

# Consensus Decision-Making: What It Is

(from the "Citizen Involvement Training Project", University of Massachusetts)

The use of consensus decision-making/problem-solving is a process that can be followed strictly or loosely depending upon your group and its needs. Success in using this method depends on people understanding it and their desire to use it. Consensus is something that can be used in all phases and activities of your group. It's a way of working together. In addition to the problem-solving method, it echoes a theme which should run through all groups - that of people having control over the decisions that affect them. This is what consensus attempts to achieve.

Consensus does not necessarily mean unanimity, where everyone is of one mind and in full agreement with a decision, although it may. Consensus happens more as a synthesis of ideas rather than one side winning. A unanimous decision is not the goal, but instead it aims at facilitating the expression of input and views from every member of the group.

In so doing, people feel that they have had a fair chance to be heard and that they have communicated with the group. Thus every member should be able to accept the decision of the group based on logic and practicality. If this is not so, then one person can foreseeably block the decision of the rest of the group. For, in consensus decision-making, the group can take no action that is not consented to by all members. In reality, what happens is that members use this right very sparingly.

Usually, someone who disagrees expresses him/herself in the following way:

*"I understand what the group wants to do, and although I don't agree, you've heard me out, and I can live with the decision."*

If someone strongly disagrees all of the way with the decision and there is no way to overcome the objections, then no action is taken on the decision. Essentially, one firm "no" vote in consensus decision-making can halt a decision (as opposed to majority rule).

# Steps to Developing Consensus

Developing consensus, when decision-making or problem-solving, includes a number of steps which facilitate the process.

**STEP 1: Describe and define the problem,** situation, or issue that needs a decision. Do this in a way that not only gives a clear idea of what decision needs to be made, but also why it needs to be made, and how it relates to the objectives of the group. Many times problems about which decisions need to be made are complex. In this case, it is very helpful to write the components on flip chart or a blackboard. And, in fact, complex issues should have information handed out prior to a meeting and be listed on the agenda.

Experience has shown that some members won't read the information until the meeting has started. It's unfair to others in the group to allow precious time to be spent in doing what should have been done before the meeting. The facilitator should express this to the group as a whole and not to specific individuals. It is important to collect and present all of the relevant information so that the problem can be clearly defined and understood by everyone. Many times decisions can be made at that point for minor issues. Yet, it helps if the group is prepared to postpone a decision for which not enough information is at hand. It is helpful to choose a specific individual to be responsible for gathering that information, and to have the recorder place it on the next agenda.

**STEP 2: Brainstorm a list of all possible alternatives.** Brainstorming means listing on flip chart or a blackboard all of the possible alternatives and ideas that can be generated by a group in a few minutes (without editing, discussion or rejection of any ideas). Ideas are listed by the facilitator and discussion of each is held till the group runs dry.

One way to prevent the more powerful or vocal members from dominating is to go around the meeting taking only one alternative or idea from each person. Then go around again and again until everyone feels comfortable with the brainstorm list. This technique, of course, depends on the size of the group. In the case of a large group, the process can be decentralized, and a great deal of time saved by breaking into smaller groups which bring their brainstorms together at the end.

This step is one of the most important in the process, for it allows for participation and creativity from the entire group. It prevents the group from locking in to the first motion or proposal presented, and in the long-run saves time by (a) not discussing the good and bad points of poor solutions and, (b) not making a poor decision without adequate information and input from the whole group. This would create little desire to carry out the decision and in many cases, the time would need to be spent making a new decision.

**STEP 3: Review, change, consolidate, rewrite, and set priorities.** Going through the brainstorm list, and consolidating and revising the ideas, the group will be able to come up with a few good solutions. There is usually a relationship between various items on the list, and a little rewording can make most people happy.

It helps to prioritize - or at least select the top two or three that the group will deal with. This can be done by taking a "straw vote" where everyone gets to vote for his/her top three choices, and then listing the items in numerical order based on votes. This can save a good deal of time by setting aside solutions that no one supports (even if they suggested it). Or, it will make the group aware of the diversity between members.

In large groups, again, it may help to do this step in small groups, asking each group to return with the maximum of two to three solutions. When the whole group reconvenes, a tally can be made and the top solutions selected.

If, at this point, there is only one predominant solution, go on to the next step and make the decision.

If there is more than one solution strongly supported at this point, it would be helpful to repeat Step 2. One suggestion that might help at this point, that usually comes later, is to find out who will carry out the decision by when. This has many times eliminated a useful but impractical solution.

**STEP 4: Make a decision by consensus.** When a solution has been formulated, make sure that it is written so that everyone can see it (flip chart, blackboard) for the decision may still need a few alterations or final touches.

There may be members present who have not indicated any interest in the decision, and have been given ample opportunity to participate. You may want to go on with the decision, although in small groups, it helps to check out the reason for the lack of response.

After an adequate discussion - if this has not already occurred - the facilitator asks if there is any opposition to the decision. If there is no strong opposition to the decision, it can be adopted. Some more traditional groups may feel the need to vote at this point, but usually it's just a formality since everyone has participated in every part of the decision-making.

It is at this point where some groups will differ from others. The difference lies in the commitment to achieving consensus. Some groups emphasize the point that "the group takes no action that is not consented to by all members." It is extremely important for a group about to partake in an action to know that everyone has been able to express themselves and have come to a personal agreement with the group decision.

