

# Decision-making Processes

**Tiziana Merletti sfp**

*The author offers practical suggestions for developing truly participatory processes around group decision-making. From 2004 to 2013, Sister Tiziana Merletti was Superior General of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor and currently works as a canonical consultant and leadership formator with committed religious and lay institutes.*

*What signifies a truly inclusive discernment and decision-making?*

First and foremost, it is characterized by a leadership style in which of all those involved are protagonists, both as actors and as recipients. It requires a change of mentality and presupposes individual journeys in which several fundamental questions need to be considered.

## Self-reflection

Leaders need to ask themselves: *What is power for me? What does it mean and how does it personally relate to my own position of active responsibility, knowing that some may willingly follow me, others will feel 'compelled' to do so, and still others will oppose me in my role? We know it is impossible to rely on a given cultural context to answer such questions, and we have a long way to go in freeing ourselves from temptations tied to ambition, domination, success and privilege.*

Instead the Gospel focuses on *exousia*, the authority exercised by Jesus to carry out the Father's work. This reclaims for us a sense of energy that is detached from one's "ego", humble, benevolent and in service of the common good. Authority is thus accompanied by unconditional love, sacrifice, co-responsibility, consistent integrity and the foresight to ensure that each one grows and flourishes in their life potential.

Then, a second question needs asking by participants because there is no leadership without membership. The question is: *How do I enter into a discernment process, knowing that the final decision lies with those who have the ultimate responsibility? Am I willing to assume the task of patient searching and sincere dialogue, despite risks of conflict or even possible disappointment in the face of unsatisfactory final results?*

And finally, questions for the entire working group: *What talents does each one bring to the project? Is mutual trust an essential and non-negotiable factor in overcoming the inevitable impasses along the way? How do we intend to build this climate of trust among the group?*

## **Basic guidelines**

Pope Francis invites us to embark towards the future along new pathways in a synodal style. To implement this, a method is needed that is both mystical and concrete, as well as value-driven and effective, with shared "ground rules". Below are a few such "rules" that are by no means exhaustive.

### Discernment phase:

- *Invited participants* need to be involved from the beginning of a process. The first stage of acquiring needed information is to gain an overview of what can and cannot be done. It must be done together.
- Relationships among group members take priority and need to be cultivated most especially in difficult moments, where risks of losing sight of goals and objectives are greater. We can become obsessed with resolving things quickly or instead delegating to the "boss" or leaning on his or her ideas. A climate of esteem, listening and mutual respect needs to be maintained. Competition and aggression discourage participation and lead to a tendency for withdrawal by some group members.
- Each group member needs to express himself or herself and creatively contribute without fear of seeming 'out of sync' with others. Likewise, group leaders who already have preferred plans in their heads can also discourage open participation in healthy discernment.
- Group members are called to actively make a pact with one another: To own one's ideas and be ready to share them, while also being detached from what is shared. This is important because each member's idea will be considered. But those ideas may not necessarily be assumed exactly as proposed. It is also a pact to remain open to other's contributions which may offer diverse and enriching perspectives.
- Another fundamental part of this process is assuming responsibility for arriving prepared to moments of decision making and accepting that collective discernment passes through a personal asceticism of listening, prayer and silence.

### Decision-making phase:

- Ensure everyone can freely express their opinions based on sound factual knowledge.
- Take stock again around both set goals and objectives and the values underlying each option. This might include, for example, asking who are the real beneficiaries of the pending decision? Who would be excluded from a preferred option? Is there consistency with respect to a charism and/or a chosen lifestyle? How is transparency guaranteed and what is the overall environmental impact?
- Place alternative proposals on the table and list their pros and cons.
- Take timing into account. Rushed deadlines force work under pressure and haste does not help in making mature, effective decisions. Conversely, procrastination causes frustration and a sense of helplessness. Only healthy dialogue assists in finding avenues for varying circumstances.
- Calculate risks and acknowledge that every choice implies a letting go of something else. There will eventually be time to retrace one's steps, which is also part of the human condition.
- Establish clear lines of communication and assigned tasks.

- Agree on deadlines. Honest and sincere assessments of how things are progressing serve to emphasize the seriousness of the process and allow for adjustment of timelines where needed.
- Express final decisions or votes using a process established beforehand.
- Celebrate final decision outcomes and confirm that there is a sense of peace around the decisions.

Establishing solid foundations at the beginning of work together ensures the quality of the group process. This is reflected not only in beneficial outcomes but also in the certainty of participants that they have contributed to creating something valuable and beautiful for God's Kingdom. The time is ripe. Can we courageously and generously commit ourselves to this?