

## **Guidelines for Consensus Decision Making**

- 1. Avoid blindly arguing for your own individual judgments.**
- 2. Avoid changing your mind only to reach agreement.**
- 3. Avoid "conflict-reducing" procedures such as majority vote, tossing a coin, etc.**
- 4. Seek out differences of opinion. They are natural and expected. Disagreements can help the ultimate decision.**
- 5. Don't assume someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches a stalemate. Instead, look for the next acceptable alternative.**
- 6. Listen carefully to one another, and encourage the participation of all members of the group.**

(Johnson and Johnson, 1975)



## **RULES FOR CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING**

1. **Avoid arguing for your own position.**
2. **Don't assume someone must lose and someone must win at stalemate positions. Look for the next most acceptable alternative.**
3. **Don't change your mind just to avoid conflict.**
4. **Avoid conflict-reducing techniques like majority vote, averages, coin toss or bargaining.**
5. **Seek out differences of opinion.**

## Activity #2—Consensus Chart

1. Assign students the task of coming up with their group's top three television shows.
2. Have the Recorder write down ten programs from the titles that the group members brainstorm.
3. In order to help reach consensus, have the groups take a "reading" of each person's rating of the television shows by doing a "five to fist" as the title is announced. (*This is not a vote!*)
4. If a student holds up a fist, he or she must provide an alternative title.
5. Students who want a show on the list can try to persuade other students who show two fingers (let's talk more) or three fingers (okay with me) to agree with the choice.
6. The consensus cycle of Talk-Discuss-Persuade-Justify should be used until the group can reach consensus on the top three shows.

## Activity #3—The Human Graph

1. Select several controversial topics before engaging in the human graph experiment. Topics might include the following:
  - Making school year twelve months long instead of nine
  - Uniforms for all public school students
  - Raising the driving age to eighteen
  - Revoking driver's licenses of students who drop out of school
  - Requiring all high school students to complete sixty hours of community service as part of their graduation requirements
  - Requiring all students who participate in extracurricular activities (sports, clubs, bands, etc.) to maintain an overall "C" average and earn no grade lower than a "D" in any class
  - Requiring all students to take at least one foreign language
2. Make a statement about the topic. For example, the teacher might say, "All public school students should be required to wear uniforms to school."

Stand in the middle of the room to indicate the "neutral position." Students in favor of the statement stand to the right of the teacher; students opposed stand to the left. The position they take indicates how strongly they feel about the topic.

**FIVE-TO-FIST  
CONSENSUS**

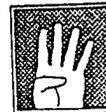
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All for it;  
top priority  
—

**5  
FINGERS**

---



Yes; high  
on my list  
—

**4  
FINGERS**

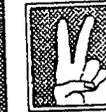
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OK with me  
—

**3  
FINGERS**

---



Let's talk more  
—

**2  
FINGERS**

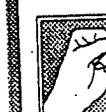
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Will trust  
the group  
—

