CODM Model

Idea In Short

Most organizational decisions fail not in the boardroom but in implementation. The reason is almost always the same: the people who must execute the decision had no meaningful role in shaping it. Dr. Tim Hartnett's CODM (Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making) model offers a structured, seven-step process for reaching decisions that every stakeholder can commit to, even when they do not hold an identical view. The action for every executive and management consultant is direct: apply the CODM model to decisions where cross-functional ownership, sustained commitment and organizational buy-in determine whether the outcome succeeds. Use it deliberately, not by default. Reserve majority voting and unilateral authority for situations where speed overrides alignment. Use CODM where alignment overrides speed.

Tim Hartnett, a psychologist and group facilitator, published the CODM model in his 2010 book Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making: The CODM Model for Facilitating Groups to Widespread Agreement. Hartnett built the model on a foundational observation: traditional group decision-making processes — majority votes, expert authority, hierarchical decree — frequently produced outcomes that lacked the genuine commitment required to drive sustained execution. The people who voted against the majority decision felt overridden. The people who had no vote felt excluded. Neither group owned the outcome.

Consensus, in Hartnett's framework, is not unanimity. That distinction is critical. Unanimity requires every participant to prefer the same option. Consensus requires every participant to reach a threshold of commitment sufficient to support the decision's implementation. A stakeholder who does not regard a particular option as their first choice can still consent to it if they believe their concerns were heard, their underlying interests were addressed and the group reached its conclusion through a fair process. That threshold — active, willing commitment without complete preference alignment — is what the CODM model is designed to produce.

The model's seven steps move a group from problem diagnosis through open dialogue, concern identification, proposal development, direction selection, solution refinement and formal closure. Each step serves a specific function in the consensus-building architecture. Skipping or compressing a step does not accelerate consensus; it undermines the conditions that make consensus durable.

Framing the Problem

The CODM model begins with problem framing, the step that defines what the group is actually trying to decide. This is not a formality. In organizations, groups frequently convene around a decision and discover — only after significant time and conflict — that different participants interpreted the problem differently. The sales leadership team believes the group is deciding how to grow revenue in the next quarter. The operations leadership team believes the group is deciding how to reduce delivery costs. The finance function believes the group is deciding how to balance margin with growth investment. All three framings are legitimate. Only one can organize a coherent decision process.

Hartnett's framing step requires the group to agree on a shared problem statement before any solutions are considered. The facilitator's role at this stage is to diagnose causes, test assumptions and surface the range of ways participants understand the challenge. When the group reaches agreement on the problem, it has already achieved a small but significant consensus — one that makes every subsequent step more efficient because participants are solving the same problem.

In organizational strategy contexts, problem framing is where the most costly errors originate. Boards that approve strategic investments without a shared, precise framing of the problem those investments are meant to solve frequently find themselves evaluating outcomes against incompatible success criteria. A disciplined framing step, applied with the rigor Hartnett prescribes, reduces that risk before it accumulates.

Open Discussion

The second step creates the conditions for unrestricted idea generation and information sharing. Hartnett designed this stage as a genuinely open exchange — not a structured debate, not a sequence of prepared presentations, but a facilitated conversation in which every participant can contribute their perspective on the problem without premature evaluation or rejection.

The strategic value of this step lies in what it surfaces. Complex organizational decisions always contain more relevant information than any single participant holds. The frontline manager knows something about customer behavior that the board member does not. The technology architect knows something about implementation risk that the commercial director has not accounted for. The open discussion step creates a structured mechanism for that distributed knowledge to reach the decision-making surface.

Psychologically safe environments — those in which participants do not fear negative consequences for raising contrary views or inconvenient facts — are a precondition for this step to function. Organizations with low psychological safety produce performative open discussions: participants appear to engage while withholding the information and concerns that would actually change the outcome. Leaders who want the CODM model to generate genuine alignment must invest in the cultural conditions the open discussion step requires.

Identifying Underlying Concerns

The third step is where the CODM model produces some of its most distinctive value. Hartnett drew a deliberate distinction between stated positions and underlying concerns. A participant's position is what they say they want. Their underlying concern is why they want it — the deeper interest, value or risk that their stated position is meant to protect. These are not the same thing and conflating them is one of the most common causes of decision-making gridlock in organizations.

A business unit leader who opposes a proposed technology platform migration is not necessarily opposed to the technology. Their underlying concern may be the disruption of a critical customer implementation cycle that falls within the migration window. Addressing that concern — through phased migration, protected timelines or contractual safeguards — may resolve their opposition entirely without changing the platform decision. A different approach to the same underlying concern might not. Only by surfacing the concern directly can the group know which solution addresses it.

This step requires skilled facilitation. Participants who feel threatened or judged will not volunteer their underlying concerns. The facilitator's job is to distinguish between the surface-level disagreement the group can see and the deeper organizational, relational or strategic tension driving it. Executives who develop this facilitation capability — either personally or through trained facilitators — consistently produce higher-quality decisions than those who work only at the level of stated positions.

Developing Proposals

Once the group has shared information openly and surfaced the concerns that must be addressed, the fourth step invites the development of specific proposals. These are not final decisions; they are structured options that attempt to address the problem framing while accommodating the concerns identified in step three.

