

CONSENSUS PROCESS

1. Proposal - Someone makes a proposal, an idea or a suggestion for the group to work on

2. Discussion - Take time to discuss the proposal with the entire group and make changes about details or conditions so everyone in the group is happy with the whole plan. This is a good time to use techniques like “go-around,” or “small group discussion” to make sure everyone has their voice heard.

Participants who disagree with the proposal have responsibility to speak up and voice their opinion. They can also put forward alternative suggestions.

The person that put forward the proposal, with the assistance of the facilitator, can choose to withdraw proposal if seems to be a dead end.

3. Restate the proposal – the person who made the proposal (with the support of the facilitator) can repeat the proposal with clarifications and changes made through the discussion.

When a proposal seems to be well understood by everyone, and there are no new changes asked for, the facilitator(s) will ask if there are any objections or reservations to it. This is a time to use hand signals or cards that the group has agreed on to express consent or dissent.

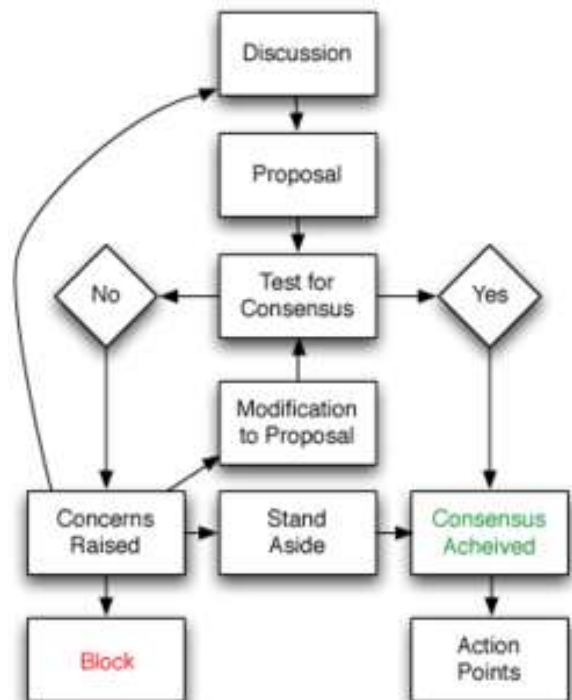
See DISSENT OR OBJECTIONS

4. Test consensus - If there are no objections, the facilitator will test consensus, saying:
Are there any objections? (pause and observe the entire group for signs of dissent)
Are there any reservations? (pause and observe the group for anyone wanting to speak)
Have we reached consensus? (pause and observe the group for hand signals)

Moment of silence - If there are still no objections, then after a moment of silence you have your decision.

5. Repeat - If consensus has been reached, the facilitator will repeat the decision to the group so everyone is clear on what has been decided.

If consensus was not reached and some people reject the proposal, go back to the 2nd step and have more discussion.



DISSENT OR OBJECTIONS

The group can choose hand signals or ways to express dissent, such as “thumbs down” or hands pointing down.

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:

- 1. Non-support** ("I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along.")
- 2. Reservations** ("I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it.")
- 3. Standing aside** ("I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it. ")
- 4. 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.)
- 5. Withdrawing from the group.** Losing group members is not desirable and when someone chooses to leave a group because they object strongly to decisions being made by the rest of the group, the facilitator or vibes-watcher should check in with the person at an appropriate time.
- 6. Lukewarm consensus:** 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.

7. Fundamental disagreement - Major philosophical or moral questions that come up will have to be worked through right away when the group forms.

Techniques for facilitating participation:

Speaker's list

The facilitator or co-facilitator can keep a list of participants that want to comment on the decision at hand, in order of request. Sometimes the speakers list functions to even out airtime, giving those who haven't yet spoken priority over those who speak often.

Agreement with a point of discussion

To avoid a lengthy meeting and repetition of points, participants can show approval or support of a speaker's point by an agreed upon hand signal or non-verbal cue.

Group Roles in consensus procedures at meetings

1. Facilitator(s) will be selected on a rotating or volunteer basis

The facilitator (and co-facilitator) aid 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**, helps to synthesize discussion points, 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 behavior, if not in attitude, then s/he should ask someone to take over the task of facilitation for that agenda item.

2. “Vibe-watcher” (can be a role of the facilitator or co-facilitator)

Especially useful for controversial topics, 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 tuned in to the power dynamics of the group.

3. Note taker selected on a rotating, voluntary basis

A recorder can take notes on the meeting, especially of decisions made and means of implementation. It is helpful to use a template based on the meeting agenda so the notes follow a consistent pattern from one meeting to the next

4. Time-keeper will be selected on a rotating or volunteer basis

In order to keep 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).

5. Most Important Role = Participant

All participants in the decision-making process

- a) 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.
- b) Listen to other people's ideas and try to understand their reasoning.
- c) 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.
- d) 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.
- e) View differences of opinion as helpful rather than harmful.
- f) 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.