**1  
FINGER**

---

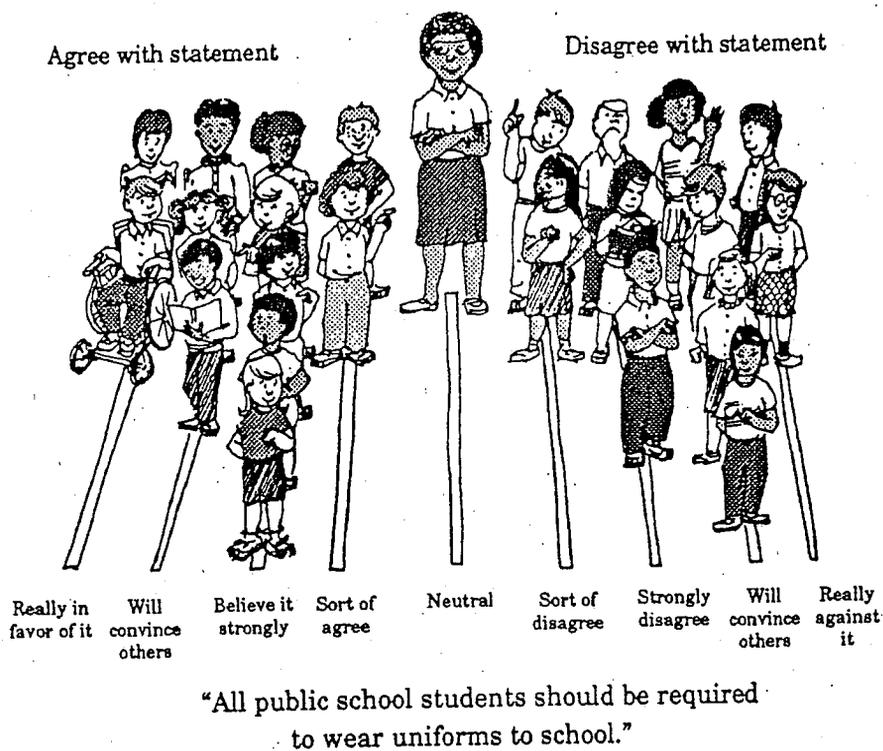


No! An  
alternative is \_\_\_\_  
—

**FIST**

(From *Blueprints for Thinking in the Cooperative Classroom* by James Bellanca and Robin Fogarty, Skylight Publishing ©1991)

