Topic 10

EMERGE
Supporting Farmer Led Groups

A collaborative project between
TAS FARM INNOVATION HUB
RMCG

Decision Making

As a group, there will be many times that decisions need to be made. Understanding how different people make decisions and how that can be harnessed within a group is important. How to ensure that everyone feels heard and that all useful ideas are captured while still heading towards finding a solution to the core question takes preparation, time and good facilitation.

The most effective groups making good decisions tend to:

- **Be prepared and have read any relevant information beforehand!**
- **Share a common purpose and agree on goals first**
- **Agree on how a decision will the made (e.g. consensus, vote, consent)**
- **Encourage open discussion**
- **Be inclusive and thrive on diversity**
- **Listen more than they speak, giving ever member a voice**
- **Challenge ideas rather than people**
- **Base conclusions on evidence rather than opinions**
- **Be curious rather than judgemental**
- **Ask questions to test assumptions and motivate fresh thinking**
- **Balance speed with thoroughness**
- **Understand and manage risks**
- **Commit to the decision once it is made**
- **Reflect, monitor and learn during and after implementation.**

Conflict of interest

Before discussion and decision making, consider whether anyone involved has a conflict of interest. A conflict of interest is a situation where a group member has a personal, financial, business or other interest that could influence, or be seen to influence, their ability to make a fair decision for the group. Conflicts should be declared and managed appropriately before a decision is made.

Not all decisions need the same process

Some decisions are simple and routine, while others have greater consequences, involve more people or carry more uncertainty (see Table 1). The decision-making process should match the importance, complexity and risk of the decision.

Using too much process for a small decision can slow the group down, while making a significant decision too quickly can create problems later.

Tip: Don't spend more time making a decision than its impact warrants - but don't rush decisions that could have significant consequences.

Table 1 - Not all decisions need the same process - decision levels and characteristics

Levels of decisions	Frequency	Impact	Confidence	Decision making processes
Operational (or routine)	More frequent ↕	Less impact ↕	More confidence ↕	Less formal ↕
Tactical				
Strategic	Less frequent	Greater impact	Less confidence	More formal

Operational or routine decisions – can often be made quickly by the person responsible for the activity, within their agreed authority, through a simple show of hands, or by another quick and fair method. For example, confirming a meeting venue or purchasing a small item within an approved budget.

Decisions needing some discussion (tactical decisions) – may involve several options, affect other members, or have a tactical element. Take time to gather relevant information, discuss the options and agree on a way forward.

Significant or strategic decisions – may affect the group's direction, finances, reputation or members. These usually need more information, broader involvement, consideration of risks and a clear decision-making process. They are often complex problems.

Urgent decisions – sometimes a decision cannot wait for the usual process. Agree beforehand who can make urgent decisions and how these will be communicated and recorded afterwards.

Tip: The greater the impact, cost, risk or uncertainty, the more care and consideration the decision is likely to need. Bigger decisions may require more research and should not be rushed.

Who makes the decisions?

Not every decision needs to involve everyone in the group. Being clear about who can make which decisions helps a group work efficiently, avoids confusion and ensures important decisions involve the right people.

For a new or informal group, decision-making responsibilities may be agreed simply between members. As a group becomes more formal, these responsibilities may be set out in its constitution, Terms of Reference, policies or delegated authorities.

Before an important decision is discussed, ask: Who needs to decide? Who needs to contribute or be consulted? Who needs to know about the decision afterwards?

The bigger the impact, cost or risk of a decision, the more important it is to be clear about who has authority to make it and who should be involved. Consider:

Whole-group decisions – significant decisions that affect the group's purpose, direction, membership or major commitments.

Committee decisions – decisions a committee has authority to make on behalf of the group and its members.

Working group or project decisions – decisions relating to an agreed project or activity, within the authority given to that group.

Individual or delegated decisions – routine or operational decisions that an office bearer or nominated person has authority to make.

External requirements – some decisions may require approval from another organisation (such as an auspice partner or funding partner).

How will we decide?

The right approach will depend on the importance of the decision, who has authority to make it, how much agreement is needed and any rules the group must follow.

The group should be clear before making an important decision about how the decision will be reached. For an informal group, this might simply be an agreed way of working. Incorporated or governed groups should follow their constitution, rules, Terms of Reference and any delegated authorities. There are some approaches you can consider in Table 2 (page 3).

What happens if we can't agree?

Disagreement is not necessarily a problem - it can highlight different perspectives, risks or information that the group has not yet considered. If the group cannot reach a decision, ask:

What are we actually disagreeing about? Is more information or expert advice needed? Could the options be changed or combined? Does everyone need to agree, or would consent or a vote be appropriate? Can the decision be deferred without creating a problem?

