

Consensus decision-making

A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Consensus is different from other kinds of decision-making because it stresses the cooperative development of a decision with group members working together rather than competing with one other. The goal is a decision that is consented to by all group members. Reaching consensus does not mean everyone must be completely satisfied with the final result, a highly unlikely situation in a group of intelligent, creative individuals. The decision must be acceptable enough so that all will agree to support the group in choosing it. Put simply then: Consensus is a point at which everyone in a group consents to the result of the group's discussion about a proposal. Consensus flourishes in an environment in which all contributions are valued and participation by all is encouraged. No decision can be adopted until every concern is resolved to everyone's satisfaction, even though sometimes concerns remain after discussion. The key to the result is that individuals can agree to disagree by acknowledging that they have unresolved concerns, but consent to a proposal anyway and allow it to be adopted.

THREE LEVELS TO CONSENSUS

In Level 1, the object is to allow everyone to express their views, including concerns, without trying to come up with a solution. The scope is broad, allowing the discussion to consider the philosophical and political implications as well as the general merits and drawbacks and other relevant information. The only focus is on the proposal as a whole. Some decisions can be reached after discussion during this level.

In Level 2, the group focuses on identifying concerns, grouping similar ones and listing them, which enables everyone to get an overall picture of the concerns.

In Level 3, the group resolves the concerns and reaches a decision. The scope is very narrow and limited to a single unresolved concern until it is resolved.

The Process

In an ideal situation, every proposal would be submitted in writing – emailed to the group, posted to a web forum – well in advance of a meeting to discuss the proposal. This allows everyone enough time to read it and carefully consider any concerns before the discussion begins in earnest.

CLARIFYING THE PROCESS

The facilitator introduces the person presenting the proposal and, if necessary, explains the process that brought this proposal to the meeting. S/he would also describe the process that will be followed to move the group through the proposal to consensus. It is the facilitator's job to make sure every participant clearly understands the structure and the discussion techniques being used while the meeting is in progress.

PRESENT PROPOSAL

The presenter (aka the proposer or mover) reads the proposal aloud, provides background information, and states clearly its benefits and reasons in favour, including dealing with any existing concerns.

QUESTIONS THAT CLARIFY THE PRESENTATION

The meeting then asks questions seeking greater comprehension of the proposal. Everyone deserves the opportunity to fully understand what is being asked of the group before discussion begins. This is not a time for comments or concerns. After answering all clarifying questions, the group begins discussion.

Level 1: Broad Open Discussion

Discussion ought to be the broadest in scope. The facilitator encourages comments that take the whole proposal into account, ie, why it is a good idea, or general problems that need to be dealt with. Discussion at this level often has a philosophical or principled tone, purposely addressing how this proposal might affect the group in the long run or what kind of precedent it might create, etc. It helps every proposal to be discussed in this way, before the group engages in resolving particular concerns. The facilitator does not allow one concern to become the focus of the discussion. When particular concerns are raised, the facilitator makes a note of them but encourages the discussion to move back to the proposal as a whole. S/he encourages the creative interplay of comments and ideas and allows for the addition of any relevant information. For those who might at first feel opposed to the proposal, this discussion considers why it might be good for the group in the broadest sense. Their initial concerns might, in fact, be of general concern to the whole group. And for those who initially support the proposal, this is a time to think about the proposal broadly and some of the general problems. If there seems to be general approval of the proposal, the facilitator can request a call for consensus.

CALLING FOR CONSENSUS

The facilitator asks, "Are there any concerns remaining?" After a period of silence, if no further concerns are raised, the facilitator declares that consensus is reached and the proposal is read for the record. The length of silence ought to be directly related to the degree of difficulty in reaching consensus; an easy decision requires a short silence, a difficult decision requires a longer silence. This encourages everyone to be at peace in accepting the consensus before moving on to other business. At this point, the facilitator asks the minute-keeper to record task responsibilities as indicated in the proposal. Note that the question is not "Is there consensus?" or "Does everyone agree?" These questions do not encourage an environment in which all concerns can be expressed. If some people have a concern, but are shy or feel intimidated by a strong showing of support for a proposal, the question "Are there any concerns remaining?" speaks directly to them and provides an opportunity for them to speak. Any concerns for which someone stands aside are listed with the proposal and become a part of it.

Level 2: List all concerns

Brainstorming is used to identify concerns, which are recorded by the minute keeper. The facilitator ensures each is accurate by checking with the person who voiced the concern before moving on. This is not a time to attempt to resolve concerns or determine their validity; that would stifle the free expression of concerns. At this point, only concerns are to be expressed, reasonable or unreasonable, well thought out or vague. The facilitator would interrupt any comments that attempt to defend the proposal, resolve the concerns, judge the value of the concerns, or in any way deny or dismiss another's feelings of doubt or concern. Sometimes simply allowing a concern to be expressed and written down helps resolve it. After all concerns have been listed, the facilitator allows the group a moment to reflect on them as a whole. The facilitator asks if there are any concerns that need clarification.

