

Dot Voting: A Process Outline¹

Dot Voting can be a quick, easy, equitable manner in which to make a group decision. Note that this is just one possible tool for trying to reach consensus - and does not always work!

You will need a box of stick-on dots (available from most newsagents/stationers). It can be useful to have a couple of colours, so a second phase of *voting* can be used to refine priorities if required.

A Step-by-Step Process

There are many ways to use Dot Voting. The following outlines the basic process:

1. List a range of possibilities (eg. all the topics which group members might like to see in a given workshop, **or**, all the possible objectives that an organisation might adopt). Ensure that every idea of every participant is included.
2. Check that:
 - Each possibility listed clearly explains a single idea (ie. there are no *double-barreled* statements where two different ideas are included in a single statement). Double-barreled statements should be split into two separate statements, before beginning Dot Voting.
 - Everyone understands all the possibilities. Allow time for clarification, explanation and rewriting of possibilities in language everyone agrees on.
3. Negotiate the number of possibilities which can viably be included (eg. the number of topics that can be covered at 2 hours each over a 2 day period, **or**, the number of objectives that can be achieved by an organisation over 3 years).
4. Explain the Dot Voting process and negotiate its use. (**Note:** This step is built in, based on experience. Participants can feel very manipulated by this method if they're not clear about how it works, and/or if they haven't had a say as to whether it should be used. It is important to ensure adequate discussion (Step 2 above) before suggesting use of Dot Voting.)
5. Give each participant the same number of dots. Generally, you would give each person the number of dots that there are viable possibilities for inclusion (eg. the number of topics that can be covered over 2 days, **or**, the number of objectives that can be achieved over 3 years). There are two ways to proceed at this point:

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- **Preferential voting** - Allow participants to allocate their dots according to the importance of particular options to them. For example, imagine that each participant has 6 dots:
 - They are allowed to put all 6 dots on a single topic, if this is a really high priority for them.
 - They are allowed to put one dot each on 6 different topics, if they feel equally supportive of a number of options.
 - They can spread their dots according to their personal proportions (eg. 3 dots/2 dots/1 dot, or 2 dots/2 dots/1 dot/1 dot).
- **Simple voting** - Ask participants to put one dot against each of their preferences. In this instance, you may offer the option of not using their full allocation of dots. Imagine that group members have been given 6 dots. If a participant only supports 3 of the ideas suggested, they may only use 3 dots.

Whether you use Preferential or Simple voting, it is crucial that you ask participants to make a clear personal decision about how they are going to allocate their dots before anyone sticks any dots up. This protects against *compensatory behaviour* ... that is, people who vote late *balancing out* their dots against the previous voting of others, to stop ideas being *lost*. (When this occurs, it defeats the whole purpose of using Dot Voting as a quick means of prioritising, through spreading the dots more widely than necessary.)

6. Look at the patterns that emerge:

Example 1: The dots are fairly evenly spread.

In this case you may be able to eliminate a few possibilities, but clearly much more discussion is required to make a decision. (All the process has really told you is that clear priorities do not readily emerge within the group.)

Example 2: There are clear concentrations of dots.

If these approximate the number of priorities which can be adopted, the priorities have been set. However, answers do not usually emerge this easily. Often this pattern helps eliminate some possibilities and confirm others.

In both cases you will almost certainly be able to eliminate many possibilities - that is, those which received either no dots, or proportionally few dots. As you negotiate removing options from the decision-making, continue to check that no individual members have missed out altogether on having any of their priorities included.

7. After reducing the number of choices available, discussion and/or a second round of voting (with a new colour of dot) needs to occur to further refine the decision-making process.

Example 1 - You are most likely to get a clearer result if you reduce the number of dots given to each participant.

Example 2 - Whether you need to use a reduced number of dots depends upon how many possibilities which had small numbers of dots were removed during the negotiation process. If many at least 1/3 of the dotted ideas were removed, you could continue to allocate 6 dots per person; if only a few were removed, you should reduce the number of dots to 3 or 4.

Overall, it is critical that during the process of negotiation, the integrity of each idea or possibilities is retained. Resist all pressure to pull two or more ideas together to create a more generalised possibility ... this will ultimately lead to lack of clarity, and some members' needs not being met. On the surface, this can create a feeling of unity and agreement. However this is an illusion, and merely masks the differences in the group. It is critical that ultimately, clear decisions are made about priorities, rather than avoiding dealing with differences.