

Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus is a word derived from the roots “con” meaning “with, together, jointly, thoroughly” and “sensus” meaning “feel, perceive.”

What it is

Consensus decision-making is a method of group decision-making in which all the participants actively discuss the issues surrounding a proposal and take an equal part in making a decision. It is a process through which people modify a proposal, often extensively, in order to accommodate different ideas and viewpoints so as to arrive at the best decision. No decision is final until everyone in the group feels comfortable with it and willing to implement it without resentment.

(This is not necessarily the easiest decision, nor one that each individual would individually equate with their own.)

What it is not

Consensus decision-making does not involve everyone talking until they agree with the leader or dominant personality in the group. Nor does it involve agreeing to the lowest common denominator.

Why use it?

You'll make better decisions and you will arrive at a decision that the group is committed to implementing and standing by! Solutions that might seem attractive initially because of who presents them or how they are presented may in fact be poor ones. As the energies of the group become focused on the problem at hand (rather than defending individual points of view), the quality of the decision tends to be enhanced. Because consensus is a process that involves *everyone*, the group benefits from many individuals' knowledge and experience.

It avoids splitting the group into “us” and “them” or setting up an atmosphere of “winning” and “losing.” It supports the cohesiveness of the group rather than working against it.

What is needed to make the process work?

Consensus decision-making can be very difficult, and several components are necessary to the process:

- The group must have a strong commitment to a common set of principles.
- Individuals in the group must trust each other.
- All members of the group must have equal information *and* feel an equal sense of responsibility to fully participate in the process.
- Each member of the group must have an equal chance to debate an issue or voice an opinion before a decision is made.
- Each member has the responsibility to be open and honest about their feelings.

How to use it

- Be clear about what the problem is that the committee is trying to solve.
- Ask everyone to consider the problem and be prepared to offer their ideas.
- At the meeting, give everyone on the committee 2 or 3 minutes to describe their feelings about the problem and their ideas on what to do.
- After everyone has spoken, open the floor for discussion. Participants should be encouraged to ask clarifying questions about each other's' ideas, to offer modifications to ideas that have been expressed, and to be as clear as possible about what they disagree with.
- If there seems to be general agreement, the facilitator (usually the staff assigned) should state in the form of a question what s/he thinks the group has agreed to. The final decision should be put in writing.

If you can't reach consensus

If the group is unable to reach a consensus, it must decide whether the issue is so fundamental to the group that it can be postponed until consensus can be reached, or whether it is more important or urgent that a decision be made *now*.

If a group feels that the issues at question are immediate, they should decide in advance during the bargaining preparations what the "backup" decision-making process will be. (For example, the group may decide that the decision will be made by voting, with either a majority vote or a super majority vote in order for the decision to be implemented.) Again, such decision-making process should be decided when the committee is establishing its initial ground rules, and not when the committee is in the process of making a stressful decision.

Decision by consensus is difficult to attain and will consume more time and energy than other methods. However, it will also produce qualitatively better decisions, and will develop a stronger, more cohesive, more responsible committee.