

Consensus:

A Brief Introductory Guide

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By consensus nerds in central Cascadia

What Is Consensus?

Consensus is a process for group decision-making. It is a democratic method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust.

Consensus vs. Voting

Voting is a means by which we choose one alternative from several. Consensus, on the other hand, is a process of synthesizing many diverse elements together. Voting assumes that people are always competitive and that agreement can only be reached through compromise. Consensus assumes that people are willing to agree with each other, and that in such an atmosphere, conflict and differences can result in creative and intelligent decisions. Another important assumption made in consensus is that the process requires everyone's participation, in speaking and in listening. No ideas are lost, each member's input is valued as part of the solution, and feelings are as important as facts in making a decision. It is possible for one person's insights or strongly held beliefs to sway the entire group, but participation should always remain equal.

What Does Consensus Mean?

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. Since our society provides very little training in these areas, we have to unlearn many behavior patterns in order to practice good consensus process. Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is the most efficient way to accomplish something, or that they are absolutely sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, no one felt that her or his position on the matter wasn't considered carefully. Hopefully, everyone will think it is the best decision; this often happens because, when consensus works properly, collective intelligence does come up with better solutions than could individuals.

The Process of Consensus Agreement, at least informally, should be sought on every aspect of group meetings, including the agenda, the times the group should take for each item, and the process the group should use to work through its tasks. The following is an outline of formal consensus, the process a group uses to come to agreement on a particular course of action. First, the problem should be clearly stated. This might take some discussion, in order for

together in the middle of the group and hash things out freely for a designated period of time while the group observes them. The people in the middle don't come to any decisions, but the fishbowl gives everyone a chance to hear the debate without involving the whole group; often hidden solutions are revealed.

“Devil’s Advocate” Questions

Particularly challenging or questions are proposed to the group. These can take many forms, and are best used when conversation has become stagnant.

Visual Aids

Visual aids can be extremely useful for particularly stagnating issues. Some ideas include: Advantage/disadvantage charts, visible notes, or goal/priority setting notes.

Charette

In a charette, you break down into small groups that all work on the same issue. If there are deep divisions in the overall group, you try to represent the factions in the small groups. Then each small group comes back with a report or proposal, and the whole group can go through and say, Oh, we like this part of Group A's proposal, and this part of Group B's, etc. I've seen this used very successfully in writing up a statement of principles of unity, for example. It's helpful when you actually need to get something done.

Process/Empowerment Tools

- Participation equalizers (pebbles, etc)
- Active listening in pairs
- Support groups/caucuses
- Feeling sharing
- Role-plays

agreement has already been reached. It is the responsibility of everyone in the group to keep the discussion to a minimum if quick action is called for. If your point has already been made by someone else, don't restate it. A calm approach and a clear desire to come to an agreement quickly can help the process. Don't let anxiety overwhelm your trust in each other or your purpose in the action. Strong objections should be limited to matters of principle.

Tools for Consensus Process

Check-ins

Usually used for introductions, but besides names, people can tell the group how they're feeling (anxious, silly, tired), or what they expect from the meeting (certain decisions, certain length). A group might adjust their agenda according to the emotional state or practical needs revealed by the group during check-in.

Go-rounds

Each person is given a certain amount of time to speak on a particular subject, without having to comment on other contributions, or defend their own. Go-rounds should be used at the beginning of discussion on an issue, if only a few people are doing the talking, or if the group seems stuck for good solutions.

Brainstorms

Brainstorms are a short time during which people can call out suggestions, concerns, or ideas randomly, sometimes without being called on. Helps to get out a lot of ideas fast, stimulates creative thinking. It's not a time for discussion or dialogue. Someone can write down brainstorm ideas on a large sheet of paper so everyone can see and remember them.

Breaking up into small groups

Depending on the size of the original group, this could be from three to a whole affinity group. A small group gets a chance to talk things over for a specified amount of time before reporting back to the large group. This gives people a chance to really listen to each other and express themselves, and is very useful when a group seems unable to come to consensus. In a spokes council meeting, breaking up into affinity groups to discuss issues or to make specific decisions is often necessary.

Fishbowl

In a large group, or a small group which seems hopelessly divided, a fishbowl helps to make clear what things are at stake in particular positions. A few people, particularly those who feel strongest about an issue, sit down

the group to identify what needs to be solved. Then discussion should take place about the problem, so the group can start working towards a proposal. The biggest mistake people make in consensus is to offer proposals too soon, before the group has had time to fully discuss the issue. Tools a group can use during this preliminary period of discussion include brainstorms, go-rounds, and breaking up into small groups. When it is apparent that the group is beginning to go over the same ground, a proposal can be made which attempts to synthesize all the feelings and insights expressed. The proposal should be clearly stated. Then discussion is held on the proposal, in which it is amended or modified. During this discussion period, it is important to articulate differences clearly. It is the responsibility of those who are having trouble with a proposal to put forth alternative suggestions. When the proposal is understood by everyone, and there are no new changes asked for, someone (usually the facilitator) can ask if there are any objections or reservations to the proposal. It helps to have a moment of silence here, so that no-one feels coerced into agreeing. If there are no objections, the group is asked "Do we have consensus?" All members of the group should then actively and visibly signal their agreement, paying attention to each member of the group. After consensus is reached, the decision should be clearly restated, as a check that everyone is clear on what has been decided. Before moving away from the subject, the group should be clear who is taking on the responsibility for implementing the decision.

