CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

TRAINING MANUAL
2007

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the benefits and challenges of consensus-based decision making. Based on the concepts explored in Leading Meetings, this course will provide specific contexts and ways to use the consensus process within your organization. Discussion topics include consensus principles and definitions, a consensus building model, and guidelines for implementation.

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During this course Participants will have the opportunity to:

- Understand the elements needed for consensus to work
- Analyse the benefits and challenges raised by consensus decision making
- Learn a step by step process and guidelines
- Explore options when agreement is elusive
- Explore a variety of definitions of consensus
- Apply learning to a range of applications for consensus in organizational decision making

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WHAT IS CONSENSUS?

WORKING DEFINITIONS OF CONSENSUS

"So then, I grew up figuring that consensus meant that you chew on something long enough until everyone can swallow it easily and safely." by Sophie Pierre, Chief, Ktunaxa-Kinbasket Tribal Council

The definition of when consensus is reached should be determined by each group that is going to use it. The choice will likely be based on the type of decision that is being made. Is it a recommendation or decision that will be acted on directly? Is it a recommendation that will go forward to another forum for further deliberation? Is a decision going to be made that will depend on participant commitment in the implementation process? Some definitions of consensus are:

- Consensus means public unanimity. All participants support the group's resolution of the package of issues and will work towards its acceptance and its implementation. This is a very useful definition for instances when solid and universal commitment is required for implementation. It gives every participant an effective veto.

- Consensus means no significant dissent. All participants support the resolution of the package of issues with some concerns in certain areas. On balance, the solution can be supported. Differences are not show-stoppers but are important enough that they would be described in any report from the group. This is a useful definition for situations in which the topic is highly difficult and complex. Groups may be most comfortable with this definition when they know that someone else is very likely to "massage" their results anyway.

- Consensus means a common solution, acceptable to everyone, reached with full and equal participation of all members. If there is strong opposition to a decision, discussion will continue or the issue will be tabled. An opposing individual may choose to 'stand aside' rather than block the process, however, all consensus decisions will be honoured by each person.

WHAT IS CONSENSUS?[1]

Consensus is a decision-making process that works creatively to include all persons making the decision. Instead of simply voting for an item, and having the majority of the group getting their way, the group is committed to finding solutions that everyone can live with. This ensures that everyone's opinions, ideas and reservations are taken into account. But consensus is more than just a compromise. It is a process that can result in surprising and creative solutions - often better than the original suggestions.

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[1] Seeds for Change

WHO USES CONSENSUS?[2]

Consensus is not a new idea, but has been tested and proven around the world. Non-hierarchical societies have existed on the American continent for hundreds of years. Before 1600, five nations - the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca - formed the Haudenosaunee Confederation, working on a consensual basis and which is still in existence today. Each Nation within the Confederacy selects individuals to represent them at confederacy meetings. Issues are discussed until all are in agreement on a common course of action. Never would the majority force their will upon the minority. Similarly no one could force a warrior to go to war against their better judgement.

A second example of consensus based organisation is the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. The Muscogee have the oldest political institutions in North America, with a recorded history going back beyond 400 years. If consensus on a major issue could not be achieved to everyone's satisfaction, people were free to move and set up their own community with the support - not the enmity - of the town they were leaving. This is in stark contrast to political organisation today, where the state's need to control its citizens makes it virtually impossible for individuals disagreeing with general policy to just go and do their own thing.

Consensus cannot only be found in the indigenous societies around the world but also throughout European history. Many medieval institutions, such as guilds, town councils, the influential Hanseatic trading league and the governing bodies of countries (German and Polish Imperial Courts) required unity.

There are also many examples of successful and stable utopian communes using consensus decision-making, such as the Christian Herrnhüter settlements 1741-1760/61 and the production commune Boimondeau in France 1941-1972. The Herrnhüter complemented the consensus system with the drawing of lots to choose the members of the community council, making intrigue and power politics superfluous. This tool for decision-making is unfortunately rarely used or discussed today, even though it can offer a fair way out of a decision-making dilemma.

Christiania, an autonomous district in the city of Copenhagen has been self-governed by its inhabitants using consensus since 1970. This includes regulating economic, cultural and educational issues, water and electricity supply, health and security. Within the co-operative movement many housing co-ops and businesses are using consensus successfully, including making difficult financial and management decisions. A prominent example is Radical Routes, a network of housing and workers' co-ops all using consensus decision-making. Through Rootstock Radical Routes raises and loans out substantial sums of money to member co-ops.

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[2] Seeds for Change

Many activists working for peace, the environment and social justice regard consensus as essential to their work. They believe that the methods for achieving change need to match their goals and visions of a free, non-violent, egalitarian society. Consensus is also a way of building community, trust, a sense of security and mutual support - important in times of stress and emergency.

In the antimilitarist protests at Greenham Common (the U.K.) in the 1980s thousands of women participated in actions and experimented with consensus. Mass actions involving several thousand people have repeatedly been planned and carried out using consensus.

Consensus has a long and varied history.

