

## What is Consensus?

Consensus is a group process where the input of everyone is carefully considered and an outcome is crafted that best meets the needs of the group. It is a process of synthesizing the wisdom of all the participants into the best decision possible at the time. The root of consensus is the word consent, which means to give permission to. When you consent to a decision, you are giving your permission to the group to go ahead with the decision. You may disagree with the decision, but based on listening to everyone else's input, all the individuals agree to let the decision go forward, because the decision is the best one the entire group can achieve at the current time.

The heart of consensus is a cooperative intent, where the members are willing to work together to find the solution that meets the needs of the group. The cooperative nature of consensus is different mindset from the competitive nature of majority voting. In a consensus process the members come together to find or create the best solutions by working together. Key attributes to successful participation include humility, willingness to listen to others and see their perspectives, and willingness to share your own ideas but not insist they are the best ones.

## What consensus is not

It is not unanimous agreement. Participants may consent to an decision they disagree with, but recognize meets the needs of the group and therefore give permission to.

## Why use consensus?

### Consensus gathers the experiences from the whole group

Within every member of any group there is a lifetime of experiences and knowledge. Consensus is a way to tap the collective knowledge of the group to craft the best decision possible.

### Consensus builds relationships between people

In a consensus process, people extend their relationships to each other as part of the listening and talking process. Consensus takes time and effort, honest communication and a willingness to trust the relationship. The communication of ideas and feelings, and the empathetic listening, builds trust and bonds between group members. By encouraging shared leadership and participation, consensus empowers all the members of a group to make the best decision. By working together to clarify ideas and proposals, the members build trust and communication skills that continue to grow and expand as the group works together. The longer the group works together, the better they get. The synergy of building collaborative agreements also builds a strong sense of commitment to the group and its mission, and a sense of belonging and commitment among the members.

### Consensus moves toward doing what is best for the common interest

In the process of defining individual boundaries and issues within the group context, individual desires and boundaries are tested against the best interests of the group. The key element of making consensus work is a commitment by each individual to honor the best interests of the group. As people work through issues, they have their own needs reflected back to them against the context of the larger group needs. This encourages them to consider other interests beyond just their own.

### Consensus agreements need less enforcement

Once an agreement is made, and everyone gives their consent to it, the agreement is backed by the relationship. If you honor your relationship to the group, your respect for the agreements which you participated in guides you to follow the agreement. Agreements made by consensus are self enforced and rarely require anything more than a reminder of the agreement to ensure compliance. Consensus

means everyone has given permission for the agreement to go ahead, and by not following through on the agreement, you jeopardize your relationship and your sense of community. If the desire for community relationship is strong, then the decisions made by the groups consensus will also be strong. There is no subgroup of angry, outvoted participants that will work to undermine the decision or ignore it.

### **Ingredients of successful consensus process**

#### **Facilitation.**

Some of the group members have an understanding and the skills for running a consensus process.

#### **Participants understand the process.**

The participants have a basic understanding of what consensus is, how the group applies it, and what the expectations of the group are.

#### **Participation.**

Group members need to be present for the discussion part of the decision so your ideas can be shared, and you hear the other perspectives and ideas.

#### **Cooperation.**

A willingness among the participants to trust the wisdom of the group and to cooperate.

#### **A safe place to talk about the decision at hand.**

The group environment needs to be comfortable so that individuals will freely share their ideas and thoughts, fears, opinions and experiences.

#### **Ideas are heard and acknowledged.**

Each participant feels that their contributions are considered. They might not be part of the final solution but the ideas were fairly and equally considered.

#### **Decisions are Documented**

When the group agrees, the agreement is captured in writing so the group can refer to it later.

#### **The process is reviewed**

At some interval, the decision process is evaluated. Meeting elements and decision processes that are working are identified to be continued. Things which are not working well are examined and changed.

### **A Three stage process for consensus**

Consensus decision process typically goes through three stages: Discussion, Proposal, Modification.

The discussion stage is where the group meets and the topic is widely discussed. People freely share thoughts, opinions, feelings, ideas and react to each others contributions. This is the heart of consensus, because it is where you come together and synthesize all the thoughts. This is also where your opinions, if you have any, are subject to change as you listen and hear other perspectives. When a person misses this stage, they are seriously handicapped in their ability to help the group, because they did not hear any other perspectives to help them modify their own thinking, thus they are limited to only their own perspective.

The proposal stage comes after the discussion stage. The thoughts and ideas are synthesized into one or more proposal statements. This is where a good facilitator adds a great value, because they look for the common areas of understanding and agreement and bring those out and summarize them for the group. As the common ground emerges from the discussion, or as common ground is created, it is captured in writing.

The modification stage is where the summary proposal is tested and modified to meet the needs of the group. In some cases this is done at the same meeting, by adjusting the working draft of the proposal by including, removing, or modifying the language of the proposal. In other situations this is done weeks or months after the meeting, as the decision is implemented and new things are learned from the experiences, and so the decision is reviewed and amended as new information becomes available. Or in larger groups, a small group takes the discussion information, creates proposals and comes back at a later time with a proposal for modification.