If agreement still cannot be reached, use the decision-making process the group agreed to follow. For formal groups, this may mean following voting or other requirements in the group's rules.

Once a decision is reached, record what was decided, any actions required, who is responsible and relevant timeframes. For significant decisions, it can also be useful to record why the decision was made.

Table 2 - Types of decision and when to use them

Approach	What it means	When it might be useful
Delegated decision	A person, group or committee has been given authority to make the decision. They may consult others before deciding.	Routine or operational matters, or where responsibility has already been delegated.
Expert advice or decision	A person with relevant expertise provides advice or, where authorised, makes the decision.	Technical or specialist matters where the group does not have the required knowledge.
Majority vote	Members vote and the option receiving the required majority is accepted.	When there are clear options and the group's rules allow or require voting.
Consensus	The group works towards a decision that everyone can actively agree with and support.	Important decisions where strong shared agreement and commitment are needed.
Consent	Members may not consider the decision their preferred option, but no-one has a significant objection and everyone can accept the way forward.	When full consensus is difficult or unnecessary, but broad support is important.
Urgent or authorised decision	An authorised person makes a decision without wider consultation where there is not enough time to follow the usual process.	Urgent situations. The decision should be communicated and recorded afterwards.

Decision-making

Simple, routine decisions, can be made quickly; bigger decisions with greater consequences deserve more time, information and involvement.

For bigger (or more complex) decisions, be clear about the problem or opportunity, why a decision is needed, what you want to achieve, who has the authority to decide, and when the decision needs to be made.

Topic 11: Communicating and Advocating includes a section on how to guide group discussions.

Before discussing possible solutions, the group should agree on:

- What decision needs to be made and why
- What success looks like, what do we want to achieve because of the decision?
- What is the consequence of not deciding?
- What process will we use to reach a decision all can agree on? (see How will we decide?)
- The constraints (budget, time, regulations, resources).

Many poor decisions occur because people are solving different problems, making assumptions or have diverging expectations. Stepping through a simple framework can support good decision making.

Table 3 is a simple framework that you can use.

Table 3 - Framework

Step	Question
Define	What problem are we solving?
Gather	What evidence do we have?
Generate	What are our options?
Evaluate	How does each option perform against our criteria?
Decide	Which option best meets our objectives?
Implement	Who will do what, and by when?
Review	What did we learn?

Before evaluating or comparing options, agree on what matters most. Depending on the decision, this might include:

- Effectiveness – will it achieve what we want?
- Cost and available resources
- Risks and uncertainties
- Environmental or social impacts
- Member or stakeholder support
- Time and effort required
- Ease of implementation.

When the above are considered together which options are realistically achievable?

For bigger decisions, it can be useful to score or compare options against agreed criteria. This provides a more consistent way to consider the alternatives and can help reduce personal bias.

There are many tools out there for capturing the ideas generated and then working out which ideas to run with and discuss further (see Figures 1 and 2, and Additional Resources).

Declare and manage conflicts before discussion or voting, following your group's agreed process or rules.

