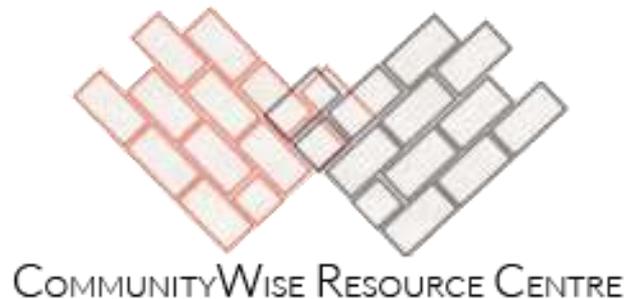# Consensus Decision Making

Presented by:

CommunityWise Resource Centre
and Good Life Community

Consensus Decision Making Process

Consensus has its origin in the Latin word *cōnsēnsus* (agreement), which is from *cōnsentiō* meaning literally *feel together*.

Consensus decision-making is a group decision making process that seeks the consent of all participants. Consensus may be defined professionally as an acceptable resolution.

Why use consensus?

Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve **better solutions**, but also to promote the growth of **community and trust**.

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 be heard. Coercion and trade-offs are replaced with creative alternatives, and compromise with synthesis.

Consensus Decision Making

In simple terms, consensus refers to agreement on some decision by all members of a group, rather than a majority or a select group of representatives. The consensus process is what a group goes through to reach this agreement. The assumptions, methods, and results are very different from traditional parliamentary procedure or majority voting methods.

Consensus Decision Making

Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and that no one has all of it (no matter how tempting it is to believe that we ourselves *really* know best!)

 It is also based on a respect for all persons involved in the decision being considered.

Consensus Decision Making

Acting according to consensus guidelines enables a group to take advantage of all group members' ideas. By combining their thoughts, people can often create a higher-quality decision than a vote decision or a decision by a single individual. Further, consensus decisions can be better than vote decisions because "majority rules" voting can actively undermine the decision when some people in the group are left out. People are more likely to implement decisions they accept, and consensus makes acceptance more likely.

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.**

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

CONSENSUS PROCESS

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)
Have we reached consensus? (pause and observe)

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

If consensus was not reached and some people reject the proposal, more discussion is needed.

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.

Sample Agenda: Good Life

- Introductions: go-around, each person says their name and gender pronoun

- Overview of consensus process

- Updates from previous meetings (quick)

- Proposals (already discussed at previous meetings or online)

- Discussions (new ideas or problem solving)

- Closing circle: go-around, check out

- Informal socializing

Sample Agenda: CommunityWise

1. Opening Comments & Introductions   5 min

2. Approve minutes from last meeting   2.5 min

3. Approve Agenda for today's meeting   2.5 min

4. Updates: committee reports   15 min

5. Strategic Plan Implementation (Old Business)   30 min

6. Discussions (New Business)   30 min

7. Closing Comments & Adjournment   5 min

Consensus Process
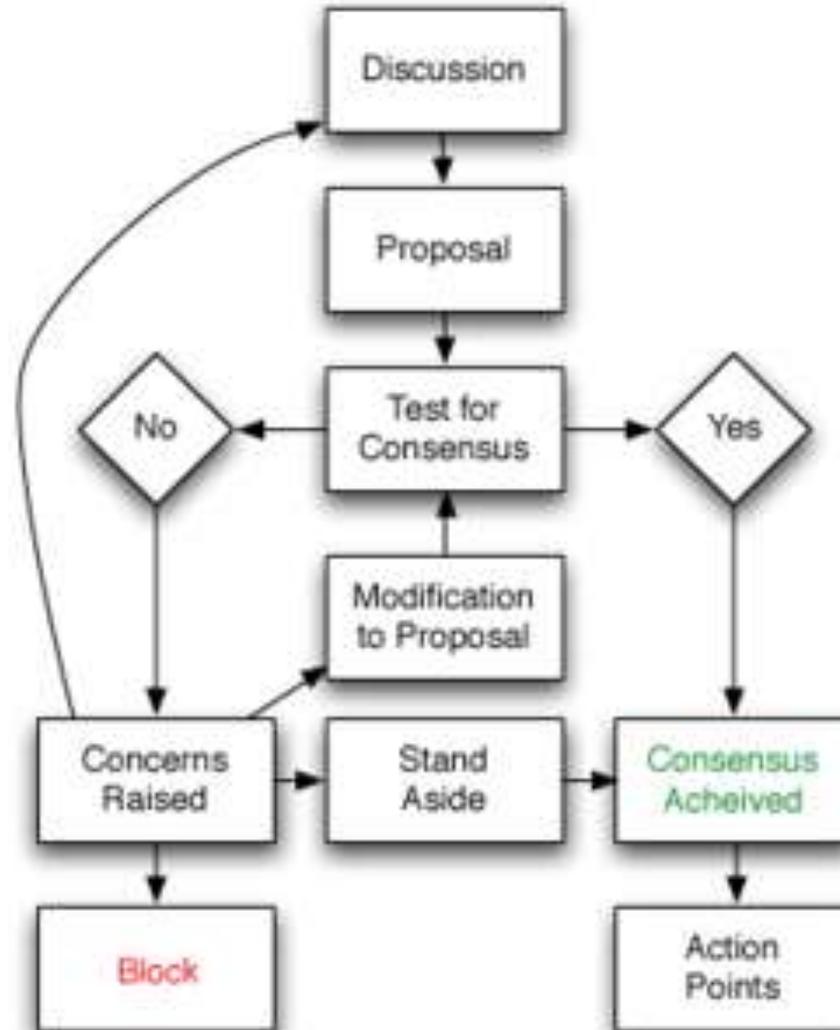
DISSENT OR OBJECTIONS

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.)

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.

Roles in consensus meetings

Roles can be performed by anyone in the group and are usually selected on a rotating or volunteer basis each meeting.

1. Facilitator(s)

2. Note taker

3. Time-keeper

4. Public Scribe (especially useful in planning or brainstorming)

5. "Vibe-watcher" (can be a role of the facilitator or co-facilitator)

6. Speakers List (only needed in a large meeting)

Facilitator

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, help them through the stages of reaching an agreement, keep the meeting moving, focus 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.

Note taker

A recorder can take notes on the meeting, capturing decisions and next steps, also called action items.

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.

Time-keeper

The purpose of this role is to keep the meeting on schedule, so each agenda item can be covered in the time allotted for it.

If discussion runs over the time for an item, the group may revisit the agenda and negotiate for more time to finish that item.

"Vibe-watcher"

(can be a role of the facilitator or co-facilitator)

Especially useful for controversial topics, a vibes-watcher notices 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. Who is speaking more than others? Are there people being left out of conversation?

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.

Thank You!

Some online resources on Consensus Decision Making:

Consensus Decision Making by APIRG (Alberta Public Interest Research Group)

http://www.all4all.org/media/2006/01/2296.pdf

Rabble: News for the rest of us – tool kit

http://rabble.ca/toolkit/guide/consensus-decision-making

Seeds for Change Consensus Handbook

http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/handbook

Contact Us

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