### **How do you know you have consensus?**

When all the participants give permission for the proposal to go ahead, consensus is reached. Typically the facilitator will ask the group for an affirmation of the proposal and at that time everyone signals their consent.

### **Blocking decisions**

After the modification stage, if the final solution is not acceptable as being the best interest for the group, then it is the duty of the participants to not give permission to the group to move forward at this time. If the modification process is done well, blocking is almost never used. The facilitator should clarify with the blocker, how the group interests is not being served by moving ahead with the proposal.

One of the key elements here, is that blocking is done for the best interests of the group, not to serve personal likes and dislikes. Remember, even if you disagree with a decision, you can give permission to the group to proceed in order for the group to learn things. Often a group must make decisions with out all the information needed or all issues resolved. Moving forward is sometimes the way to understand what will happen as you implement a decision.

### **Standing aside**

A common problem in consensus groups is where there is a values clash between personal and group values. For example, say it is a personal value of some group members to honor all life, but this value is not held by the group as whole. This value comes up during a discussion about vegetarianism at meals. In this case, since the groups stated values are not supporting the personal values, rather than expecting the whole group to become vegetarian to support a personal value, the person stands aside and does not participate in the activity that they find offensive to their values. Often personal values can be included in a solution that works for the group. Where it can't, the values are respected by allowing the individual to stand aside. Stand asides should be noted in the minutes so it is clear that the person standing aside should not be asked to implement or participate in the decision due to their values.

### **Typical problems groups have using consensus**

#### **Lack of participation**

For consensus to work, a large majority of the membership, ideally a minimum of 80%, needs to be present for the discussion phase of the decision. Those not present during this phase need to be brought

up to speed. Some consensus groups sign up to be buddies for those not present, and the buddies job is to convey the perspectives of the meeting to the person not present. When half or less of a group participates, the group misses too much perspectives and decisions end up poorly made, and often unsupported by those that missed the discussion.

### **People who miss the discussion but come in on the proposal**

When people miss the discussion, and its perspectives, they may bring up the same conversations and points that the rest of the group has already been through. If this occurs regularly, people may become resentful of those that don't participate in the discussions, or may even stop coming to meetings because they end up rehashing the same discussions over and over again. Many consensus groups do not allow those not present for the discussion stage to be part of the proposal and modification stages, or have special considerations for those that did not participate in the discussion. Participation in the full cycle of the consensus process is a important for a successful consensus decision.

### **The meeting environment discourages contributions**

If there is a lot of cross talking, or loud rebuttals, or sarcastic tones it will keep some people from sharing their ideas. In the worse cases people are personally insulted, belittled, or laughed at. It is unlikely in such an environment people would feel good about being part of the process and willingly contribute ideas that might add value but run counter to the ideas of others in the group. If there is a strong hierarchy in the group, for example a dominate person such as a supervisor, it can affect peoples willingness to bring up all the ideas, especially those that might run counter to the bosses opinions.

### **Poor communication of decisions, agendas and information**

If you don't know when or where the meeting is, you can't attend. If you don't hear about the agenda of the meeting, you have no time to think about it before the meeting. Some people do need time to get think, they don't do well having to process ideas and information immediately.

### **Everyone consents but puts no energy behind it**

A decision is reached, everyone consents to it, but it never gets done. This occurs when the during the modification stage of the proposal, the "who will do this work" question does not get asked or resolved. At the end of the modification process a plan can be added for who does the work and how they will be held accountable for the work.

### **An individual inappropriately uses blocking**

The groups interests are not being served by a block, for example a person blocks a decision from their own preferences or as a power play over the group. Or a personal threatens to block even before the discussion phase is held. This is where the facilitator needs to help the group negotiate by defining what is the real issue. Often there are hidden issues unresolved which are driving the individual to block. In the final case, a majority vote can override an inappropriate use of blocking.

## Group member contributions

How to be an effective member of a collaborative process

### Know yourself

#### Your personal behavior has impacts on the group

Every person in a collaborative process effects the process. Think about how you impact the group. What assets do you bring? What liabilities? Think about how you might work to keep your liabilities in check as the group works together. How can you remind yourself not to do that behavior that causes problems?

#### Personality Style

Every person has a Personality style. In it's simplest form you can examine whether you are task or feelings oriented. Do you want to get things done, or do you want to hear about how people feel about it? Maybe you don't know and so you might ask how others perceive you. How you relate and react to people that have opposite needs than you has a great impact on the groups work.

#### Hot buttons

Hot buttons are those things that get an instant angry response. They often come from events in our lives that shaped our values and are not often things we can control. What kinds of things make you mad? Remember, a skillful antagonist might be able to manipulate you by pushing your hot buttons to get you to react. Know them and be aware of your response when those issues come up.