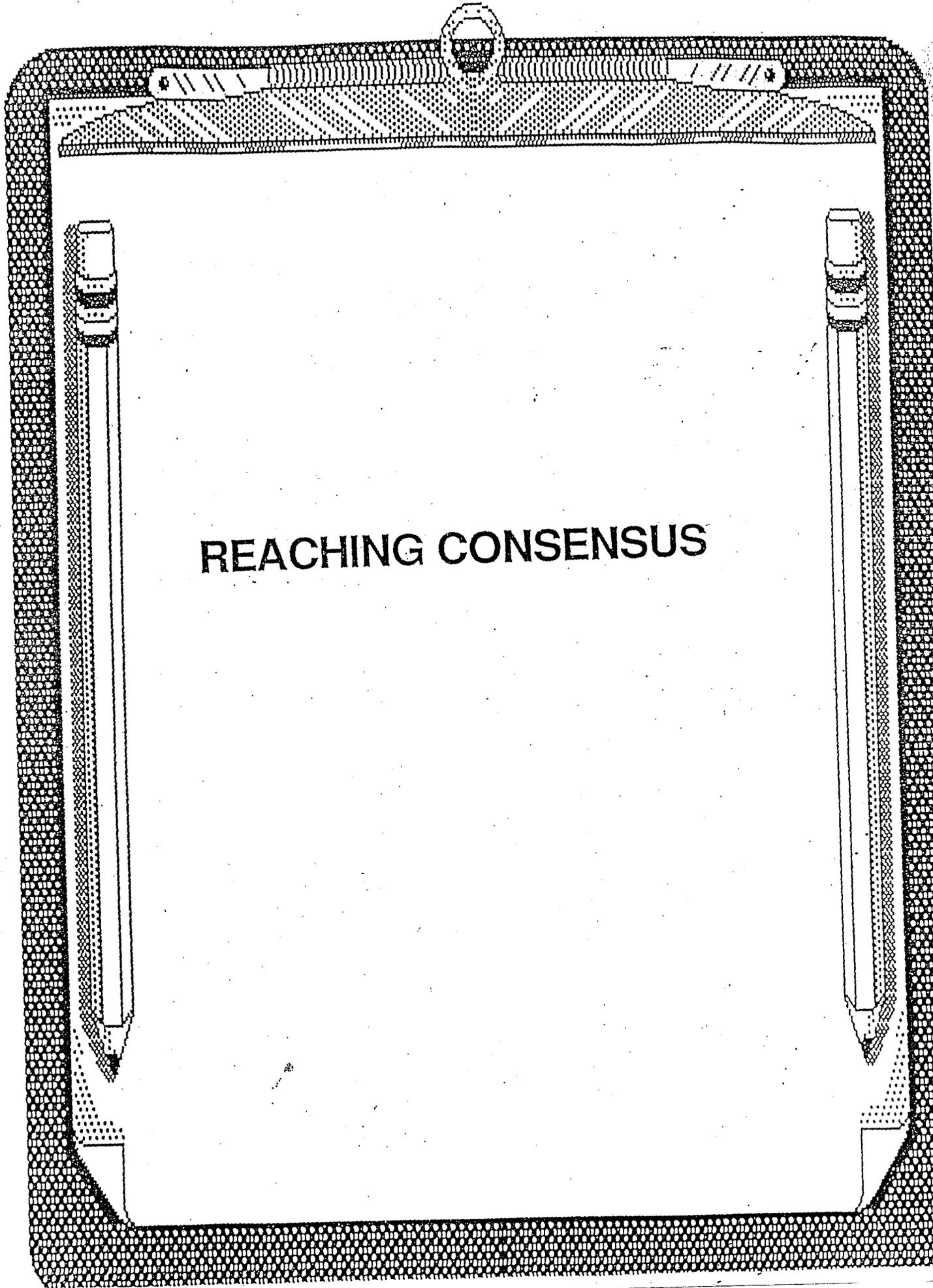
### CLUSTER OF STUDENTS



(Adapted from *Blueprints for Thinking in the Cooperative Classroom* by James Bellanca and Robin Fogarty, Skylight Publishing, © 1991.)

3. Students can line up in front of one another if they share the same opinions.
4. Students can remain neutral in front of the teacher if they don't know anything about the topic or if they don't have an opinion.
5. Call on students to explain why they feel the way they do about the topic. Only one person speaks at a time.
6. Everyone listens to all arguments.
7. After several students have expressed their opinions, give a signal to allow everyone to change positions in the human graph to represent their changed opinions on the topic.
8. Ask students why they changed their opinions.

The activity allows for a great deal of interaction and it allows students to use their facts and ideas to persuade others to side with their view. It also emphasizes effective listening skills and the importance of keeping an open mind. Students often change their position, literally and figuratively, by listening to arguments and reassessing their stance on a topic.



**REACHING CONSENSUS**

## **CONSENSUS MEANS . . . .**

- 1. All participants contribute resources. Encourage use of one another's resources and opinions. View differences as helpful rather than as a hindrance.**
- 2. Everyone can paraphrase the issue.**
- 3. Everyone has a chance to describe their feelings about the issue.**
- 4. Those who continue to disagree indicate publicly that they are willing to go along for an experimental try for a prescribed period of time.**
- 5. All share in the final decision.**

## CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

1. Consensus is an effective decision-making process. When consensus is reached, the group has achieved synergy -- the group outperforms the individual.
2. There are guidelines to follow when reaching consensus. (See "Consensus-Building Tips")
3. Several studies have shown that training in consensus decision making will increase the productivity of groups.
4. Reaching a consensus takes time -- especially in the beginning. It is much slower than delegation of responsibility or majority vote. However, once trust is achieved, the decision-making time may equal that of groups that vote.
5. Consensus decision making is most powerful when there are no correct answers. It improves our communication with others, allows the group to use all its resources, and builds commitment to decisions.

## Guidelines for Consensus Decision Making

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4. Seek out differences of opinion. They are natural and expected. Disagreements can help the ultimate decision.
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(Johnson and Johnson, 1975)

## CONSENSUS-BUILDING PHRASES

- Let's begin by getting a reaction from everyone in the group.
- Let me summarize what I hear you saying.
- Are we all comfortable with this recommendation?
- Let me repeat what I think I heard you say.
- Let me ask you . . .
- Can everyone live with this decision?
- Is anyone uncomfortable with this recommendation?
- Does everyone feel like they have had the opportunity to express an opinion? Let me see if I can pull together a recommendation.
- Let's take five minutes to reevaluate our positions and prepare a statement in writing to share with others.
- Let's ponder this question over night and discuss it when we are fresh in the morning.

## CONSENSUS-BUILDING TIPS \*

1. Review the definition of consensus.
2. Ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of the issues.
3. Ask each member to state his or her opinion.
4. Create a compromise position. Ask everyone to react to it.
5. Provide private "think time" and begin discussing again.
6. Leave the issue and return to it later.
7. Assign a mini-task force to reach consensus. Include individuals who have the strongest views.
8. Organize small groups to reach consensus and then begin discussion again.
9. Create a contradictory statement to refocus the discussion and identify real concerns.
10. Ask another person to assume the role of facilitator
11. Leave it out -- with all this effort there may be no consensus to be reached.

