

Key Points of Consensus Decision Making

The most common way of making a decision in organisations is a majority vote; a competitive process that can result in a decision that lacks the support of a large proportion of the group. As an alternative, consensus decision-making uses the best thinking and creativity of the entire group to come up with the most appropriate decision for the group. A decision that everyone will be committed to making happen.

The consensus model actively encourages input from all group members, at all stages of the decision-making process. The thoughts, ideas, concerns and reservations of individuals are used to create a proposal that best represents the values and opinions of the group as a whole. This contrasts with majority voting, as individuals are forced to choose one of a number of proposals, when perhaps none of them represent his or her position on the matter. Group members have less input because their choices are limited to the options that have been presented for voting.

The consensus model evolved from a process adopted by the Quakers, an unorthodox religious group, and adapted by feminist groups, peace and environmental movements from the 1960's onwards. Consensus decision-making is an inclusive, positively oriented process that doesn't competitively adopt one alternative over another. In this way, the social cohesion (good vibes?), effective functioning and productivity of the group is maintained. This is seen as more important than any given decision.

Principles

Inclusive – as many group members as possible are included in the process.

Participatory – the input of every individual should be actively sought.

Cooperative – participants should strive to reach the best possible decision for the group and all of its members, rather than just a majority.

Solution-oriented – the group should be prepared to accept differences of opinion, using compromise and other techniques to find a common ground acceptable to all.

Roles

Group Convenor – responsible for the basic functioning of the group, ensuring meetings happen, distributing agendas, minutes and updates, and maintaining email lists and

communication. This may also include meeting organisation – preparing agendas, filing or posting minutes, setting venue & sourcing equipment, food or refreshments.

The Convenor doesn't have to cover all this personally, but they should delegate tasks and are responsible for ensuring that they are all done. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of time is often demanded of the person responsible and this role must be rotated after an agreed period of time, to avoid burn-out.

Facilitator, Co-facilitator – Responsible for the smooth running of meetings, keeps discussion on topic and to the agenda, summarises discussion into proposals, and ensures that the Minute-taker is keeping up. The facilitator makes sure that the consensus decision-making process is followed, explains this to new members and reminds group members who may be stepping outside of the principles.

Notetaker or Secretary – Records minutes during meeting (and compiles them afterwards), brings minutes to next meeting, records discussion and action summary (who will do what and when), reads action summary at the end of meeting, can call a halt to the meeting to catch up with the minutes.

Some description must be included in the discussion summary so that it can be seen how the group arrived at its final decision.

Timekeeper and Speaking-List Keeper* - Makes sure that the meeting follows the agreed timing of agenda items (advising group where necessary), and maintains a list of speakers to ensure that no one takes more than a fair share of the group's attention.

Empath or Vibewatch* – Keeps an eye on the emotional climate and interpersonal relations during passionate discussion.

Devils Advocate – Has the responsibility of brainstorming and voicing any and all criticisms, issues and concerns possible for any proposed course of action. This helps to break the silence when concerns exist but for some reason are not being voiced.

*Could be included as part of the facilitator/co-facilitator role.

Regular cycling of these roles between members of the group is important to avoid the real or perceived build-up of power by any individual or sub-group.

Process

As a starting point, the group must openly encourage input from everyone present. Input might be an idea, support for an idea, a concern or even healthy criticism. All members of the group must actively listen to each speaker and follow the direction of the facilitator if they wish to speak.

Following the introduction of an agenda item by the facilitator, group members will discuss the topic including relevant issues that may influence an appropriate course of action. If a proposal has not already emerged in discussion then the facilitator will try to summarise the group's input into a proposal. Then the facilitator will test for consensus by calling for any concerns or reservations with the proposal, rather than asking if everyone agrees.

If no issues are raised, consensus has been achieved and the group can move its attention onto the next item on the agenda. However if there are concerns raised, more discussion should follow and those concerns, where possible, should be incorporated into a revised or completely new proposal for testing again.

It should be noted that full consensus for a decision may not be possible and does not have to be achieved for every item on the agenda. It can be a long process to iron-out some concerns and it makes sense to spend greater time and resources on more important issues. If time doesn't permit any further discussion, the group may choose to defer the decision to a later meeting or approve the decision on a two-thirds or three-quarter majority. In this case, at least an effort has been made to address concerns and improve the quality of the decision.

Issues to be aware of...

Time - As mentioned above consensus can be a time consuming process especially when individuals' values differ from those of the group as a whole. Set time limits for each agenda item at the beginning of a meeting.

Groupthink – Individuals should not withdraw their opposition or keep their concerns to themselves simply to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation. This tendency to try to maintain group cohesiveness is called groupthink. Be suspicious when agreement comes too easily – consider the value of the Devil's Advocate role.

Individual vs Group Values - Group members must find a balance between persisting with their own concerns, and allowing a decision to pass based on the overall group's values and position on the matter.

Independent Facilitation – Facilitators must keep their own opinions out of the consensus process to avoid influencing the group’s decision when they are in this position of power. The benefit of having co-facilitators is that if one wishes to express their opinions in a discussion, the other can take over the facilitation role for that decision.

Further information online...

The Change Agency

http://www.thechangeagency.org/01_cms/details.asp?ID=58

Friends of the Earth Australia

<http://www.foe.org.au/about-us/consensus-decision-making>

Consensus decision making - DRM Associates

<http://www.npd-solutions.com/consensus.html>

Seeds for Change

<http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/consens>

Australian Greens Victoria

<http://www.vic.greens.org.au/about/consensus>

South Australia Community Gardening Resource Kit

http://www.canh.asn.au/community_gardening/sa-cgkit-Decision.html

Notes on Consensus decision-making

<http://www.vernalproject.org/papers/process/ConsensNotes.pdf>

The Tree Group

<http://treegroup.info/topics/handout-consensus.pdf>