



Introduction to Consensus Decision-Making

What is consensus?

Consensus decision-making is a process that seeks to arrive at decisions that everyone can live with, by seeking to resolve or mitigate the concerns of the minority. In contrast, the will of the minority is simply over ridden in majority rule. The consensus process is based on the assumption that every member of the group has a valid perspective that is potentially crucial to making good decisions. It requires everyone in the group to be committed to clearly understood common goals, and to be able to differentiate between their personal preferences and what will help the group achieve its goals.

Is consensus for you?

Consensus is not for every group. It is unfamiliar to many people, and requires a relatively high level of trust, understanding and skills among participants in order to work well. On the other hand, it produces high quality decisions, and the effort to make consensus work can pay off when it comes to implementing the decision. Consensus becomes more challenging with larger groups, so that should be a consideration in deciding if consensus is right for your group.

How it works:

There are many variations on consensus decision-making, some of which are described in the resources listed below. In most variations of consensus, there are three main responses to a proposal:

- 1) *consent*, or support
- 2) *stand-aside*, expressing concerns or disagreement but also a willingness to yield to the group
- 3) *block*, expressing concerns that are serious enough to put one's own will over the will of the majority

It is important to not use a block like you would a "no" vote; the latter is actually more like a stand-aside. Blocks should only be used in extreme circumstances, in which the decision is believed to endanger the organization or its participants, or violate the mission of the organization. It is not enough that the proposal violate one's personal ethics (this might call for a stand aside, but not a block); it must also violate the collective ethics of the group.

(Note: establishing such collective ethics requires a decision-making process, so it is necessary to have some trust as you move through this Catch-22)

The real work of consensus happens before consensus is called for and participants must choose whether to consent, stand aside, or block. Built groundwork that allows everyone to understand the proposal and for concerns to be addressed; this environment can be created through:

- solid proposals
- clear communication
- focused discussion

Concerns, especially those that might lead to a block, should be raised early in the discussion. When raising a concern, be as specific as possible, and indicate if it is a minor worry or a major problem that would lead you to block the proposal if it is not addressed. This way everyone can work together to generate solutions and amend the proposal if necessary.

Not every decision needs to be made by consensus. It is helpful to keep in mind that the next step in setting up your organization should be the delegation of responsibilities. While some decisions are serious enough to warrant a collective consensus, it is crucial that you not get bogged down in micromanagement. Some decisions are best delegated to individuals or committees.

For more info:

<http://www.consensus.net>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making

“12 Myths of Consensus” by Betty Didcoct and Paul Delapa, in *Communities*, Winter 2006