\* Facilitators may use these strategies as needed to lead a group to a consensus decision.

National Staff Development Council

## CONSENSUS IS . . .

- A general agreement
- Built on trusting relationships
- Not forced
- Requires patience
- Achieved informally
- Easiest to reach when:
  - input is sought from each member
  - active listening occurs
  - quiet think time is used
  - breaks are taken when necessary
  - similarities and combinations are sought

# Consensus Building Leads To Win-Win Solutions

School teams can tackle tough issues effectively by using collaborative problem solving, or consensus building, and avoiding other decision-making methods that threaten to divide the group into happy "winners" and dissatisfied "losers."

The aim of collaborative problem solving is to bring all the people involved to a mutually satisfying position on the issue at hand. This process strengthens commitment and promotes ownership instead of leaving some people wondering whether the group values their opinions.

To reach consensus, members of a group must be committed to the task, and each must believe that his or her input and the input of others are important to help develop a strong solution.

Members of the group also must be willing to seek out differences of opinion instead of avoiding conflict, and each must be willing to stand up for his or her own opinion without arguing blindly for it.

According to David and Roger Johnson, authors of *Leading the Cooperative School*, consensus means the group agrees to what the decision ought to be. Joellen Killion, Staff Development Trainer in Adams County School District #12, recommends that each group take time to create its own definition for consensus. For one group an agreeable definition may be the highest level of agreement possible, whereas for another group it may be a decision everyone can live with and support when the meeting is over.

## Helpful strategies.

Several strategies can be useful during a meeting to facilitate the consensus process. After school teams have worked to reach consensus on a proposal, they might want to avoid a final "yes" or "no" vote by having each member respond to the proposal on the following 0-5 scale:

5. I believe this proposal is good, and enthusiastically endorse it. I would take the lead with implementation.
4. I feel this proposal has merit and will support its implementation.
3. I am weighing the advantages and disad-

## Decision-Making Methods & Outcomes

Method	Outcome
Executive Decision	Win/Lose
Majority Vote	Win/Lose
Consensus	Win/Win

vantages of this idea and believe it is worthy of a limited test.

2. I am not sure of the value of this, but am willing to support a limited pilot test.
  1. I am strongly opposed to this proposal, but will not exercise my veto power to prevent a pilot test.
  0. I am prepared to exercise my veto power.

Meeting leaders and facilitators find it useful to have several strategies to fall back on when a group experiences difficulty in achieving consensus. Stephanie Hirsh, Associate Director of the National Staff Development Council, offers the following consensus-building tips that groups may find useful.

### Clarify the definition of consensus.

Often groups lose sight of the definition they have agreed upon and some individuals continue to strive for their priority choice.

Ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of the issues under debate. Sometimes consensus cannot be achieved because individuals are arguing over different issues.

Ask each member to state his or her opinion and establish a compromise position based on these opinions. Begin the discussion again with the compromise position.

Provide private "think time" and begin the discussion again. There may be an individual in the group who can find the right

words if the discussion would shut down for just a few minutes.

### Leave the issue and return to it later.

When emotions are aroused, it may be easier to achieve consensus after a cooling off period is provided.

Assign a mini-task force to reach consensus. Include individuals who have the strongest opinions and one neutral person. This process can allow the group to continue its work while a smaller group works to a consensus position.

Organize a large group into small groups to reach consensus. Put each group's recommendations on display for the entire group to consider.

Change the facilitator. Sometimes the inability to achieve consensus is associated with the facilitator. Choosing another group member to facilitate may alter the individual's outlook and expedite the process.

Recognize when consensus cannot be achieved and have a process for moving on to the next issue. When consensus is not achieved it is often appropriate to return the proposal to the recommending group for more study and revision.

## TO DO

Post a list of strategies that can be used to facilitate consensus when your team seems stuck.