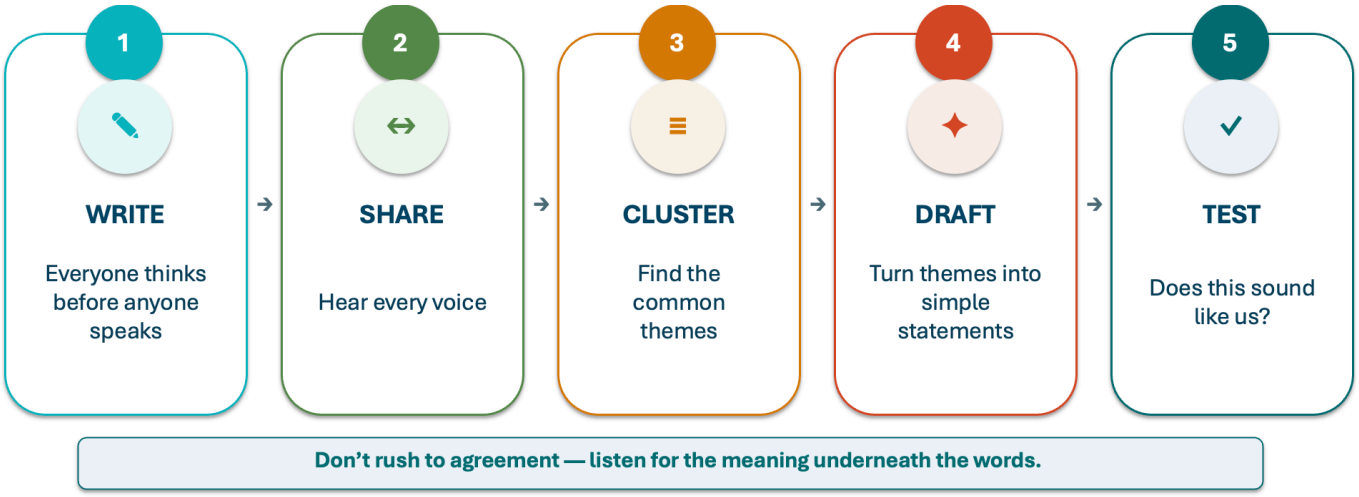

Figure 1 - Potential method to reach a decision

Using Figure 1 the following steps can be used within the framework outlined in Figure 2.

- Steps 1, 2, and 3 - where the problem is defined and common themes emerge.
- Steps 4 and 5 can then be used to turn the themes into simple statements used to explore and test the solution.

Record, act, and communicate

Once a decision is made, record what was decided, the actions required, who is responsible and relevant timeframes. For significant decisions, also record why the decision was made. Make sure the decision is communicated to anyone who needs to know.

Reviewing your decisions

Without clear implementation pathways (guided by the above dot points) and follow up, even excellent decisions have little value.

Reviewing outcomes is vital. Effective groups learn from experience by asking:

- Did the decision achieve its objective?
- What assumptions proved wrong or right? What did we forget to consider?
- What should we do differently next time?

Tip: Include a standing agenda item at your meetings to review previous decisions and how they are working. This helps the group follow through on decisions, learn from outcomes and improve future decision making.

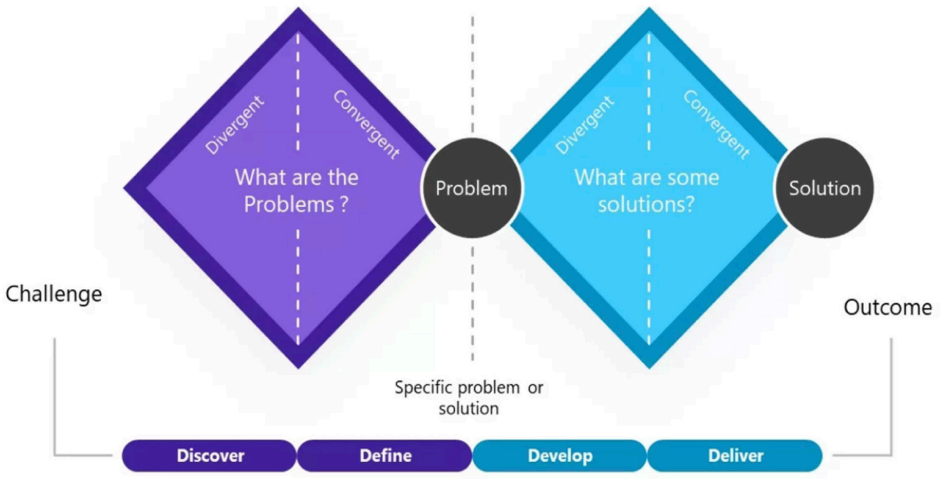

Figure 2 - Framework for defining a problem and reaching a solution (from: https://slidemodel.com/templates/double-diamond-model-powerpoint-template/convergence-divergence-double-diamond-model-ppt/)

Additional Resources

- **WA Grower Group Alliance - Toolkit**

  https://www.gga.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Vol-4_April-2021-GGA-Toolkit.pdf

- **SessionLab**

  https://www.sessionlab.com/library

  e.g. How to run an effective group decision making process. https://www.sessionlab.com/blog/group-decision-making/

- **Useful facilitation techniques**

  https://juliavastrik.com/facilitation/facilitation-at-different-stages/

References

Cockfield, Geoff (2021) APEN Webinar – 15 February 2021 – Understanding farmer decision making, YouTube – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UO0Heb_aJmM, PowerPoint – https://www.apen.org.au/static/uploads/files/apen-presentation-15-feb-21-wfbehcymdtia.pdf

Nicholson C, Long J, England D, Long B, Creelman Z, Mudge B, Cornish D (2020), Farm Decision Making: The interaction of personality, farm business and risk to make more informed decisions, GRDC Project Code – SFS000028, Grains Research & Development Corporation, Canberra. Available here: https://grdc.com.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/436847/farm-decision-making-grdc-20250805.pdf.

How this resource came about

The Emerge project was funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund to support new, emerging and informal farmer groups to develop their skills and knowledge, and to create this set of resources for use by groups into the future. Groups participating in 2026 received coaching and additional learning opportunities to supplement the content of these resources.

