

Nelson CARES Society Consensus Decision Making

What is consensus?

Consensus is a process for group decision-making. It is a method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust.

Consensus vs. Voting

Voting is a means by which we choose one alternative from several. Consensus, on the other hand, is a process of synthesizing many diverse elements together. Voting is a win or lose model, in which people are more often concerned with the numbers it takes to “win” than with the issue itself. Voting does not take into account individual feelings or needs. In essence, it is a quantitative, rather than qualitative, method of decision-making. With consensus people can and should work through differences and reach a mutually satisfactory position. It is possible for one person’s insights or strongly held beliefs to sway the whole group. No ideas are lost, each member’s input is valued as part of the solution. A group committed to consensus may utilize other forms of decision making (individual, compromise, majority rules) when appropriate; however, a group that has adopted a consensus model will use that process for any item that brings up a lot of emotions, is something that concerns people’s ethics, politics, morals or other areas where there is much investment.

What does consensus mean?

Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is necessarily the best one possible or even that they are sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, no one felt that her/his position on the matter was misunderstood or that it wasn’t given a proper hearing. Hopefully, everyone will think it is the best decision; this often happens because, when it works, collective intelligence does come up with better solutions than could individuals. Consensus takes more time and member skill, but uses lots of resources before a decision is made, creates commitment to the decision and often facilitates creative decision. It gives everyone some experience with new processes of interaction and conflict resolution, which is basic but important skill building. For consensus to be a positive experience, it is best if the group has 1) common values, 2) some skill in group process and conflict resolution, or a commitment to let these be facilitated, 3) commitment and responsibility to the group by its members and 4) sufficient time for everyone to participate in the process.

Consensus

Stresses the cooperative development of a decision and the active search for common ground rather than differences.

Everyone’s support is needed to finalize the decision, so softer or culturally undervalued voices are actually encouraged and attended to.

The decision will usually garner greater commitment to follow through on a decision, because everyone was involved in making it.

Both feelings and logical arguments are considered important.

When a decision is not favourable to the whole group, the time is often taken to find creative and often better solutions.

A Few Disadvantages of Consensus

- The group can be dominated by outspoken members
- Sometimes it takes a bit longer - can lead to boredom and frustration if not facilitated properly
- Individuals can block decisions to further their own power
- Groups that have one person in charge and groups that have little in common or opposing goals may experience difficulty implementing consensus

Rules for Consensus

Consensus does not mean that everyone agrees with the decision, but that everyone is willing to live with it.

Standing aside- If you do not agree with the direction that the group is heading in, but you are not willing to stop the rest of the group from going ahead with a generally accepted idea, you can choose to stand aside. This should only be done after you have clearly articulated your concerns and there has been discussion from the group about your concerns. If there are more than one or two people standing aside, it would be wise to continue to search for other ideas and compromises.

Blocking- one individual has the power to block a decision, even if it goes against something that the rest of the group agrees to. Again, this should only be done after lengthy discussion, and only in situations where you feel that the decision is morally wrong and would harm the group or other people in some way. Good conflict management skills are necessary in these situations to try and work out solutions.

Forming the consensus proposals

During discussions a proposal for resolution is put forward. It is amended and modified through more discussion, or withdrawn if it seems to be a dead end. During this discussion period it is important to articulate differences clearly. It is the responsibility of those who are having trouble with a proposal to put forth alternative suggestion. The fundamental right of consensus is for all people to be able to express themselves in their own words and of their own will. The fundamental responsibility of consensus is to assure others of their right to speak and compromise with synthesis. When a proposal seems to be well understood by everyone, and there are no new changes asked for, the facilitator(s) can ask if there are any objections or reservations to it. If there are no objections, there can be a call for consensus. If there are still no objections, then after a moment of silence you have your decision. Once consensus does appear to have been reached, it really helps to have someone repeat the decision to the group so everyone is clear on what has been decided.

Difficulties in reaching consensus

If a decision has been reached, or is on the verge of being reached that you cannot support, there are several ways to express your objections:

Non-support ("I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along.")

Reservations (“I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it”)

Standing aside (“I personally can’t do this, but I won’t stop others from doing it”)

Blocking (“I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral.” If a final decision violates someone’s fundamental moral values they are obligated to block consensus)

Withdrawing from the group- Obviously, if many people express non-support or reservations or stand aside or leave the group, it may not be a viable decision even if no one directly blocks it. This is what is known as a “lukewarm” consensus and it is just as desirable as a lukewarm beer or a lukewarm bath.

If consensus is blocked and no new consensus can be reached, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject, or does nothing if that is applicable. Major philosophical or moral questions that will come up with each affinity group will have to be worked through as soon as the group forms.

Modified Consensus- Some groups use a modified form of consensus that allows for a fallback to voting if consensus is not working or if someone is blocking a decision that the group feels strongly about. A vote must be taken to determine if a vote will take place. Both votes must usually garner 75% approval.

Role of the Facilitator

The facilitator keeps track of WHAT the group is talking about and HOW the group is talking about it!

- Your role is to “make easy” the functioning of the group
- Everything you do or say must be checked with the group
- Facilitation should be shared. Everyone should know what it’s like to guide the group
- Everyone should try to “self-facilitate”. We are all equally responsible for making the meeting run effectively
- If you start getting personally involved in the discussion or debate, ask someone else to facilitate awhile

Your Function as a Facilitator is to.....

1. Guide the Agenda
 - Start a check-in round
 - Review and revise the agenda with the group
 - Monitor time
2. Keep the discussion on topic
 - Point out tangents, watch out for repetition
 - Reiterate original goal of the discussion or ask the group to clarify the original
3. Clarify and Rephrase
 - If a member is being misunderstood, or not listened to, rephrase their statement and check out the accuracy of your statement. Do not act as an advocate

Consensus Process Flow Chart