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# Methods of Decision-Making

<u>Method</u>	<u>Advantage</u>	<u>Disadvantage</u>
Decision by leader		
Reliance on expert member		
Decision by leader after seeking input from individual group members		
Decision by leader after group discussion		
Decision by leader to support or contradict committee decision		
Majority vote		
Two-thirds majority		
Nominal group process		
Consensus		

Source: Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, F., P. (1982). Joining Together. Group Theory and Group Skills. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., pp. 108 - 109

# A Consensus Process That Works

1. Pose the question, decision, or problem to the group.
2. Identify the parameters or values important to individuals.
3. Share pertinent information regarding the parameters.  
State reasons why the parameters should guide the response, choice, or solution.
4. Provide an opportunity for additional information to be gathered.  
(This usually means that you don't introduce and decide at the same meeting.)
5. Provide time for the group to generate possible "win-win" responses., decisions or solutions.
6. Go to Round #1.

# A Consensus Process That Works

## Round #1

1. Ask the group to signal their support for various options to determine how close the consensus is.
2. If it is close to unanimous the group may agree to stop at this point. One person can insist that the process continues.
3. Ask who cannot live with each option and ask those individuals to suggest alternatives and allow them to try to persuade others to agree with them.  
(Avoid history lessons, use I messages and active listening.)
4. Ask the group to signal again.
5. End of Round #1.

## A Consensus Process That Works

Round #2 -- Repeat the steps from round #1.

Go to the “Fall Back” Rounds

Round #3 -- Use the “Saturn Model” of consensus.

Use the process from Round #1 but only 80% of the group is required to make the decision.

Round #4 -- The decision is made by some other “fallback” model. e.g.

- a. democratic vote with a simple majority
- b. the chairperson, the principal, or the superintendent makes the decision.

# **Tools for Reaching Group Decisions**

## **Carousel/Graffiti Papers**

(Use to create thought and discussion/prevent mental shutdown)

## **Nominal Group Process**

(Use to gather and rank various solutions to a problem.)

## **Fist to Five**

(Use to poll the group's feelings at any point in the discussion.)

## **Brainstorming**

(Use to generate numerous ideas in a short period of time.)

## **Sorting**

(Use to narrow brainstormed lists to a workable number of ideas)

## **Clustering**

(Use to merge small-group ideas into a total group product.)

## **Spend A Buck**

(Use to provide a ranking system.)

## **The 1 - 3 - 6 Technique**

(Use to obtain information when group members are reluctant to speak or when some group members tend to dominate. This is an easy way to prioritize issues in a relatively short time.)

## **The Fish Bowl**

(Use to discuss the ideas generated in small groups in a large group setting.)

## **Silent Consensus**

(Use this as a way to help a group begin planning projects or goals.)

## **A Tree Diagram**

(Use to help move goals to implementation.)

## **Synectics-like Process**

(Use to generate new ideas, to break paradigms, and to find solutions when there appear to be none)

# Carousel/Graffiti Papers

1. Divide the group into smaller groups of 3-5 people per group.
2. Place one piece of chart paper on the wall for each of the smaller groups.
3. Setup a set of "rounds" in which each group addresses a different question each round and records the response on a piece of chart paper.
4. The smaller groups rotate from one piece of chart paper to the next each round.

Possible questions include:

1. What is its definition?
2. How would you clarify the definition stated?
3. What are two concerns or burning questions you have?
4. How would you respond to the burning questions or concerns listed?
5. What good things could happen or result from what has been defined?
6. Draw a picture that represents the records from each round.

**Process Observer:** Have one person act as an observer who gives feedback to how the groups work together.

# **Nominal Group Technique**

(Approximately 45 minutes)

- 1. Start with a clearly written statement of the problem.**
- 2. Ask each person to spend ten minutes writing ideas and responses on cards or a worksheet.**
- 3. Form groups of ten or fewer and have everyone report out, round robin, each person giving one idea. (Ideas may be clarified as you go or after all ideas are charted. Clarification is aimed at making the ideas understandable, not changing or eliminating them.)**
- 4. Ask participants in each group to list the best four, five, or six ideas on a separate chart.**
- 5. The large group then selects a final list and ranks the ideas.**

# **Sorting**

(approximately 10 minutes)