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Influences on decision making

How We Individually Make Decisions – Theory

This is a brief overview of how people think and what influences their decision making in general including attitude to risk, and their biases and heuristics. It is included here as background to promote understanding of how individuals may approach decisions.

Different people have different risk appetites, biases and responses to types and levels of decisions – this should be borne in mind during meeting discussions.

When we make decisions we weigh up multiple factors, the pros and cons, and not all are of equal importance and there are risks and uncertainties for each factor.

How we identify the factors involved and the level of importance or weighting that we put on each factor, is influenced by a whole range of things including:

- Facts and information
- Our values
- Our beliefs
- Our experience
- Our personalities
- Our attitude to risk.

Head, Heart, Gut

Facts, information, technical data, etc., are the only part of the decision-making process. Often they are not the ultimate driver. How we make decisions is influenced by our head, our heart and our gut.

The "head" is about the logical, rational processing of information and calculations and is based on the data, facts and figures.

The "heart" encompasses the emotional aspects of a decision. These are value-based and include goals, beliefs and preferences. This can be described as your "guidance system" for decision making.

The "gut" is about intuition which is shaped through our experiences and knowledge. It allows us to make quicker decisions because it bypasses rational processes by linking past experiences and knowledge (both good and bad) with the present. Intuitive decisions are about "gut feel". It's often a decision that "feels" right.

If a decision feels right, it is likely to link back to the emotional factors, or the heart. So the heart and the gut are linked.

Integrating these three in complex decisions can lead to more effective decisions.

Risk

(Adapted from Nicholson et al. 2015.)

Some considerations may involve a large amount of uncertainty ,for example, in farming it might be rainfall, or temperature and market outlook. We think differently about some considerations depending on the likelihood of it happening and the risks involved. There is no position on risk that is right or wrong. Each individual may have different levels of risk they can and are prepared to accept on behalf of the group, i.e. different risk appetites.

Bias

The biases detailed in Figure 1 may occur when evaluating different types of information (adapted from Cockfield 2021).

Heuristics/Rules of Thumb

Heuristic definitions:

- Educated guesses, or rules of thumb that are used to solve problems
- A mental shortcut that allows people to solve problems and make judgements quickly and efficiently.

Using rules-of-thumb (or heuristics) and experience (your own and that of others) in decision-making can be useful when dealing with complex variables in day-to-day decisions.

Evaluating information

Affect heuristic
- Being guided by emotional responses to things.
- How we feel about something not what we think of it.

Availability heuristic
- Stronger influence of recent events and discussion of recent events; easily accessible and/or processed information; and vivid or memorable events.

Clustering illusion
- Overestimating the effect of small patterns/ clusters.

Anchoring effect
- Relying on a base point to evaluate information,rather than comparing things equally.

Focusing effect
- Focusing on one particular aspect of an issue, rather than other aspects that may also be important.

Illusory correlation
- False correlations between events or trends.

Regressive tendency
- Downplaying high and low probabilities (regressing to the 'mean').

Optimism preference
- Focusing on favourable outcomes.

Resistance to new ideas

Confirmation bias
- A tendency to search for evidence to support current views.

Desirability bias
- Preferring 'good news' over bad news (Tappin,McKay, and van der Leer 2017).

Status quo preference
- Preferring current state or situation.

(Limited) belief revision
- Only making small concession to even strong contrary evidence.

Memory and hindsight

Choice supportive effect
- Favourable recollections of one's own past choices (Mather, Shafir, and Johnson 2000).

Hindsight bias
- Seeing past events as more predictable than they were.

Consistency effect
- Aligning past beliefs & ideas with present ones.

Financial decision-making

Loss aversion
- Weighting losses more than gains; an inclination to protect nest eggs.

Hyperbolic discounting
- Allocating high value to immediate income.

Sunk cost fallacy
- Continuing with a course based on previous investment.

Declining utility of wealth
- The value of wealth declines with increasing wealth (motivation to accumulate may decline).

Communications effects

Framing effects
- Acceptance of argument or evidence varying with how they are framed.

Halo effect
- Response is to personal characteristics of presenter or source.

Reactive devaluation
- Response is based on dislike or distrust of source of information.

Illusion of truth
- Belief develops through familiarity with the concept, slogan or phrase.

False consensus effect
- Overestimating others' agreement with your attitudes and beliefs.

Take-aways

- We make decisions using emotion
- We are not necessarily good intuitive scientists, statisticians or economists
- We take mental shortcuts and often exclude a lot of information
- Once positions are formed they can be hard to overturn
- It can be instinctive to reject challenges to our thinking/position.