Difficulties in Reaching Consensus

If enough discussion has occurred, and everyone has equally participated, there should not be a group decision which cannot be supported by everyone. But depending on the importance of the decision, the external conditions, and how the process has gone, the group might be on the verge of reaching a decision you cannot support. Here is one way of expressing your objections:

- Non-support: "I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along with the group."
- 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 stop others from doing it."

Blocking: "I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral." If a final decision violates someone's moral values, they are obligated to block consensus. A decision by an affinity group spokes council can only be blocked by an entire affinity group, not by an individual. Blocks will rarely occur if the group has fully discussed a proposal.

- Withdrawing from the group. Obviously, if many people express non-support or reservations, or leave the group temporarily through standing aside, there may not be a viable decision even if no-one directly blocks it. This is what is known as a "lukewarm" consensus and is just as desirable as a lukewarm bath or a lukewarm beer. If consensus is blocked and no new consensus is reached, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject, or does nothing if that is applicable. Major philosophical or moral questions that come up with each affinity group should be worked through as soon as the group forms. Discussions about values and goals are as important as discussions about actions to be taken, and too frequently get pushed aside by groups who feel time pressures.

Roles in Consensus Process

In large groups, it is helpful to designate roles for people to help the process move along. It is important to rotate these responsibilities for each meeting so that skills and power can be shared. Ideally, such responsibilities should belong to everyone, and not just the designated person.

Facilitator

The facilitator's job is to help the group move through the agreed-upon agenda, and to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak by calling on them in order. Facilitators should see that speaking opportunities are evenly distributed; that quiet people get a chance to speak and people who talk too much are given a chance to listen. The facilitator should observe when the discussion seems to be nearing the point when a proposal could be made. S/he can then call for a proposal or offer one to the group, and after more discussion if necessary, s/he can then guide the group through the check for consensus as outlined above. Facilitators should not use their position as a platform from which to offer solutions; solutions should arise from the group, and no-one should facilitate if they find they have strong opinions on a given issue. A facilitator can always hand over her or his responsibilities temporarily if s/he feels it necessary to step down. The group should not rely upon the facilitator to solve process problems, but should be ready to help with suggestions on how to proceed. Some larger groups may have a separate position of "stacker," but in smaller groups this role is usually given to the facilitator.

Vibeswatcher

Vibeswatchers are useful in large groups where people don't know each other, and their job is to be attuned to the emotional state of the group. Is the group tense, or bored, or too silly? The vibeswatcher might suggest a game, or more light, or open windows, or a group hug. Sometimes simply calling attention to an emotional undercurrent that may be affecting group process is helpful.

Vibeswatchers should also call the group's attention to a person whose anger or fear is being ignored, or to people who may be involved in a dialogue that has its causes outside of the group's activities. Vibeswatchers also should assume the role of "gatekeeper," taking care of any external disturbance for the group.

Timekeeper

A timekeeper keeps the group on track by giving the group a warning halfway through that discussion time is running out and by asking the group if it wants to contract for more time on a given issue. Timekeepers should ask if people want to set specific time limits on brainstorming or time allotments to each speaker on go-rounds. Before speaking themselves, timekeepers should be sure that someone else is timekeeping for that period.

Note-taker

A note-taker tries to clearly record key points of discussions, the consensus decisions reached by the group, things that were left to be decided later, and who has taken on responsibilities for particular tasks. The group (or the facilitator for the next meeting) should be able to use the notes to construct the agenda for the next meeting. A note-taker can also be helpful during the meeting to remind the group of key points covered in discussion if the group is having trouble formulating a proposal.

It's important to emphasize that every member of the group should try to facilitate, vibeswatch, time-keep, and note-take. Sharing the responsibility ensures that power is distributed equally within the group and makes consensus easier on everyone.

Decision-making During Actions

It is clear that consensus is a time consuming activity. It is therefore important for affinity groups to make their fundamental decisions prior to going to an action. Discuss in advance such questions as: What do we do if faced with a provocateur in our group or a nearby group? How long do we want to stay on site? How do we respond to police strategies designed to keep us away from the site? It helps for an affinity group to define for itself its particular goals, or tone. Such general definitions as "Our group will always go where numbers are most needed," or "We want to be where we will get media coverage," or "We want to leaflet workers inside the site," will help a group make decisions under stressful and changing circumstances. Be prepared for unexpected circumstances by selecting a spokesperson and a facilitator for your group for quick-decision making process during the action. It will be the spokesperson's responsibility to communicate the group's decisions to the action or cluster spokes council. It is the facilitator's responsibility to quickly and succinctly articulate the problem to be discussed and to eliminate those points where