HOW DOES CONSENSUS WORK?

There are many different formats and ways of building consensus. Some groups have developed detailed procedures, whereas in other groups it may be an organic process. This also depends on the size of the group and how well people know each other. Below we have outlined a process that covers all the aspects of consensus, but can easily be adapted to fit your group. There are however a few conditions that have to be met for consensus building to be possible:

- **Common Goal:** All members of the group/meeting need to be united in a common goal, whether it is an action, living communally or greening the neighbourhood. It helps to clearly establish what this overall goal of the group is and to write it down as well. In situations where consensus seems difficult to achieve, it helps to come back to this common goal and to remember what the group is all about.

- **Commitment to consensus building:** All members of the group must be committed to reaching consensus on all decisions taken. It can be very damaging if individuals secretly want to return to majority voting, just waiting for the chance to say "I told you it wouldn't work". Consensus requires commitment, patience and willingness to put the group first.

- **Sufficient time:** for making decisions as well as to learn to work in this way.

- **Clear process:** Make sure that the group is clear about the process they will use for tackling any given issue. Agree beforehand on processes and guidelines. In most cases this will include having one or more facilitators to help the group move through the process.

THE WORKING DEFINITION USED BY MEDIATION SERVICES

No recommendations will go forward unless there is a consensus among those attending and those attending represent a reasonable cross-section of views. Support for the consensus decision is expressed in one of the following four ways:

1. *Yes! I can say an unqualified yes to the decision. I am satisfied that the decision is, all things considered, a reasonable expression of the group's wisdom.*

2. *OK! I can and will live with the decision, even though I'm not especially enthusiastic about it.*

3. *OK, and…I do not fully agree with the decision and need to register my view to the group about it. However, I do not choose to block the decision and will not advocate against it. I am willing to defer to the wisdom of the group.*

4. *No. I do not agree with the decision and feel the need to stand in the way of this decision being accepted.*

When the facilitator polls for consensus, anyone can declare the fourth level and stop the item from going forward.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING [1]

Why the consensus process can take on many different forms can be recognized by the following characteristics:

- A process in which all those who have a stake in the outcome aim to reach agreement on goals, actions and outcomes

- Participants work together to design a process that maximizes their ability to resolve their differences

- Participants work together as equals without imposing the views or authority of one individual or group over another

- Participants are involved in all the steps and retain full control of the outcome

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[1] Adapted from *The Russia-Canada Co-Operative Decision-Making Project*, S. McLeod and M. Boakye, Mediation Services, 1998.

WHY CONSENSUS MAY BE DESIRABLE

1. **Provides potential for more creative solutions.**
   - dependent on the extent to which each party can identify with the interests of the other parties

2. **Creates more durable and lasting solutions and the risk of future undermining of the decision is diminished.**
   - dependent on full participation of all effected by the issue

3. **Builds commitment to implementation on the part of all involved.**
   - all participants share responsibility for success

4. **Enhances the development of new partnerships and maintenance of valued relationships.**

5. **Increases respect among participants.**
   - we encourage others to change only if we honour who they are now

6. **Improves understanding and tolerance of each affected person's interests.**

7. **Builds a sense of community instead of a collection of disparate individuals.**

8. **Eliminates win-lose outcomes; decisions are win-win.**

9. **Provides regular opportunities to voice dissent.**

10. **Dialogue between equals.**
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11. **Empowerment in the process.**

12. **Increases commitment.**

WHEN NOT TO USE CONSENSUS[3]

When there is no group in mind

A group thinking process cannot work effectively unless the group is cohesive enough to generate shared attitudes and perceptions. When deep divisions exist within a group(s), bonding over their individual desires, consensus becomes an exercise in frustration.

When there are no good choices

Consensus process can help a group find the best possible solution to a problem, but it is not an effective way to make either-or-choices between evils, for members will never be able to agree which is worse. If the group has to choose between being shot and hung, flip a coin. When a group gets bogged down trying to make a decision, stop for a moment and consider: Are we blocked because we are given an intolerable situation? Are we being given the illusion, but not the reality, of choice? Might our most empowering act be to refuse to participate in this farce?

When they can see the whites of your eyes

In emergencies, in situations where urgent and immediate action is necessary, appointing a temporary leader may be the wisest course of action.

When the issue is trivial

I have known groups to devote half an hour to trying to decide by consensus whether to spend forty minutes or a full hour at lunch. Remember consensus is a thinking process. Where there is nothing to think about, flip a coin.

When the group has insufficient information

When you're lost in the hills, and no one knows the way home, you cannot figure out how to get there by consensus. Send out scouts. Ask: Do we have the information we need to have to solve this problem? Can we get it?

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[3] From Starhawk's book, <u>Truth or Dare</u>

WHAT IS NEEDED FOR CONSENSUS TO WORK?

DECISION MAKING

All organizations experience some conflicts/disagreements around decision making.

Reflection Questions:

1. How are decisions made in your organization?
2. Who makes what decisions?
3. Is everyone clear what is expected of them in the decision making processes?
4. Where can individuals make decisions alone and when are they expected to consult with others?

