Choosing a Decision-Making Method: Compromise

By Kayleigh Ward, ESIIL | January 28, 2026

What is Compromise?

Compromise is a common decision-making method in teams, particularly when members are divided between two or more clearly defined solutions. However, like majority voting, compromise has important limitations that teams should understand before relying on it.

Compromise is a positional decision method in which individuals or subgroups typically enter the discussion having already decided what outcome they prefer. When neither side is willing to fully accept the other's solution, the team moves toward a middle position. In doing so, each side gains some elements of what it wants but also gives up outcomes it values. The result is often a solution that no one would have chosen independently (Fisher & Ury, 2011).

After a compromise, team members *should* frequently report that they can "live with it." While this may sound acceptable, it is important that living with the outcome is a <u>deliberate choice, not a reaction to time pressure, fatigue, or a desire to move on.</u> When compromise is reactionary, dissatisfaction tends to linger beneath the surface which can increase the risk of disengagement and resentment (NASEM, 2015).

Because compromise discussions begin with predefined solutions, they can often take on an adversarial tone. In this process, individuals or team "factions" usually 1) advocate for their preferred outcome, 2) defend their positions, and 3) sometimes concede certain points. Although compromise is not typically framed as divisive, it can become so when agreement reflects resignation rather than genuine acceptance. In these situations, compromise is less about shared agreement and more about, "I'll give in so we can move forward." This form of agreeing to disagree can be particularly dangerous for teams, as it can erode trust and weaken collaboration over time (especially if it happens frequently).

Navigating Compromise

Despite these risks, compromise is sometimes unavoidable. It may be appropriate when collaborative integration is not possible and when options are mutually exclusive. In these cases, the quality of the dialogue surrounding the compromise becomes critical.

If compromise is used, teams should structure discussion carefully to reduce its inherent divisiveness. This includes ensuring that opposing parties genuinely hear one another's reasoning, systematically examining the strengths and weaknesses of each proposal, and making explicit what

is being gained and lost. These practices help shift compromise from a purely positional negotiation toward a more reflective and transparent process (Fisher & Ury, 2011).

One advantage of compromise-based decision-making is that it generates substantial discussion and forces teams to articulate priorities and trade-offs. At the same time, its central drawback is that it frames decision making as adversarial bargaining. In compromise, everyone may technically "win," but everyone also loses something they value. Overuse of compromise can therefore normalize partial dissatisfaction as an acceptable outcome, even when better, more integrative solutions might be possible (NASEM, 2015).

As a result, compromise is best used selectively, when integration is not feasible and when the team explicitly acknowledges the costs of settling somewhere in the middle.

Consensus Voting Decision Tree

If you and your team are trying to decide if compromise is right for you, consider the following questions:

1. Are there two or more clearly defined solutions already on the table?
   →If no, the team needs to discuss further to generate a list of clear options.
   →If yes, continue.

2. Are team members strongly divided in their preferred outcomes?
   →If no, consensus or multi-voting may be more appropriate.
   →If yes, continue.

3. Is it possible to integrate elements of the options into a new, shared solution?
   →If yes, prioritize consensus over compromise.
   →If no, continue.

4. Can the team explicitly accept the trade-offs involved in a middle position?
   →If no, compromise is likely to generate lingering dissatisfaction.
   →If yes, compromise may be appropriate.

If compromise is used:
Structure dialogue to ensure mutual understanding, openly acknowledge gains and losses, and confirm that team members are choosing the outcome deliberately, not simply conceding to move on. A simple way to help group members see all sides of an option is to create a list of pros and cons, or list each option in terms of its cost (i.e., time, labor, resources), risk (i.e., failure), complexity (i.e., skills needed, data, analysis), and contribution (i.e., meets project goals).

References

Fisher, R., & Ury, W. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). (2015). *Enhancing the effectiveness of team science*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/19007