- 1. After brainstorming ways to accomplish a specific goal, post three large sheets of chart paper.**
  
- 2. Ask the group to “sort” the ideas into three categories:**
  - **“Quick Fixes” (those ideas that are important but can be accomplished quickly or by one individual);**
  - **“Out of Our Hands” (ideas that are not realistic given our present circumstances);**
  - **“Definite Possibilities” (the reset of the ideas).**
  
- 3. Concentrate future team efforts on the “Definite Possibilities list. Eliminate the “Out of Hands” list, but don’t ignore the ideas in the “Quick Fix” list, for they may be the source of early and easy successes. Individual volunteers may tackle those issues, freeing the group to address more complex ideas.**

# **Clustering**

(Approximately 40 minutes)

- 1. Ask small groups to brainstorm the solution to a problem or to generate goals on slips of paper (8 1/2" x 11" paper cut lengthwise works nicely, as do Post-It notes.) Each brainstormed idea should be written on a separate slip.**
- 2. After the small groups have completed brainstorming, ask one group to post one of their ideas on the wall. Ask other groups if they have any similar ideas and tape those slips directly beneath the first.**
- 3. Ask a second group to post another idea on the wall and again ask other groups to put similar ideas beneath this one. Continue categorizing the slips in this manner until all ideas are posted.**
- 4. Review the columns of ideas with the group and then ask them to label each of the categories. (The label should capture the essence of each cluster). Proceed with some type of ranking procedure, such as a variation of the Nominal Group Process or Spend a Buck.**

# **The 1 - 3 - 6 Technique**

(Approximately 35 minutes)

- 1. State the topic and allow two or three minutes for each person to list one or two ideas concerning the topic on a card.**
- 2. Form the participants into groups of three (either voluntary or assigned groups). The groups of three discuss the ideas of each person in the group and select one or two ideas that the group can support. This usually takes seven to ten minutes.**
- 3. Once each group has selected their priorities, they should join another group to form a group of six. Again, the goal is to discuss the choices and choose the best one or two items to represent this group of six.**
- 4. Ideas from the groups of six are charted for everyone to see. Every person is given five sticker dots and must choose what he or she believes are the best alternatives. No more than two dots may be placed on one alternative.**

# **Fish Bowl**

(Approximately 30-60 minutes depending upon topic)