Three Options For Decision Making:

1. **Concentrated**
   - made by one person **without consultation**, could be the **person in authority** or an **expert**

2. **Consultative**
   - persons are expected to **consult with others** prior to making a decision

3. **Collaborative**
   - group makes a decision together either by **voting** or by **consensus** (formal or informal)

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

A. Communication

Factors that contribute:

- Openness, respect, sharing
- All relevant information available to all participants
- New ideas are met with enthusiasm and with questions of clarification, and the new ideas are used as a springboard for further thinking
- Parameters, boundaries, and code of conduct are set up and accepted
- Committee's working on issues give information to the Board ahead of time
- When people really listen and speak, it is towards achieving the best option/decision
- Well defined communication processes leads to good exchange of ideas and easier consensus at decision making time
- People involved must have information prior to meeting
- Everyone is given the opportunity for input/participation
- All are heard and share

Factors that get in the way:

- Abusive behaviour: swearing, name-calling, blaming, temper tantrums, lying
- Receiving information about decisions that need to be made too late to properly inform individuals leads to drawn out procedures
- People are allowed to or encouraged to ridicule others' input
- When people get hung up on their own opinions and won't move or cause the decision to come down to the lowest common denominator
- Some of the information was not made available before the meeting
- Previous history, pre-conceived judgements, inferences, opinions
- Does everyone fully understand?
- External vs. internal processing: talkers take over
- Lack of knowledge on issues can lead to a more biased consensus
- Board members uninformed about issues of organization

B. Values

Factors that contribute:

- Inclusiveness, wanting everyone to feel an important part of the group
- Collective caring
- Encouragement of co-operation between union/management
- Inclusive of all key stakeholders
- Working with people to help themselves, define own issues and possible solutions
- Value structure is sound
- Values are common, shared, worked upon, discussed
- Values of the organization are values that all members are comfortable with
- Clear parameters to keep everyone focused
- Value statement and mission statement are clear – helps with the process
- Group elaboration of values
- Stakeholders should have some input in forming the process itself

Factors that get in the way:

- How to translate values into action
- Not knowing exactly where organizations stand on issues can lead to conflicting opinions
- Values can inhibit some action that some members may like to see happen
- One set of values was publicly espoused while there was another set of underlying values or system in place
- Different/opposing history, culture differences
- When values limit the scope of the organization and no longer fully reflect the reality of practice
- An orientation towards adversarial approaches to disagreement, a win/lose mentality that values "winning"

C. Leadership

Factors that contribute:

- Open to new ideas, willing to share power
- Proactive, shared vision, value focused
- Mentorship system, learning atmosphere
- Identifying addressing and naming problems, self discipline
- A strong leader will help discussion be fair for all involved
- Strong leadership without any one person feeling left out of the process
- CEO did not attempt to dominate meeting or influence other participants
- Relaying that they are not the experts and that we as a whole have the answers
- Share, collegial, vital input from areas of expertise, trust-building necessary for consistency
- Strength of leadership abilities mobilized
- When it is balanced between achieving the goal (a decision) and making sure the process happens constructively

Factors that get in the way

- Authoritarian, power driven
- Vacillating between a consensus based group and a handing over of all the power to a particular individual
- Power over but pretending there is choice, stating it is by consensus and it isn't
- No outside facilitation
- Weak leadership leading to no clear decision
- Strong people can sway opinions
- Autocratic, retributive, weak leadership
- Authoritarian, tired and pessimistic, no vision, needs to step down
- A topic could get side stepped very easily
- When leadership is not focused on synthesizing different opinions and aiming towards finding the best option

D. Goals

Factors that contribute:

- Goals clearly stated at the outset of the project
- More motivation with holistic agreement
- Clearly expressed articulated goals that the group discusses
- Goals are understood, the "how to do it" is as valued as reaching the goal
- Goals are clear but agreed that constant evaluation is vital, and individual assessment brings clarity to ongoing/renewed commitment to the over-all goal
- Assist people to work in co-operation with each other
- Consensus is easier to reach when a specific goal of the organization is in mind
- Goals help keep the organization on track and indicate when things are happening (movement toward goal)
- Evaluations completed in timely manner

Factors that get in the way:

- Time constraints to meet goals, nature of the funding
- Personal agenda different
- Goals are not defined, long term and short term goals are needed for effectiveness
- A lack of clarity or a commitment to an agreed upon goal, agenda, path, etc.
- Goals that sideline a group within the larger group or go against the values of a significant segment of that group
- Different ways of reaching goals, different levels of involvement on issues (prioritizing)
- Some goals or the organization can differ from ideas of individuals as to how they are to be attained or even the nature of the goal
- Trying to win their view
- When participants do not have much input into setting goals, only had input into decision
- When goals become the whole focus with little room to change

E. Organizational Structure

Factors that contribute:

