

Trade-offs

How to choose among two or more options, when more than one consideration is taken into account? Often a particular alternative is best from one standpoint, but not from other standpoints. Each option has advantages and disadvantages. The answer depends on the relative importance of each consideration. Such trade-offs are faced at the individual level (e.g., how best to use your time this week) ... at the organizational level (e.g., where to locate your pilot projects) ... at broader socio-political consensus levels (e.g., which proposal for a new health-care system to endorse).

Frequent causes of heated debate in meetings and policy discussions are that various groups 1) have different *considerations* in mind, 2) may be fuzzy about *viable options*, or 3) may have differing expectations about *outcomes*. It helps to clarify the criteria, options and likely effects in a systematic way. This encourages sharper focus on aspects of agreement and disagreement. **Two ways to do this are:**

- **Simply list the perceived pros and cons of each alternative.** This can bring out the kinds of effects of greatest concern to the various groups and individuals.
- **Prepare a trade-off table to show relevant criteria and perceived effects of each option.** This helps to put the spotlight on specific trade-offs and aspects needing more study.

Here's an example of a trade-off table. It is about options for future use of an abandoned farm near a city, and the pluses and minuses generated by each.

Alternative uses being proposed	Important local considerations		
	Annual economic gains	Environmental change index	Family health & enjoyment
1. Large business center & shopping mall	\$ 6 million	- 2	☺?
2. Nature reserve, with no human access	0	+2	☺
3. Cluster zoning with blending of some commerce with open space & outdoor recreation	\$ 3 million	+1	☺☺

How can the apparent trade-offs and differences in view be softened? Some ways are:

1. **Seek to build consensus about which considerations are most and least important.** You could even have a system for scoring each alternative in terms of the important criteria.
2. **Probe to make sure that people don't have distorted impressions of the likely effects.**
3. **Initiate more study, if particular kinds of effects are not very clear or have been ignored, or if the "experts" disagree with one another.**
4. **Explore additional options and compromise solutions, especially those that might lead to win-win solutions.**