Level 3: Resolve concerns

Go through the list, grouping any that are related. The facilitator checks each one with the group to see if, after clarification, it is still a concern. Those that have been resolved are removed. Each remaining concern is restated clearly and concisely and examined one at a time. Sometimes new concerns are raised that need to be added to the list. However, every individual is responsible for honestly expressing concerns as they think of them, not holding back and mentioning them after the meeting. To do so would limit the group's ability to adequately discuss the concern in its relation to other concerns.

The facilitator asks for any questions or comments that would further clarify the concern so everyone clearly understands it before discussion begins.

The group now moves through each concern, only moving on to the next one when every suggestion has been offered. If no new ideas are coming forward and the concern cannot be resolved, or if the time allotted for this item has been entirely used, move on to the next concern, and come back to it later.

Repeat this process until all concerns have been resolved. At this point, the group should be at consensus, however, it would be appropriate to call for consensus anyway just to be sure no concern has been overlooked.

Note: Once a decision has been adopted by consensus, it cannot be changed without reaching a new consensus. If a new consensus cannot be reached, the current decision stands.

UNRESOLVED CONCERNS

If a decision on a proposal can wait until the whole group meets again, send the proposal to a group or committee consisting of representatives of all the major concerns, as well as those most supportive of the proposal so they can work out solutions in a less formal setting. Sometimes, if the decision is needed before the next meeting, a smaller group can be empowered to make the decision for the larger group, but again, this committee should include all points of view. Choose this option only if it is absolutely necessary and the whole group consents.

STANDING ASIDE *(when a decision is adopted with unresolved concerns listed)*

When a concern has been fully discussed and cannot be resolved, the facilitator asks those with this

concern if they are willing to stand aside; that is, acknowledge that the concern still exists, but allow the proposal to be adopted. It is very important for the whole group to understand that this unresolved concern is then recorded along with the proposal and, in essence, becomes a part of the decision. This concern can be raised again and deserves more discussion time as it has not yet been resolved.

BLOCKING

After having spent the allotted agenda time moving through the three levels, the facilitator is obliged to declare that consensus cannot be reached at this time, that the proposal is blocked, and move on to the next agenda item.

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Process, roles, rules

A. Meeting process

1. Optional, but it's good to begin a meeting this way. Try NEW AND GOOD. Around the circle: each person briefly talks about something good and something new that's occurred in their lives since the last meeting. One minute maximum for each person.
2. List participants and record apologies.
3. Agree on length of meeting
4. AGENDA SETTING. Facilitator asks for items/proposals for discussion with suggested time limits for each. (Time limits can of course be reviewed, but are designed to reflect how important each is in relation to the others and to the time allocated for the whole meeting.)
5. REPORTBACK on actions taken on proposals from previous meeting.
6. PROPOSALS are then discussed, modified if necessary, agreed upon and recorded. All proposals that require action need to have recorded the person/people who intend to carry out those actions. Those proposals not agreed upon — see 7. **Refer to SECTION C for a step-by-step guide to the process of reaching consensus.**
7. UNRESOLVED MATTERS – proposals unresolved or ones needing more clarification/information/research – are listed and may go to working groups/collectives (record names) and/or be raised at the next meeting for consideration.
8. EVALUATION. Personal feedback. Around the circle again: each person gets a chance to reflect on what was good about the meeting and what could have been better. One minute maximum for each person. What could have been better is recorded by minute taker.
9. Agree on next meeting's date, time and venue.

Then relax and congratulate yourselves on how well you've done.

B. Role of facilitator

1. Calls for proposals, helps discussion of proposals.
2. Helps group accomplish its goals but does not make decisions for the group.
3. Is responsible to the group and its work rather than to the individuals in the group.
4. Can be time-keeper, but this is often another person.
5. Is reasonably detached from the proposals at hand but indicates when s/he is 'stepping out of his/her role as facilitator' and is participating in the discussion. If this happens too often, it's best that the facilitator steps aside for another.
6. Makes suggestions for the smooth running of the meeting, e.g., breaking into small groups, the use of silence, breaks, games etc. Asks for guidance from the meeting regarding time limits, method of debate, e.g., free ranging or strict order.
7. Indicates order of speakers.
8. Makes sure people aren't interrupted, don't go on too long, speak off the topic or repeat points already made.
9. Needs to be flexible, tactful and firm.
10. Reflects back to the group his/her feelings about where the group is in the discussion
11. Helps group set priorities in the agenda, time limits for each item and the length of the meeting, method of debate, how minutes are to be recorded, e.g., only decisions reached or discussion leading to decisions.
12. Checks to ensure that meeting etiquette is followed. (SEE SECTION F)

OTHER ROLES

Minute-keeper (self-explanatory)

Time-keeper (self-explanatory)

Vibes-watcher (particularly good in large meetings) is responsible for identifying where personal conflicts between people get in the way of decision-making. These conflicts ought, as far as possible, be resolved before the meeting. The facilitator can be the vibes watcher, although it's often another person.