- Board: good size, staff and board sitting down together
- Community oriented
- Roles and responsibilities clearly defined
- Principle-centered, shared trust, belief
- When the structure supports and encourages all of the membership to participate in decisions that effect them all
- A good, clear mission statement
- Board members come in with diverse backgrounds therefore various positions on subject matter are considered and discussed
- Membership input at various levels allows for a vision and mission statement as well as values statement that all can embrace
- Common, shared, proactive, visionary
- Union/management participation

Factors that get in the way:

- Appeals of decision can be brought forward to another committee where on site management makes decision
- Chaos
- Too much input from general membership can bog down decision making and lead to time lines being extended again and again
- Board members might not be getting input from membership or have a true concept of membership position
- When the decision process is unclear and all decisions (big and small) end up being by consensus
- Time constraints for product delivery
- Confidential nature of service delivery
- Vision/passion for outcomes not shared
- Dissension, lack of trust, no communication
- Hierarchical
- Dysfunctional board, power struggles
- Hierarchical board, management, staff
- Board chair and CEO not on same page

CONSENSUS - WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

The following are five of the elements that are vital for a consensus decision making process to be effective:

1. **Building trust:** an ongoing process of relating respectfully and acting on concerns

2. **Open communication:** listen actively, discuss fully, share information freely

3. **Co-operation:** allow differences, and be open to being influenced by them, and engage in creating mutually satisfactory solutions

4. **Clearly defined goals**: (or mission statement, or terms of reference) be sure you know the reason it is important to make a decision together

5. **Definition of consensus:** get agreement on how this group or organization will know when consensus is reached

The first three elements are how you work and decide together. Commit to them, and constantly re-create them as you go.

Numbers four and five need to be decided on at the beginning of working together, before you are in the midst of making decisions. They also have the effect of requiring clarity of each person as to why s/he is in the group. What is the commitment to the big picture, and hence the commitment to working it out by consensus?

Reaching consensus will take time. Time to understand each person, time to address concerns, time to make clear decisions. It just does not have to take the <u>kind</u> of time it often takes.

If you choose consensus, make sure you put in place what is needed for it to be an effective way to make decisions, to reflect your goals, and to move you forward into achieving them.

A GOOD FACILITATOR[4]

Good facilitator: Another important element of the consensus process is a good facilitator. This person is responsible for seeing that everyone is heard, that all ideas are incorporated if they seem to be part of the truth, and that the final decision is agreed upon by all assembled. The facilitator is the servant of the group, not its leader. It is his/her job to draw out and focus the best thinking of the group, not to use his/her position to impose or elevate his/her own.

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[4] Mary McGhee

GUIDELINES FOR ACHIEVING CONSENSUS

1. Avoid arguing for your own solutions. Present your concerns and ideas, listen to the other members' reactions and consider them carefully.

2. Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches a stalemate. Instead, look for an alternative which will work for everyone.

3. Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict and to reach agreement and harmony. When agreement seems to come too quickly and easily, be suspicious. Explore the reasons and be sure everyone accepts the solution for basically similar or complementary reasons.

4. Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, averages, coin-flips and bargaining. When a dissenting member finally agrees, don't feel that s/he must be rewarded by having his/her own way on some later point.

5. Differences of opinion are natural and expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the decision process. Disagreements can help the group's decision because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance that the group will arrive at lasting and mutual workable solutions.

KEY GUIDELINES FOR CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING[5]

1. Come to the discussion with an open mind. This doesn't mean not thinking about the issue beforehand, but it does mean being willing to consider any other perspectives and ideas that come up in the discussion.

2. Listen to other people's ideas and try to understand their reasoning.

3. Describe your reasoning briefly so other people can understand you. Avoid arguing for your own judgments and trying to make other people change their minds to agree with you.

4. Avoid changing your mind only to reach agreement and avoid conflict. Do not "go along" with decisions until you have resolved any reservations that you consider important.

5. View differences of opinion as helpful rather than harmful.

6. Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote. Stick with the process a little longer and see if you can't reach consensus after all.

SOME DIFFICULTIES WITH CONSENSUS

1. Achieving consensus can take considerably longer than a simple majority vote.

2. People who don't actively try to find a decision that is acceptable to everyone (all-win) can dominate a group's discussion by trying to make everyone else go along with them (win-lose).

3. A group can coerce or manipulate individuals into saying they accept a decision, even when they don't. That is groupthink, not true consensus.

Consensus and groupthink are different. Groupthink occurs when everyone expresses agreement with a decision, but some people are just going along because they feel obligated to reach an agreement and avoid conflict. Thus although there appears to be a consensus, some people have not resolved disagreements they consider important. In consensus, all agree with the decision and all important disagreements are resolved.

The time required to reach consensus can't usually be avoided. Instead, look at it as an investment in better decisions and a healthier, more egalitarian, more participatory organization.

The other pitfalls can best be dealt with through openness and continuous effort on everyone's part to do what is ethical and right for the group. A willingness to take risks and to give and receive honest feedback are key to developing the trust required to let the process work.