#### Physical factors

When you are hungry do you get irritable? If you are tired do you have less patience than normal? If you have an injury or soreness that is hurting you does it change how you react to others? You can defuse this often just by admitting it out loud to the group. "When I get hungry I get cranky. I am sorry if I am not working well right now, but its right before lunch which is my worse time"

#### Emotional state

When something is causing you distress you are in an abnormal emotional state and like the physical factors, this may cause atypical behaviors. When you can do so, alert the group to your distress and warn them of potential consequences. "I am feeling sad today because my dad is really sick and I was up late last night worrying about him. I apologize if I am less patient than usual for today's meeting"

## Perspective

How you see the world may not be how it really is. The way you do things, is not necessarily the right way, even if that's how your momma taught you. It is often difficult for us to see in our viewpoints and judgments in the many things we believe or take for granted because of cultural and family indoctrinations which have saturated us since our earliest childhoods. A classic example of this can be found in how clean people are about their houses or personal spaces. Some folks spend lots of time cleaning and putting their possessions in a very specific order. Other folks are much less orderly and spend little time cleaning. Most often this comes from the way your family lived and how you were raised. This difference is often a source of conflict as each cleanliness perspective views itself as being the "right way". If you view yourself as being right then those not like you must be wrong. This right and wrong judgmental thinking is often the root of conflicts within groups.

### **Identify your closures**

What things are you closed about? What ideas are you simply not going to accept? This closed mindedness comes from your personal values and its good to identify these and understand them. When these things become out of sync with the group you are in, it is very hard to continue working in that group. For example, a person that believes that all animal life is sacred, will not succeed well on a farm that slaughters its livestock.

### **Humility**

A key element to making consensus work is personal humility. By recognizing the limits of your own experiences you open the way to learn new things.

### **Over generalizing experiences**

It is easy to over generalize from experiences, for example, because you once had problems with a Ford brand of car, all Ford cars are lemons. This kind of over generalizing from experience inhibits your ability to see that experiences are not always repeated in the same way, with the same outcomes.

### **A perspectives test**

A good test for how open you are to another perspective is how well you can explain it to someone else with fairness and without making judgmental remarks or using negative tones.

## Meeting Actions

There are several behaviors which have been shown to be helpful to many collaborative groups. Each of these behaviors can be learned, practiced and form skill sets which members can be trained to excel at. It can be helpful to adopt these, and other helpful behaviors as group ground rules and post them to remind yourselves to follow them. A good facilitator can use such ground rules to intervene and help the group succeed.

### **Be a good listener**

Listen carefully and ask for clarification, especially about why people think or feel as they do. Never interrupt. Ask questions to clarify what the issue is and why is it an issue.

### **Be solution centered**

Don't just criticize, suggest solutions and ideas for solving problems. Be sure to state the problem clearly as you can before trying to apply solutions.

### **Use the right group**

Sometimes the wrong set of people spend a lot of time trying to solve a problem that is outside their scope of experience or expertise. Maybe a small group of experts might be better than the large group.

### **Be open to outcome**

Look fairly and equally at all the pros and cons of all ideas. Don't come with "THE PLAN" come with "an idea". Then see where the group expands it and be open to the change. Don't own ideas, give them away to the group. Don't lobby your idea, encourage the group to look at all the pros and cons. Don't set unnecessary limits.

### **Be concise**

Think out what you are going to say before you say it and then be brief. Don't ramble, don't repeat what others have said. If you think the same as someone else who has already spoken, then simply say, "I agree with \_\_\_".

### **Be patient**

Others may need more time to understand, or need more information. Consensus is NOT a fast decision making process. Be willing to let others have the time they need.

### **Take a dose of humility**

The answer that suits your needs does not mean it's the best answer for everyone, or that what meets your needs meets the needs of others. Learn to say to yourself: I might be wrong. Be willing to learn what lessons the group can teach you. Even if you are the expert.

### **Take ownership of your feelings and share them when it's needed**

If you feel unhappy, or uncomfortable say so and try to pinpoint why. Also don't forget to say you are happy or grateful as well.

### **Take a long term view**

Many decisions and proposals are learning experiences for things you have not yet done. If it does not work, you can change it later. Try things out. Experiment. Be willing to try on new ideas and processes. This is an adventure to be explored.

### **Learn when to let go**

Many things a group decides can be redone later. Don't get hung up on small details, let the decision go forward and then examine it later to see if your misgivings were justified or not.

**Use I statements to define your needs**

When you have things you want or need, tell the group what they are by using I statements such as “ I need covered parking because I have an old car that leaks”.

**Give the reasons behind your thinking**

Whenever you state an opinion, you can add valuable information by giving others the reasons for your opinion. Be open to questions and comments about your opinions.

**Ask for feedback**

Ask others to tell you what they think. Invite others to offer ideas and suggestions. Encourage folks to talk with you about things that you do that bother them.

**Clean up your messes**

When you say the wrong thing, or act in a way that hurts, angers or alienates others, talk later to discuss what happened and why with those who were affected.

**Intervene to help the group**

Even if you are not the facilitator, if you notice something is going well, complement the group or person. If things are not going right, try to state what you perceive to be happening and ask for feedback. “ It seems when ever we start talking about childcare, I hear angry tones in peoples statements” Does anybody else sense this?” Can we process this emotion to find out what’s behind it?”

**Do your homework**

Don’t wait until the meeting to get or give information. Call people, hold small gatherings, etc. Read everything you are given closely and think about it before the meeting.