute, and the Choice Points framework developed by The Management Center and Race Forward. The REIA tools suggest decision makers consider questions such as, "Does the decision ignore or worsen existing disparities?" It could take additional data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and other lines of difference to get to an answer. That ultimately leads to asking, "Based on the above, what revisions are needed in the decision?" The Choice Points framework similarly prompts managers to note moments in their practice where a decision has differential implications on equity and inclusion.

The questions these tools pose are relevant for different dimensions of identity, in different areas of the social sector, and in different regions and countries. Asking these questions can influence who performs which roles in the decision-making process, as well as the recommendations that emerge from the process—and thus the decision itself. They also provide examples to help leaders advance equity in a range of scenarios, from strategic decisions, such as which programs to expand (one might serve more residents from the community), to day-to-day managerial choices, such as providing staff from different backgrounds with equitable access to mentorship and management time.

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The five approaches outlined above provide the architecture for inclusive decision making that puts equity front and center as a desired outcome. But even the best-laid plans can go askew without good communication. Almost every leader we talked to in researching this article emphasized the importance of communicating about decisions as they are being made and when they are announced. Otherwise, people will make assumptions that could undermine the decision and its follow-through. Indeed, several mentioned instances where poor communication about a decision process made people feel less included and less satisfied with their own place in the organization.

That's doubly true with contentious decisions. "You have to be able to make decisions in the face of people not agreeing with you. That's a muscle that every leader needs to have," says Cordua of Thorn. "But if you make difficult decisions, and don't document and share them, it doesn't go as far. People won't know what's been decided and why that decision was made."

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One leader we talked to was frustrated that people didn't understand a decision or how it had been made. "I used to ask myself: Didn't the staff read that? Didn't they hear me say that? But of course people absorb information in different ways." Now, the organization works harder to communicate decisions in all-staff meetings, team meetings, and written information on its intranet. And because of its more inclusive decision-making process, it has more credible voices from across the organization to draw upon when communicating the decision.

To be sure, none of the leaders we talked to for this article claimed to be perfect case studies for inclusive decision making. Many talked about what had gone wrong and what still needed to be improved. And repeatedly, we heard about the importance of trust, clarity, and candor. "We talk about decision power more explicitly now," says Whitford. "We've had enough hard conversations in our leadership team—now we're able to have a dialogue about this."

We are eager for these dialogues as well. Many leaders are hungry for actionable approaches to inclusive decision making. Let us know if you've seen practices we should learn from.

Does Inclusion = Consensus?

Inclusive decision making does not require consensus, but a consensus style may nevertheless play a part. **Consensus means that to reach a decision everyone must agree—or that no one must object**. Almost everyone we talked to in researching this article had something to say about consensus—not always favorable. Many have experienced consensus processes that felt slow or cumbersome—or failed to reach a decision at all.

Nonprofits that operate by consensus across the entire organization seem fairly rare, but many nonprofits—including Bridgespan—do have a culture that relies on consensus within specific management and leadership teams. In some organizations, this is made explicit; in others, the role of consensus isn't spelled out, yet looms large.

We favor being as explicit as you can. An organization may decide that on certain types of important decisions, there needs to be consensus within the leadership—the team decides unanimously. Or it may seek consensus—but if that fails, the organization may leave the decision to the executive director, or to the member of the team most responsible for implementing the decision, or maybe even require a majority vote. The same rule could apply to other teams at different levels of the organization. And it can be valuable to spell out how consensus operates—everyone raising their hand and saying *yes, I agree*? Or no one raising their hand and saying *no, I object*? Both are forms of consensus decision making, but they may end up with different results.

It can also be liberating for an organization and team members to explicitly state that certain types of decisions, even important ones, will *not* be made by consensus. When organizations clarify which individual will make a decision, and establish a transparent and authentic way to engage with those providing critical input, it can unlock a highly inclusive and effective process.

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