

The AD Method of Cooperative Decision-Making

When a group of people tries to choose a course of action, they often come up with two conflicting proposals. Then the group divides into two contentious factions, and each faction argues the merits of its own proposal and points out the flaws of the other proposal. This miserable process can arouse distrust and antagonism and lead nowhere. If the wrangling gets extreme, people may even begin to attack each other personally.

In contrast, the Advantages-Disadvantages method of decision-making identifies many possible solutions. It shows that each possible solution has merit while none is perfect. It also steers the attention of the group away from the people who propose or support a particular proposal and towards the value that each solution will have for the whole group. In this way, it usually encourages cooperation and problem solving.

There are five main steps in the Advantages-Disadvantages method of decision-making:

1. State the Problem, Present Background Information, Ask Clarifying Questions

Those who understand the problem explain it clearly. They also present background information that places the problem in context. Then all members of the group discuss the problem and ask clarifying questions.

If possible, write the problem on a large piece of paper and tape the paper to a wall so it is visible to everyone. If there is controversy concerning the exact nature of the problem, then summarize all possible versions and write up the main variations.

2. Suggest Possible Solutions

Suggest all possible solutions that might address the problem(s). If members of the group have a difficult time suggesting any solutions or the solutions are too narrowly focused, you may want to use creativity-stimulating techniques like brainstorming and fantasizing. If possible, write each possible solution along the top of large pieces of paper and tape them to the wall.

3. For Each Possible Solution, Determine Its Advantages and Disadvantages

The person who proposed each possible solution explains it and exactly how the solution would work. Others

ask clarifying questions. Then, for each possible solution, make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of that solution in achieving the group's goals. List them below the possible solution on the wall notes so they are visible to all. You might want to put an exclamation point or a star next to those advantages and disadvantages that are particularly important or extreme. Make sure that everyone understands why each solution is advantageous or disadvantageous and mostly agrees with that assessment.

Notice as you evaluate each solution that you have implicitly created a list of criteria to judge whether solutions are acceptable. You may want to make these criteria more explicit by writing them on the wallchart and, perhaps, put stars or exclamation points next to those that seem most important to group members.

4. Synthesize New Solutions that Incorporate the Advantages or Avoid the Disadvantages of the Existing Solutions

By discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each of the possible solutions, you may see new solutions that avoid a problem or that can incorporate a particular strength from your original list of solutions. Add these solutions at the top of the paper and list their advantages and disadvantages below them. Check them against your list of criteria.

(continued)

Problem	Possible Solution 1	Possible Solution 2	Possible Solution 3	Possible Solution 4
Criteria	Advantages	Advantages	Advantages	Advantages
	Disadvantages	Disadvantages	Disadvantages	Disadvantages

5. Choose the Best Solution

If there is general agreement on the advantages and disadvantages of the possible solutions and the criteria for judging them, it should be relatively easy to choose the best solution.

If you have a large number of possible solutions, you may first want to eliminate all those that are obviously unacceptable and those that are clearly inferior to another possible solution so that you no longer need consider them. Once there is complete agreement to eliminate a possible solution, you can cross it out. But if there is not complete agreement, you should leave it, since you may offend those who are still attracted to the idea.

Once you have narrowed the field to the best possible solutions, evaluate them and choose one:

- One solution may stand out as clearly the best. Choose it.

- Several may be acceptable and approximately equal in their overall value — each with some advantages and

some disadvantages, but none standing out as clearly superior or inferior. If they all seem equally worthwhile, then choosing any one of them is an equally good choice. You may want to choose the solution with the most advantages, the one with the fewest disadvantages, or the one that most people like. Or simply choose one randomly (draw straws). Try to avoid spending a great deal of time wrangling over equally good solutions.

- None may be acceptable. You may want to go back to Step 2 and see if you can come up with more possible solutions or go back even further and re-evaluate the original problem. Maybe there is another way to look at the problem that offers a fresh way to solve it.

If these efforts prove futile, you may need to choose among the best of the bad possible solutions. Again, you might choose the one with the most advantages, the one with the fewest disadvantages, or the one that most people favor. Or just choose one by lot. Try to avoid spending a great deal of time wrangling over equally bad solutions.

If members of the group cannot agree on the criteria for evaluating solutions or cannot agree on the list of advantages and disadvantages, then you may need to spend more time discussing the possible solutions and how they will truly work in practice. This discussion may point out the different ways that members of your group see the world and their basic core values. With luck, these discussions will lead to greater understanding and empathy towards others and to a greater understanding of the possible solutions. However, if group members cannot understand or empathize with each other's perspectives, then your group may need to split into smaller groups in which members are more compatible. If so, try to separate amicably.

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