In this case, any one person can state opposition and this will block the group's adoption of the decision. (There are ways to express an objection without blocking the group from adopting the decision - see **Guidelines and Hints**.)

If there is an objection blocking the decision, it must be worked out before the decision can be made. If the objection-blocking consensus can be satisfied with the approval of the other members, and if there are no other objections, consensus will have been reached.

In some instances, all objections will not be satisfied. Then the group would continue to uphold the last consensus decision that relates to the problem. This will continue until the group can come up with a decision that is not blocked. If there is no prior decision that relates to the problem, then the consensus is to take no action as a group.

In addition to the way mentioned earlier for objecting to a proposal without blocking consensus, these methods may be used:

**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 block others from doing it.”)

**Withdrawing from the group.**

**STEP 5: Implementing the decision: who will do what by when and how?** While making a collective decision in which everyone participates is a major part of consensus, it is a waste of energy without this step. Everything must be laid out now - after the decision has been made and before the people go home. This means the tasks must be clearly defined, the people who will do them clarified, as well as the dates they will be done by and the way they shall use to accomplish it.

**STEP 6: Evaluate the results of the decision.** Every major decision should be evaluated in order to set new direction, as well as for group accountability. *Did we do what we said we would do? What things happened that were not anticipated in the planning? How would we do it if we had to do it again?* This can be a simple or a complex matter for your group - as is the whole process. Modify everything to fit **your** situation.

# Guidelines and Hints to Help in the Process of Consensus Decision-Making

1. **Modify the problem-solving/decision-making model to fit your own group**, its needs and the type or importance of the decision being made. Reserve the full process for complex and important issues and don't overburden members by breaking into subgroups to decide if wine or beer should be served at a banquet.
2. **Think about using committees** to gather and present the relevant information for a particular decision - it saves time.
3. **Attempt to satisfy objections.** In this process, there is a great deal of power invested in every member. That power must be used sparingly and in a responsible manner. Members should only use their blocking power for "serious, principled objection". It's better to find ways to satisfy objections than to block consensus.
4. **Beware of the time pressures** - plan ahead for enough time to develop consensus on vital decisions. Be willing to extend the time or postpone a decision till the next meeting.
5. **Be aware of members who have difficulty expressing their ideas**, and have facilitators help out. Especially be aware of members with linguistic and cultural differences and support them.
6. **Always be looking for the common ground** where members can begin to agree on something and work from there.
7. **Don't take the attitude that a meeting is a competitive event** where someone has to win and someone has to lose. When a stalemate occurs, look for the next most acceptable alternative and work from there.
8. **Avoid arguing for your point of view.** Present your views clearly and logically and then listen to what others have to say.
9. **Don't resort to conflict reducers**, such as bargaining, majority votes or flipping a coin. Work it out.
10. **Don't be afraid of differences.** It's natural for people to disagree and have differing points of view. In fact, try to encourage all sides of an issue to be expressed. The more information and input, the better the decision.
11. **Don't change your mind or withdraw an objection simply to stay away from conflict.** Beware of group conformity and the pressures for agreement and harmony. Watch out for an important decision that comes too easily - be sure everyone understands the implication of the decision in the same way.
12. **Irreconcilable differences can be worked out** if people talk freely and honestly and try to listen and understand all sides, including their own.

# Summary:

## Consensus Decision-Making

In summary, the steps in the process of consensus decision-making and problem-solving look like this:

1. Describe and define the problem, situation, or issue that needs a decision.
2. Brainstorm a list of all possible alternatives.
3. Review, change, consolidate, rewrite and set priorities.
4. Make a decision using consensus.
5. Implement the decision: Who will do What by When and How.
6. Evaluate the results of the decision.

Using the consensus process, your group effort could result in a higher quality of decisions being made and carried through in the long run. It could maximize the participation of all members in the decision-making process and help to lessen the impact of “the leader” and “tyranny by the majority,” as well as help to eliminate conflict, and get action from members on decisions **they** made.

Following are some reference sources about consensus decision-making:

- Rules for Reaching Consensus: A Modern Approach to Decision-Making. (by Steven Saint and James R. Lawson)
- Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making (by Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger)
- [www.coreroi.com/consensus.htm](http://www.coreroi.com/consensus.htm)
- [www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Consensus.html](http://www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Consensus.html)
- [www.reclaiming.org/about/consensus/invert.html](http://www.reclaiming.org/about/consensus/invert.html)
- [www.casagordita.com/consensus.htm](http://www.casagordita.com/consensus.htm)
- [www.spokane-county.wsu.edu/family/consen.htm](http://www.spokane-county.wsu.edu/family/consen.htm)
- [www.ndu.edu/ndu/inss/books/strategic/pt3ch11/html](http://www.ndu.edu/ndu/inss/books/strategic/pt3ch11/html)
- [www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/dc/activism/condecis.htm](http://www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/dc/activism/condecis.htm)
- [www.unb.ca/web/enviro/cdm/cdmread2.htm](http://www.unb.ca/web/enviro/cdm/cdmread2.htm)
- [www.epa.gov/commonsense/final/consens101.htm](http://www.epa.gov/commonsense/final/consens101.htm)
- [www.ncrve.berkeley.edu/CW63/BuildingConsensus.html](http://www.ncrve.berkeley.edu/CW63/BuildingConsensus.html)
- [www.zmag.org/forums/consenthread.htm](http://www.zmag.org/forums/consenthread.htm)