C. Guidelines for consensus decision-making

- STEP 1.** State the proposal. Note proposer and seconder
- STEP 2.** Points of CLARIFICATION. If anyone doesn't understand any part of the proposal s/he asks the proposer to clarify any points.
- STEP 3.** INFORMATION SHARING
- STEP 4.** DISCUSSION Meeting needs to decide if discussion will be free-ranging or strict order of debate. Either way a speaking list and an agreed time limit is essential. Facilitator is the list taker.
- STEP 5.** Agreements and differences are drawn out and reflected back to meeting by facilitator at appropriate intervals throughout the discussion.
- STEP 6.** Modifications to proposal begin to emerge.
- STEP 7.** A new proposal is drawn up based on those modifications. Check that changes don't conflict with the spirit of the original proposal and that the proposer agrees with them.
- STEP 8.** If all agree to proposal (even if it's not everyone's first choice), then consensus is reached.
- STEP 9.** If no agreement, and the meeting is divided, the facilitator will suggest possible procedures. See Section E and the model on page 7 for ideas on how to proceed.

Consensus does not mean unanimity. People should feel that the proposal agreed to is the best solution that can be reached at this time under these circumstances.

D. Conditions for consensus

1. The group understands the process and agrees to it.
2. The group has a fairly high degree of shared commitment and philosophy.
3. People in the group are committed to the group continuing rather than just to personal agendas.
4. The group recognises that each person has something to say.
5. The group recognises that its facilitator/s act with both firmness and flexibility.
6. The group recognises that any agreed proposal has a better chance of being achieved because it has the support of all.

E. When consensus isn't reached

1. When anyone in the group doesn't agree with a proposal after modifications have been made:
 - make sure s/he/they are listened to;
 - ask whether s/he/they are prepared to block consensus;
 - will s/he/they allow the group to go ahead with the proposal if
 - A. s/he/they don't have to work on the task/s outlined in the proposal
 - B. her/his/their objections are noted
 - C. the decision does not set a precedent
 - D. the group tests the decision for a trial period.
2. If the meeting is evenly divided:
 - meet in small groups to discuss the issue
 - ask those who feel strongly to draw up another proposal
 - suggest another time for the group to meet to review the issue, but first clearly state where the discussion is and what the key issue is.
 - take a break, play a game, temporarily shelve the proposal, begin a new proposal, resolve it and then come back to the unresolved one.

N.B. Some groups choose to modify the consensus process so that one person alone cannot block group consensus. This is based on the notion that if a proposal requires two people (proposer and seconder) it should take two people to block consensus. This is known as modified consensus or consensus minus one. So, in a group of 10, consensus is reached when 9 agree to a proposal.

F. Rules for good meeting etiquette

- 1 Begin/be on time.
- 2 Be responsible for how you participate and how you relate to others.
- 3 Stay on the topic
- 4 Listen attentively. Don't interrupt. Avoid 'self-listening' — working out a response after another's first few sentences, not listening to anything after that point and then jumping in when there's a pause.
- 5 Avoid repeating or restating in one's own words what has already been said. Only raise new arguments, new information.
- 6 Leave a short space after someone has spoken.
- 7 Avoid dominating the meeting. Give others a turn.
- 8 Avoid giving answers or solutions before others have had a chance to contribute.
- 9 Avoid put-downs ("I used to believe that, but now . . ."), negativity, nitpicking (pointing out minor flaws). Focus on that which is positive as much, if not more, than that which is negative.
- 10 Avoid speaking in capital letters — giving one's own solutions as the final word on a subject.
- 11 Be wary of defensiveness — responding to every contrary opinion as a personal attack.
- 12 Avoid attention-seeking or using dramatics/drama to get the spotlight
- 13 Avoid manipulating the discussion to focus on one's own pet issues in order to give one's own pet rap/rave.
- 14 Recognise any personal conflicts between people to ensure they don't sidetrack the meeting. Also avoid intellectualising, withdrawing into passivity or joking around when it comes to sharing personal feelings.
- 15 Avoid withholding information (to maintain one's 'power').
- 16 Avoid speaking for others ("What such and such really meant was . . ." or "A lot of us think we should . . .").
- 17 Avoid running the show by continually taking on tasks before others have had a chance to volunteer (also used to maintain one's 'power').
- 18 Avoid being inflexible or dogmatic by taking a last stand for one's own position on even minor points.

In sum, there are four basics that always improve meetings: **begin on time, stay on the topic, don't interrupt others, don't repeat points already made.**

A model for consensus decision-making

Is there consensus?