HOW DOES CONSENSUS WORK?[6]

There are many different formats and ways of building consensus. Some groups have developed detailed procedures, whereas in other groups it may be an organic process. This also depends on the size of the group and how well people know each other. Below we have outlined a process that covers all the aspects of consensus, but can easily be adapted to fit your group. There are however a few conditions that have to be met for consensus building to be possible:

- **Common Goal:** All members of the group/meeting need to be united in a common goal, whether it is an action, living communally or greening the neighbourhood. It helps to clearly establish what this overall goal of the group is and to write it down as well. In situations where consensus seems difficult to achieve, it helps to come back to this common goal and to remember what the group is all about.

- **Commitment to consensus building:** All members of the group must be committed to reaching consensus on all decisions taken. It can be very damaging if individuals secretly want to return to majority voting, just waiting for the chance to say "I told you it wouldn't work". Consensus requires commitment, patience and willingness to put the group first.

- **Sufficient time:** for making decisions as well as to learn to work in this way.

- **Clear process:** Make sure that the group is clear about the process they will use for tackling any given issue. Agree beforehand on processes and guidelines. In most cases this will include having one or more facilitators to help the group move through the process.

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[6] Seeds for Change

ROLES IN A CONSENSUS MEETING[7]

There are several roles which, if filled, can help consensus decision making run smoothly:

The facilitator(s) aids the group in defining decisions that need to be made, helps them through the stages of reaching an agreement, keeps the meeting moving, focuses discussion to the point-at hand; makes sure everyone has the opportunity to participate, and formulates and tests to see if consensus has been reached. Facilitators help to direct the process of the meeting, not its content. They never make decisions for the group. If a facilitator feels too emotionally involved in an issue or discussion and cannot remain neutral in behaviour, if not in attitude, then s/he should ask someone to take over the task of facilitation for that agenda item.

A vibes-watcher is someone besides the facilitator who watches and comments on individual and group feelings and patterns of participation. Vibes-watchers need to be especially tuned in to the power issues of group dynamics.

A recorder can take notes on the meeting, especially of decisions made and means of implementation and a time-keeper keeps things going on schedule so that each agenda item can be covered in the time allotted for it (if discussion runs over the time for an item, the group may or may not decide to contract for more time to finish up).

Even though individuals take on these roles, all participants in a meeting should be aware of and involved in the issues, process, and feelings of the group, and should share their individual expertise in helping the group run smoothly and reach a decision. This is especially true when it comes to finding compromise agreements to seemingly contradictory positions.

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[7] Act Up

CONSENSUS MODELS AND PROCESSES

CONSENSUS FLOW[8]

Introduce Issue	Gather and share all relevant information.
Define question	What are the key questions? Is this the right time/place/group? Take one question at a time.
Discussion	Voice first thoughts, reactions, ideas.
Make proposal(s)	Try to incorporate all viewpoints
Discuss proposal(s)	Look at good points and drawbacks.
Amend or change proposal	Take into account any concerns. The proposal often changes completely at this stage.

Test for consensus
Ask who agrees with the proposal.
Ask who does not agree.
What are the major objections?
Are there are any blocks?

A major objection is a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal, not just a general dislike.

Major objections or blocks

All agree.

Consider options:

1. Objectors stand aside. They allow group to go ahead but are not involved in the decision and its consequences. (Agree to disagree.)

2. Return to discussion to develop new proposals.

3. Leave it for another time/have a break for reflection.

4. Accept block - do not go ahead.

5. Send to reconciliation committee. Use mediation tools / an (outside) mediator.

6. Resort to other ways of deciding such as random choice, or voting.

Consensus

Implement decision

THE FORMAL CONSENSUS PROCESS

Introductions
- Clarify Process
- Present Proposal or Issue
- Questions to Clarify Presentation

Level 1
Broad Open Discussion
- Group Discussion
- Call for Consensus

Level 2
Identify Concerns
- List Any Concerns
- Group Related Concerns

Level 3
Resolve Concerns
- Resolve Grouped Concerns
- Call for Consensus
- Restate Remaining Concerns
- Questions to Clarify Concerns
- Discussion Limited to Resolving One Concern at a Time
- Call for Consensus

The Formal Consensus Process
www.consensus.net

CONSENSUS

Alternative Closing Options
- Stand Aside
- Send to Committee
- Declare Block

MEDIATION SERVICES

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PROCESSES THAT DIVIDE AND UNITE[9]

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Majority Voting	**Compromise**	**Delegated Decisions**	**Multivoting Criteria-based Grids**	**Consensus Building**
Use it for more trivial items about which the group can afford to be divided				Use it for important issues and/or ones in which commitment and support are essential

BEFORE YOU START

Know:

- Why you are using consensus for this decision making process.
- How this group defines consensus
- What you need to have in place for it to work

Areas to clarify:

1. Commitment to Consensus

    - What is the group's definition of consensus?
    - To which decisions does the definition apply?
    - When is consensus reached?
    - What happens if consensus is not reached?
    - Can consensus be revisited?

2. Meetings

    - How often will meetings take place?
    - How will agendas be set?

3. Attendance

    - Who needs to be part of the process?
    - What commitment do participants make?

