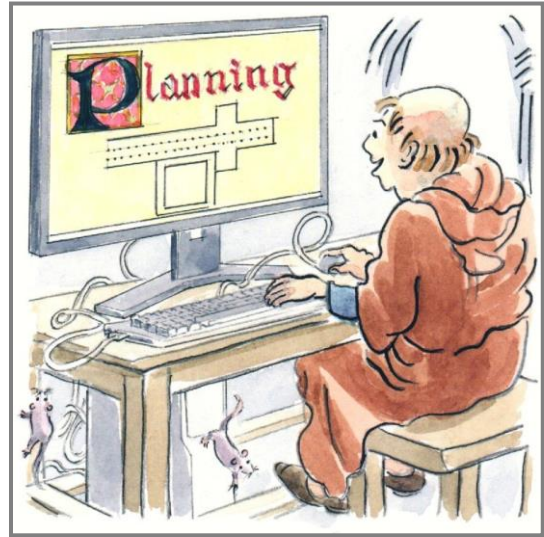


Major decisions: a new approach

TN8 Training Notes series: Planning



These notes were first published on the website in January 2002 and last updated in November 2023. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

To enable a group to make a decision you take a vote. You then follow the majority answer. But is this heavy-handed approach the only way forward? Of course not! Here is an interesting variation suitable for particularly crucial group decisions.

One of the difficulties with the traditional (Parliamentary) ways of voting – the ‘ayes’ and the ‘noes’ – is that the process oversimplifies any complex issue. All that is achieved is to discover whether each member of the group thinks ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Apart from abstaining, there are no other options.

Such a blunt instrument is not a very Christian way forward. The following offers a much wider choice of response, and hence provides a more enlightening body of information from the voting procedure.

How the system works

Instead of the equivalent of two boxes in which to cast their votes, each person is offered a continuous line on which to express their feeling about the issue under discussion.

At one end of the line is the position of the ultimate enthusiasts for the proposal. This is the ‘yes, yes, yes’ position. They will do almost anything to ensure the success of the venture. They are completely sold on the idea.

The line then moves down the enthusiasm scale through people who are for the idea but who can see the other side as well, to those who are not going to be against it, but can hardly be said to show any enthusiasm at all. You then arrive at the mid-point of the line, with the person who is genuinely undecided.

The line moves on to those who, on balance, are against the proposal but only just, through to those who would vote 'no' but can see there is another view, ultimately arriving at the 'no, no, no' position where the vehemence against the proposal is as extreme as it could be.

The model allows people to put a mark on the line where they feel they are at the moment, and expects people to move up or down the line during discussion or subsequent reflection. It has replaced the restriction of two discrete points with a continuous spectrum that offers everyone the chance to express their position much more accurately.

Here are two different ways of expressing points on this spectrum (note that this shows 11 points only as markers on a continuum). One uses a percentage figure, the other a choice of words.

	+100	I embrace
	+80	I enthuse
	+60	I back
	+40	I prefer
	+20	I allow
	0	I am undecided
	-20	I question
	-40	I disapprove
	-60	I reject
	-80	I protest
	-100	I block

Note that the ends of the spectrum ($\pm 80-100$) represent high levels of emotion compared with points nearer the centre of the line. For example, someone at + 10-20 is really saying that they are not prepared to vote 'no', rather than voting 'yes' with any enthusiasm.

This is, of course, not a 'legal' method of voting in most cases. It is designed more as a straw poll to determine where people stand on an issue. It is only designed for major issues. It should not be used for relatively minor issues requiring a quick decision.

I have used it on a number of occasions to determine a group's view on an issue after plenty of time has been given for debate. Typical cases in church life might be a decision on whether to go ahead with a major item of capital expenditure (such as a building project), or to set up a new leadership structure, or to set a strategy that involves major change.

The best way to use it is to make out sheets as above, give one to everyone, carefully explain the model, and ask everyone to place a cross at the point on the line which most closely shows their current view. The sheets are returned anonymously, and all the crosses transferred on to one sheet (or put on a flipchart) so that the scatter is visually obvious.

Its advantages include

- giving much more helpful information than any 'yes'/'no' vote can ever achieve;
- respecting people's real views, rather than crushing them into a simplistic model;
- allowing everyone to be honest without feeling threatened;
- allowing people to change their minds without feeling guilty (it *expects* people to move up or down the line over time);
- warning against proceeding with a major change when, although the vote may be unanimous, there is little enthusiasm for it.

Interpreting the results

In a normal 'yes'/'no' vote, any feeling marked as above 0 on the line would go down as 'yes', and anything below 0 as 'no'. Consider the following case studies.

1: A major building project

At the end of an awayday to decide whether to go ahead or not, a few people are around the +80 mark, several more at +40, and quite a few more at +20. This would represent a unanimous 'yes' vote, but these results indicate the group is not ready to proceed. The enthusiasts want to go, but they have not yet persuaded the others that this is something well worth doing. If they go forward now, they may well find problems in getting the church behind the project.

Advice

Wait – think about it further – discover why the low scorers have not yet come up higher. They may well move up the scale when their fears are answered. Try to encourage the enthusiasts to be patient while the process continues.

2: Planting a new congregation

The Minister is at +100, the majority at +10 to +40, and a minority at -20. This would have been a majority 'yes' vote, and the Minister might have well assumed that all the 'yes' people were at +100 with him or her.

Advice

This is not on. To go ahead might be disastrous. There is little support for the plant. The Minister would have blamed people for backing away from their original enthusiasm. The model has shown that the Minister's views on any enthusiasm other than his or her own are sorely misplaced. Better to discover this now than later when people fail to support the plant.

3: Setting up a new leadership structure

Just over half the people are at +60 to +90 with the rest at -10. Here a 'yes'/'no' vote might have looked pretty even with a slim majority for going ahead.

Advice

The 'yes' voters are much more enthusiastic in their decision than those voting 'no'. So it will probably be worth discussing this further as you may well find that the -10 people are in fact moving up the scale as things become clearer to them. Some may simply be people who need time to think before committing themselves. So work further at it, or come back to it next month. Don't force it through at this stage, but don't drop it either.

Those familiar with the management of change will spot parallels with typical distributions for people's readiness or otherwise for new ideas. If you draw the spectrum axis as a horizontal line rather than the vertical one shown above, and then plot a graph above it of levels of emotion, you will get something like the reverse of what mathematicians call a 'normal' curve: high at both ends and low in the middle.

If, however, you instead plot the likely number of people at each point in the spectrum you may initially get a block in the middle (and so something like a normal curve). The aim of course is to get as many people as possible as close to the +100 end as you can.

There are still drawbacks (eg. people are likely to underplay their real feelings if they are really at -60 or more). But, treated with care, people appreciate the chance to express their views in a way that allows them to be honest. Try it and see!

Postscript

For more general advice on key decisions, read Training Notes TN125, *How to take major decisions*.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN8. They cover one aspect of possible events on church business meetings and change management. For further ideas on church business meetings, see Articles A5, *How to chair meetings*, and A40/41, *Going deeper into meetings*. See also Training Notes TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair*, TN71, *Seatings for meetings*, and TN125, *How to take major decisions*. For group dynamics, TN49, *What's going on under the water*. For change, TN81, *Changing the scenery*. And many others.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN8 under Planning (with a link to Structures).

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>