Hartnett designed this step to encourage multiple proposals rather than a single preferred solution presented for ratification. The discipline of developing several proposals — each reflecting a different set of trade-offs across the concerns in play — does two things. First, it demonstrates to participants that their concerns have been taken seriously enough to generate distinct options that address them. Second, it gives the group a genuine choice rather than a binary approval-or-rejection dynamic.

In executive decision-making contexts, the proposals step is often where the most creative problem-solving occurs. When the group has moved through framing, open discussion and concern identification rigorously, the proposals that emerge tend to incorporate insights and trade-offs that no single participant would have generated working independently. That collective intelligence is one of the primary sources of value that consensus-oriented processes produce over expert-authority models.

Choosing a Direction

The fifth step moves the group from a set of proposals to a chosen direction — the broad strategic orientation that will guide the final solution. Hartnett placed this step before the development of a detailed preferred solution deliberately. Choosing a direction before investing in detailed solution design prevents the group from becoming attached to implementation specifics before the fundamental strategic choice is secure.

The direction choice is tested for consensus at this stage, not finalized. The facilitator checks whether every participant can commit to the chosen direction at a level sufficient to support the work of solution development that follows. Participants who cannot yet commit are given the opportunity to articulate what additional information or assurance they need. That additional information is then surfaced within the group before the process moves forward.

This step reflects one of the CODM model's central structural insights: consensus is not achieved in a single moment at the end of a process — it is built incrementally across multiple steps, each of which tests alignment at the appropriate level of resolution. A group that has achieved consensus on direction without consensus on detail has made real progress. That progress is preserved and built upon in the steps that follow.

Developing the Preferred Solution

The sixth step translates the agreed direction into a detailed, implementable solution. The group works together to specify what the decision means in operational terms — who does what, with what resources, on what timeline, with what measures of success and with what escalation pathways if the solution encounters difficulty in execution.

The detail generated at this step is what makes the CODM model practically superior to many alternative decision-making approaches in complex organizational contexts. A decision that specifies direction without detail leaves implementation teams free to interpret the decision in ways that may diverge from the group's intent. A decision that reaches the detail level of step six produces a shared understanding that is robust enough to guide execution without continuous reference back to the decision-making group.

Hartnett's model requires that the preferred solution be tested against every underlying concern identified in step three. Each concern should be traceable to a feature of the solution that addresses it. Concerns that the solution does not address require either a modification to the solution or an explicit acknowledgment by the concerned participant that they can accept the residual gap. That discipline prevents the CODM process from producing solutions that achieve surface consensus while leaving critical concerns unresolved.

Closing

The seventh and final step formalizes the decision. Closure in the CODM model is not a rubber stamp. It is a structured check in which each participant confirms their level of commitment to the agreed solution. Hartnett used a graduated consent scale — ranging from full support through conditional support to a stand-aside position — to capture the range of commitment that consensus, as opposed to unanimity, accommodates.

A stand-aside in Hartnett's framework means a participant does not personally endorse the decision but will not block its implementation and will not actively undermine it. This is a meaningful commitment and it is one that majority-vote processes frequently fail to secure from those who voted against the outcome. The act of naming one's stand-aside position within the CODM process creates a form of accountability: the participant has publicly committed to supporting implementation even without full agreement.

Closure also creates organizational memory. A decision that is formally closed under the CODM model carries a documented record of the concerns it addressed, the proposals it evaluated, the direction it chose and the level of commitment each participant provided. That record is a valuable governance asset, particularly in organizations where leadership transitions, regulatory scrutiny or strategic reviews require decisions to be reconstructed and justified retrospectively.

CODM in Organizational Practice

The CODM model is most valuable when applied to decisions that require cross-functional commitment to execute. Enterprise strategy decisions, organizational restructuring, large-scale technology investments and culture transformation programs all meet that criterion. These are decisions where no single function owns the outcome, where execution depends on coordinated action across multiple teams and where the cost of misalignment in implementation substantially exceeds the cost of a longer decision-making process.

Executive teams that operate without a structured consensus process frequently discover that decisions made in the boardroom dissolve in the corridor. Individual leaders leave the meeting with different mental models of what was decided, different levels of commitment to its implementation and different interpretations of what their function is required to do. The CODM model prevents that dissolution by making alignment explicit, step by step, before the decision is closed.

Facilitation and Leadership

The quality of a CODM process depends significantly on the quality of the facilitation. Hartnett's model assigns the facilitator a specific and demanding role: to maintain the integrity of the process without influencing the substance of the decision. The facilitator ensures that every step is completed, that every participant's contributions are incorporated and that the group does not compress or skip steps under time pressure.

Organizations that apply the CODM model consistently find that facilitation capability becomes a strategic asset. Leaders who can facilitate without imposing, who can surface underlying concerns without triggering defensiveness and who can hold a group to process discipline when urgency creates pressure to shortcut — these leaders produce better decisions and stronger implementation outcomes than those who rely on authority or consensus-by-exhaustion.

Summary

The CODM (Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making) model provides a seven-step framework for reaching group decisions that participants commit to executing. Developed by Dr. Tim Hartnett, the model separates consensus from unanimity and builds alignment incrementally. Organizations that apply it to high-stakes, cross-functional decisions consistently achieve stronger implementation outcomes and more durable organizational buy-in.