4. Members' Mutual Responsibilities

    - Preparation before meetings?
    - What are ground rules?
    - How will new facilitators be chosen?
    - What is the responsibility of the facilitators?

5. Follow-through

    - When and how will others be informed of the decisions?
    - How will decisions be implemented?

AN APPROACH TO CONSENSUS BUILDING

The following is a basic approach that can be used to facilitate a consensus-based decision making process. It is intended to be customized and adjusted to accommodate the needs of the particular group. The group leader or facilitator plays a key role in directing the consensus process and facilitating group members' involvement.

1. Preparation:
- Ensure group agreement on consensus definition (if not in place, clarify, and get group agreement at beginning of meeting).
- Ensure that members are aware of the specific goal or the agenda of the meeting.
- Provide members with any backup material or references of past material required for them to prepare for the session.
- It is often helpful to touch base with the major players (formal and informal)
- Identify a series of clear questions you may want to use throughout the meeting
- Make sure to have space to write (i.e. white board, flip chart stand, cards for ideas)
- Have available markers, flip chart paper, etc.

2. Possible Guidelines (not exhaustive):
- Guidelines should be fine tuned for the group.
- one person speaks everyone listens
- participate to your max - share openly
- risk being influenced by someone else's ideas
- seek to meet others concerns
- respect your own ideas - participate

Other Guidelines[10]

■ Make sure everyone understands the topic/problem. While building consensus make sure everyone is following, listening to and understanding each other.

■ Ensure that all members contribute their ideas and knowledge related to the subject.

■ Explain your own position clearly. Listen to other member's reactions and consider them carefully before pressing your point.

■ Be respectful and trust each other. This is not a competition. Nobody must be afraid to express their ideas and opinions. Remember that we all have different values and opinions, different behaviours, different areas and thresholds of distress.

■ Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches stalemate. Instead look for the most acceptable solution for all parties

■ Distinguish between vetoes/major objections and discomfiture/amendments. A veto/major objection is a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal.

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[10] Mary McGhee

■ Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict and achieve harmony. When agreement seems to come quickly and easily, be suspicious, explore the reasons and be sure that everyone accepts the solution for basically similar or complementary reasons. Many of us are scared of open disagreement and avoid it where we can. Easily reached consensus may cover up low esteem or lack of safety for some people to express their disagreements openly.

■ Differences of opinion are natural and to be expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the decision process. Disagreements can help the group's decision, because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance the group will hit on more adequate solutions. However you must also be flexible and willing to give something up to reach an agreement in the end.

■ Remember that the ideal present behind consensus is empowering versus overpowering, agreement versus majorities/minorities. The process of consensus is what you put into it as an individual and a part of the group. Be open and honest about the reasons for your view points.

■ Think before you speak; listen before you object.

■ Allow enough time for the process of building consensus. Being quick is not a sign of quality. Thinking issues through properly needs time. For taking major decisions or in a controversial situation, it is always a good idea to postpone the decisions, "to sleep on it".

3. Meeting Process For Each Issue To Be Discussed:

1) Frame Issue to be Discussed
- Define issue in terms of the problem to be solved, rather than as a yes/no solution
- Set parameters on the problem to be discussed (clarify what group is not here to solve as well as what needs to be addressed).
- Review discussion guidelines - especially if emotional issue.

2) Hear Interests and Concerns Regarding Each Issue
- Elicit the interests and perspectives of group members regarding the issue.
- Record this information either on flipcharts or in minute form.
- Restate interests as needed, for clarity.
- Ensure all interests relevant to the problem are heard

3) Develop Consensus Statements
- Summarize interests in relation to the problem to be solved.
- Based on the interests expressed by the group, invite a participant to share a statement that reflects the "will" of the group. (Explain that the statement is a beginning point and can be modified.)
- If participants are unable to develop a statement, the group leader can provide an initial statement.

4) Determine Group Agreement on the Consensus Statement
- Once an initial statement is provided, ask group members if they support the statement as it is. If not, invite them to modify the statement in a way that reflects their own interests as well as those of the other group members.
- Once there are no other modifications, ask participants if they support the statement as it is using the 1-4 scale.

5) Deal with Substantial Disagreement
- If substantial disagreement occurs, the facilitator can invite further discussion and repeat the consensus statement process or table the decision for another time.
- For more options, see "When agreement is elusive."

6) Confirm Final Agreement
- Once the discussion is finished on a decision, and all members support it, confirm final agreement and plan of action to implement it.

WAYS TO BUILD UNDERSTANDING

1. Teach Shifting From Positions to Interests

1) In a polarized discussion, either:
- facilitator identifies interests of each different perspective;
- in small like minded groups identify own interests, or
- in small groups of similar perspective, people hunch the interests of those that took the opposing position, and then check back for accuracy in large group.

2) Facilitator listens for interests and highlights them.

3) Facilitator moves people from talking about solutions to interests.