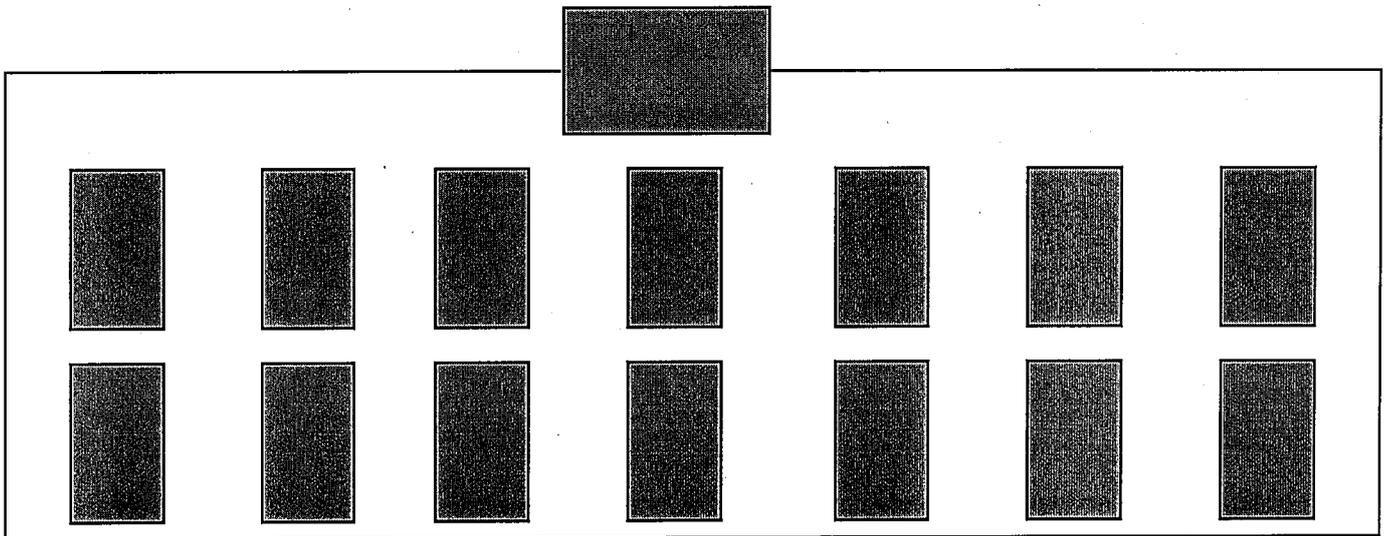
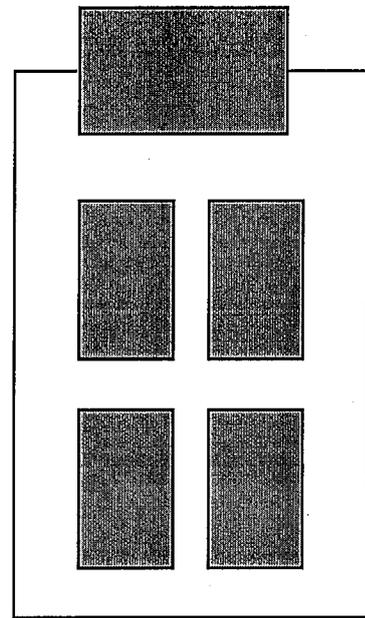
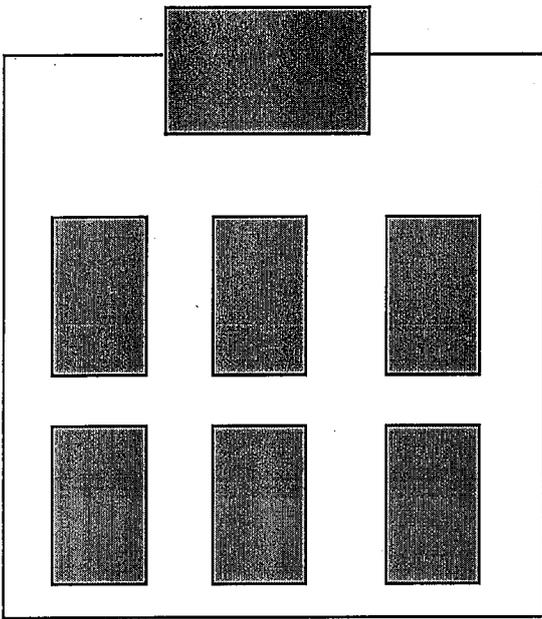
- 1. Form a circle of chairs in the middle of the room (one chair per group plus one additional chair).**
- 2. Ask each small group to elect a spokesperson who they believe will adequately express their opinions and sentiments. These spokespersons sit in the chairs in the circle.**
- 3. The persons in the circle of chairs participate in the discussion or negotiate for a possible solution to the the problem. The remainder of the participants observe and are not allowed to interject their opinions. If the observers feel that something is being overlooked, they may temporarily sit in the empty chair and participate in the discussion. Once they have made their point, however, they must return to the outside circle to free the empty chair.**

# **Silent Consensus**

(Approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours)

- 1. Establish a clear question that will generate diverse responses.**
- 2. Brainstorm responses and record all ideas on Post-It notes or cards (follow hints for brainstorming).**
- 3. Randomly place the Post-It notes or cards on chart paper, a chalkboard, a tabletop, or other flat surface.**
- 4. Push for breakthrough thinking, then end with verbal brainstorming.**
- 5. Ask participants to *silently* sort random ideas into categories by placing like ideas in the same area.**
- 6. Participants continue moving and removing Post-It notes or cards.**
- 7. Consensus is reached when no one moves any more notes or cards.**
- 8. Ask participants to develop a category statement that describes the essence of the ideas in each category, and place this statement at the top of each category, as shown in the attached diagram.**
- 9. Ask participants to prioritize categories.**

