

Decision-making by consensus

A brief introduction

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Consensus is often a great way to make decisions—if it's done well.

What is consensus?

Consensus is a process that groups use for making high quality decisions that are acceptable to all of its members. That is not to say that everyone necessarily feels that the adopted decisions are best, but that everyone supports them.

This differs from “majority rule,” the model most of us are brought up to equate with democracy itself.

In majority rule:

- Proposals are presented and modified to secure enough votes to approve them. In consensus, group members present and modify proposals to make them agreeable to all.
- It's often hard to be heard. In consensus, special efforts are made to hear those who are often not heard.
- The goal is to please a majority, often paying little attention to the needs of the minority. In consensus, the aim is to recognize the needs of everyone, especially if they are in a minority.

Consensus is often best done in small groups, although there are techniques for doing it even in very large assemblies.

Consensus can be incredibly satisfying. But it can also be very challenging. A bad consensus process might make you wish for a quick vote, or even a friendly dictator. So, if you are going to do it, it's important to work to do it well.

How consensus works

Dealing with an issue for which a group decision needs to be reached generally begins with discussion in which members describe the problem, identify needs, raise concerns, ask and answer questions, and give other input. Proposed solutions should be captured and revisited when this general airing is done.

Proposals to address the issue may come up in discussion or may have to be called for by the facilitator. As proposals are discussed, they may be amended by their owners based on the comments and requests of other members, and restated to reflect such changes. If a proposal seems to be going nowhere, or no longer seems

like a good idea, the maker of the proposal can withdraw it.

When a proposal gains some momentum, the facilitator can see where the group stands by testing for consensus.

He or she restates the proposal (or has the maker restate it) to make sure it's clear to everyone and then asks the group how it feels about it. Formally, members can react to the proposal in one of several ways:

- As a supporter (“I think that's a good idea”)
- With ambivalence (“I don't see the need for that, but I'll

go along”)

- With reservation (“I have a concern with that, which I can live with if we can't accommodate”)
- By standing aside (“I won't participate in that, but it's fine if others do”)
- By blocking consensus (“I cannot support that and don't want the group to do it”)

The group then works to clarify and address the concerns underlying members' reservations, stand asides and blocks. If the proposal is blocked, the blocker should clearly state his or her reasons. As the proposal is amended to accommodate members' concerns, it gains acceptance and often becomes a better solution.

When this accommodation phase is complete or has lost its forward motion, the facilitator can test for a final consensus. If there are no blocks, consensus is reached and the proposal is adopted. If consensus is not achieved, another proposal can be taken up, or the issue can be dropped or put off until later.

Note that sometimes consensus is reached with a lot of ambivalence, reservation or standing aside. A group might choose to reject this kind of “lukewarm consensus,” despite coming to agreement. Some things are best hot or cold.

Roles in consensus

Several roles help make the consensus process work, each played by one or more members.

The facilitator A good facilitator can make a difficult meeting great. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true.

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Consensus process requires a capable facilitator, who can guide the group in:

- Moving through the agenda, without bogging down by trying to reach formal consensus on minor matters;
- Working through consensus on important items, without overemphasizing or completely ignoring his or her own input;
- Keeping the discussion on track;
- Clarifying proposals, questions, decisions and process;
- Looking for underlying points of agreement and disagreement; and
- Helping quieter members step up and more dominant ones step back.

That's quite a lot to do. Typically the facilitator is also responsible for other aspects of a meeting, such as:

- Seeing that an agenda is made;
- Prioritizing or helping to prioritize agenda items;
- Arranging the implementation of decisions;
- Making sure a subsequent meeting is set; and
- Inviting evaluation.

For an in-depth discussion of facilitation, see the companion article "Facilitation Skills."

The note taker A note taker records what happens, or at least decisions reached and commitments made. A written record is often very important—it increases clarity during a meeting and prevents disagreement afterward. Is a subsequently contested decision really a decision?

The timekeeper Often, a time-keeper helps the facilitator and other members remain conscious of how long things are taking. If time runs out for a time-limited item, the group can decide to "contract for" (or allocate) more time, or move on. But watch out for long discussions about short additions of time!

The vibes watcher A vibes watcher can help consensus by focusing on the mood and dynamics within the group.

He or she can look for and make observations about speaking time and tone, body language, emotions, distractions, and so on. Hearing from the vibes watcher can really help the facilitator to address unspoken problems and members to check their own behavior.

Everyone else Even if you don't play one of the above roles, consensus process works best when everyone actively tries to make it work. One of the most important things to know about consensus is that it is a very inviting process and can easily become flooded by unwieldy participation.

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Consensus process welcomes everything you need to say and then some, but weighing in on details that are not really important to you or the topic at hand, defensive explanations or comments to show your knowledge can really bring consensus to a crawl. Block consensus only when a

problem matters to you a great deal.

For more on supporting good process as a participant, see the companion article "Good participation."

Racism, sexism, and classism

Because the consensus model is so inclusive, it can be a springboard for racism, sexism, and classism. Men, for example, generally speak and block consensus more than women, and concede and take notes less. Practiced well, the process can also help prevent these behaviors. Making decisions by consensus is a good opportunity for all of us to challenge ourselves and, when appropriate, each other to transcend the hierarchical culture that shapes us and more fully become constituents of the new world we seek to build.

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