2. Check Out Assumptions:

Working Through A Misunderstanding

There is a specific set of steps that can resolve misunderstandings. The same process can address circumstances which have resulted in some of the group members feeling disappointed, frustrated, hurt and/or even angry. As the meeting leader guides the group through the following process the conversation should be focused, though not hurried. Everyone who needs to speak should be given time to speak to the issue.

1) Topic is introduced and framed by the facilitator. 'It has come to our attention that there are still some concerns about the way in which a bingo was presented as an alternative to address the $50,000 budget short fall.'

2) Person who has the background information shares what they know about the issue, specifically how and when did the bingo idea get introduced and what were the 'bingo' conversations up to this point. This information should be quite detailed as far as process, not what individual people actually believe on the issue. Generally the person with the greatest power would speak to the issue. Other group members would add information at the end if that was required.

3) The rest of the group are encouraged to ask questions of clarification. Again answers should be as clear and open as possible. It is critical that people feel that information is not being withheld.

4) The people who are experiencing difficulty with the issue share the impact that this situation has had on them and the questions that this has raised for them. They may also wish to share how that has affected their participation in the discussion to date.

5) The spokesperson for the group (see #2) expresses clear and unqualified regret about the impact of their actions. They may wish to go as far as acknowledging they made a mistake or what they wish they would have done differently. This is not the time to provide information that could easily be heard as a 'but.' Others who were involved may also wish to acknowledge their contribution and regret.

6) Facilitator thanks group members for their honesty, highlights the statement of regret and gently encourages people to move forward from this point.

Note: Throughout the process the facilitator may summarize and paraphrase as is required. These skills should be used when the facilitator wants to a) highlight/emphasize a certain piece that has been spoken or b) clarify understanding.

3. Responding With Empathy:

- Have each person respond empathetically (paraphrase) previous person's concern before sharing his or her perspective.
- Encourage people to listen for each other's concerns and validate them, especially if different from their own.

4. Use Techniques Such As Rounds, Small Groups To Increase Participation

Rounds: Each person responds briefly to a focused question, and without arguing with what has gone before. Builds consensus, especially when people are able to build on each other's ideas or validate concerns as they speak.

Small Groups: In larger groups or where some are consistently less vocal, people share concerns in small groups. Note taker records concerns and brings back to large group.

QUESTIONS

There are many different kinds of questions. The art of good questions is knowing what question to ask when. At each stage in the consensus process different kinds of questions are needed. It is generally the responsibility of the meeting facilitator to ask questions strategically and by doing so move the group do decision making.

Dorothy Strachan in **Questions that Work**: A Resource for Facilitators (St. Press, Ottawa 2001) identifies three kinds of questions. These questions can help us move through a consensus process.

1. WHAT: - The Notice Questions

2. SO WHAT: The Meaning Questions

3. NOW WHAT: The Application Questions

WAYS TO CHECK FOR EMERGING AGREEMENT

It is important to encourage as much of the conversation as possible to be public so everyone can deal with the different views and so there are no surprises to yourself and others.

1. Spectrum exercise or Crossroads (Tape on floor)

Ask people to place themselves on an imaginary line on a particular issue. For example, place yourself on the line indicating your level of comfort on participating in bingos: enjoy working bingos to I would never work a bingo.

- Could be on a variety of topics or elements of discussion
- Question needs to be clear and carefully selected
- Generally done in the beginning or in the middle of process
- Helps people see where others are at (in relation to them)

2. Outstanding Questions

Ask people to identify any other outstanding questions or concerns they have for which they do not have answers?

3. Placing Dots on Flip Chart

This is done in front of everyone so people can see people's preferences.

For example, place dots on the top two solutions you would prefer (red 1st choice and blue 2nd choice).

4. Small Group to Large Group Discussion

5. Spokes

6. Feeling Sharing or Check the Pulse

7. Pros/Cons or plus/minus

DEVELOPING CONSENSUS STATEMENTS

1. Review interests or the options for solutions that have been brainstormed.

2. Remind people of consensus definition.

3. Invite any of the participants to suggest a possible consensus statement. If the group has brainstormed options then the initial focus should be on the brainstormed lists. Participants are invited to suggest statements that they believe everyone could live with. (Participants may require some time to think of the first statement. Facilitators can assist with this process by guiding participants to a brainstorming option that appears already to have significant consensus from the group.) Participants may suggest:

    -   a verbatim statement from the brainstorming exercise
    -   a merger of two ideas from the brainstorming exercise
    -   a linking of two ideas from the brainstorming exercise
    -   an idea that is not present

4. The facilitators record and summarize the statement.

5. The remaining participants can confirm the statement or change it in a way that they can live with it.

6. The process of refining the statement may continue for some time, until all participants feel that the statement has addressed their concerns regarding the issue.

7. The facilitators continually check the statement with the group. At some point, the facilitator may wish to make a formal call for consensus.

Note: Solutions may be a combination of consensus statements.

WHEN AGREEMENT IS ELUSIVE

First, ensure you have taken time to thoroughly explore concerns.

Also, check what preparation the group has done – what needs to be in place for this discussion to work. Check for: clear definition of consensus, common goals, clear process, participant involvement, sufficient information shared.