# Silent Consensus



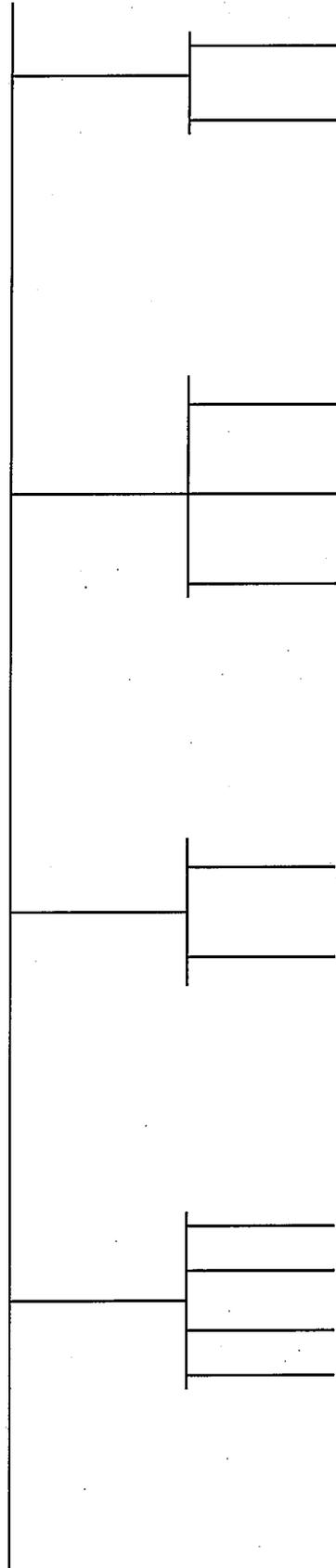
# **A Tree Diagram**

(Approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours)

- 1. Place a goal statement to the extreme left center of a piece of chart paper.**
- 2. Ask the group, “What tasks do we need to address to accomplish this goal?”**
- 3. Write answers to this question on Post-It notes placed to the right of the goal statement (see attached diagram).**
- 4. Ask the following question of each task:  
“What activities, projects, or processes need to be accomplished to achieve this target demonstration?”**
- 5. Write answers to this question on Post-It notes placed to the right of each task.**
- 6. Assign each of the activities, projects, and processes generated to a person who will assume responsibility for completing the task.**
- 7. Timelines for completion should also be added.  
(A computerize project manager, like Microsoft Project is an excellent way to manage the tasks)**

# A Tree Diagram

Goal



# **Spend A Buck**

(Approximately 15 minutes)

- 1. Distribute 3" x 5" cards to participants and ask them to write each predetermined issue or category on a card. Each participant will need as many cards as there are issues.**
- 2. When they have finished, inform them that they have one dollar to spend. Their task is to determine which idea or ideas are most important and then divide their money accordingly. Participants write on each card how many cents they are willing to spend on that item.**
- 3. Remind participants that no one can spend more than one dollar.**
- 4. Collect cards and tabulate.**

# **Fist to Five**

(Approximately 3 to 5 minutes)

**When asked to show a fist to five, participants show:**

- **Fist** - **Absolutely not, strongly disagree**
- **One Finger** - **No, disagree**
- **Two Fingers** - **Much prefer other choices**
- **Three Fingers** - **Neutral**
- **Four Fingers** - **Yes, agree**
- **Five Fingers** - **Absolutely, strongly agree**

# Synectics

(Approximately 1 - 1 1/2 hours)

- 1. One member of the group presents a problem and the other members of the group listen and record their thoughts on paper. (Note: a large group may be organized into smaller groups before beginning synectics. (Then use a variation of The 1 -3 -6 Technique.)**
- 2. Each member of the group describes what would occur if the perfect solution were found.**
- 3. The group is asked to take an imaginary side trip that is only remotely related to the problem. (Often times group members are asked to compare their organization or the problem with something very different to break paradigms. For example, how is school like an omelet?)**
- 4. Ask the team to “force-fit” solutions by taking the ideas generated in step #3, above and creating a possible solution to the problem identified in step #1.**
- 5. First record the parts that are consistent with the perfect solutions described in step #2, above. Then identify the crazy parts.**
- 6. Select one or two ideas the group can support and continue The 1 -3 -6 Technique.**