Then, here are some attitudes and skills which each can bring:

Facilitator:

- Use communication and conflict resolution skills
- Check concerns are understood – by you – by all participants
- Probe for interests which are underlying the dissent and encourage their inclusion in seeking a decision
- Restate and clarify where the concern lies (e.g. is it with resources, time, process, direction, values?…)

Participants:

- Listen carefully and consider the dissenting view – it may be the key perspective that is needed to create a good decision
- Treat the dissenting person with respect and remain open to being influenced by their perspective
- Seek solutions that include their interests
- Focus on the problem, not the person
- Use communication and conflict resolution skills

Avoid:

- Bringing the weight of numbers to bear against a small group of "holdouts"
- Perceiving those who dissent as slowing down the process or causing difficulty for everyone else
- Making the dissenter(s) the center of attention, showering them with arguments about why they are wrong

Dissenter(s):

- Clearly explain the reasons for your dissent, helping others to understand your interests
- Continue to communicate, express you ideas, and listen to others' concerns
- Remain open to being influenced by what you hear
- Ask yourself whether you believe the group understands your concerns and has considered it carefully. If not, what can you do to help them understand?
- When you believe they understand, clarify how your concerns relate to the problem at hand – and link to the group goal (i.e. the reason you are making a consensus decision together)
- Balance your own perspective and interests with the interests of the group as a whole
- Continue to clarify for yourself the level of your dissent – is it a 2, 3 or 4?

Other strategies:

- In a large group, call a break and ask dissenter(s) to meet with some who support the proposal and work to seek solutions that meet all concerns.

- Table discussion and establish a working group, as above, to explore solutions.

- Consider whether group has sufficient information to make a good decision. Defer until more facts are gathered, more discussion takes place, or participants have time to reflect. In meeting, decide what you will do: what information is needed and who will gather it, what will it take to address the concerns raised, how much reflection is needed; decide on a plan for revisiting the decision.

- The group as a whole may decide that it is more important to reach a decision at this particular time than to make a decision that meets the usual level of consensus. Some may see this as a special circumstance where reaching an immediate decision is so important that they will go along with a decision rather than dissent*. This kind of concession is sometimes made by individuals for the sake of the group, but a group should never pressure someone into doing so.*

- If there has been significant dissent, consider what follow up will be needed within the group.

OTHER ISSUES

1. When not to use Consensus?

2. Is every consensus decision equally good?

3. Who should facilitate the consensus process?

4. When to use a formal or informal process?

CASE STUDY

Organization: Crocus Mental Health Agency

Staff: 1 Executive Director, 3 Counselors, 1 Activity Staff, 1 Administrative Assistant

Board: Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Fundraising Committee Chair

Constituency: Community-based program, board of directors come from the community and represent a broad variety of skills, funding comes from fee for service, provincial health services and community foundations, numerous staff and board members have some personal experiences with mental health issues.

Program focus: Working with people who live with mental illness on an out patient basis, clientele are people living with mental illness who are trying to integrate into the neighbourhood. Caseload of about 150 clients.

Crisis: You are $50,000 short for this year's budget. The organization has tried *everything* to find the money to not have a deficit and there are only 2 months before the year end. A board member has pursued funding from the local lottery group. The lottery group has offered to give you the short fall ($50,000) **IF** you staff 2 bingos. The lottery group has also expressed interest in supporting Crocus in the future. The challenge – Board was not able to reach agreement to accept the money. Concerned that it might be a sensitive issue for staff, the E.D. also tested the waters at a staff meeting.   There is not agreement on the staff or board to work bingos nor for that matter to accept money from the lotteries. The organization has had a consensus-based approach to decision-making for the last couple of years and recently removed the voting option from the constitution. This is the first time such a major decision has had to be dealt with by consensus and so they have brought in outside facilitators to help.

Background: Organization is committed to not operating in a deficit because it cannot afford to be in position of making up shortfalls from year to year.   The Financial Committee (Chair, E.D., Treasurer) consult with staff and develop a balanced budget each year. Money has always been tight and requires a lot of work maintaining relationships with government departments and making proposals to funders.
The $50,000 is needed because the budget was based on receiving government program funding which had been informally committed and the Board had no reason to believe would not come through. Before the funds came through an early election was called. A new government came in on a reduced spending platform and this program funding is now not available.

Your budget is $500,000 of which $350,000 is for staff.

The Chairperson is in their 2nd year of a 3 year term and served on the board for one term prior to their current role.

Organization is fifteen years old.

APPENDIX

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Web Sites....
See www.ic.org - community bookshelf for other resources.

CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING: EVALUATION

We would appreciate any comments you have that would help us develop our training manual and workshop. Thank you for your comments. (Please use the back if you need more space).

1. What was helpful?

2. What is one way to "fine tune" this workshop?

3. What would you have liked us to spend more time on?

4. What would you have liked us to spend less time on?

5. Other Comments

_____

Name (Optional)

DO NOT USE THIS PAGE FOR NOTES. IT IS THE BACK OF THE EVALUATION.