
E 2 | CONSENSUS

A consensus takes into account the interests and needs of everyone involved in a decision as far as possible and comprises a group attempt to develop a collective solution. A consensus is reached by listening to each other and working together on proposals, especially with people whose ideas differ from our own. Consensus does not only involve a different procedure than other types of decision-making (notably majority voting), but also a different form of communication.

Consensus decision-making is:

- cooperative, integrative and solution-oriented.
- creative. A number of motivated people participate; different concerns and ideas can be heard and are taken seriously.
- participatory. Everyone is encouraged to participate in the decision-making process.
- activating. If everyone takes a decision together, implementation becomes a lot easier.
- a way of decision-making that can foster interaction, help develop new approaches and strengthen a group's team spirit.
- respectful of the needs and concerns of everyone involved.
- not about finding a weak compromise, but an approach that helps develop a nuanced picture of various opinions.

Checking levels of consensus

Consensus decision-making enables us to develop a nuanced picture of the opinions that exist within a group. If the group wants to test a proposal for consensus, the facilitator can ask everyone to demonstrate their positions with a show of hands.

- Full approval or support
- Minor concern
- Major concern
- Abstention: I cannot or do not want to take a position on the proposal. Yet, if necessary, I will help implement the decision taken.
- Standing aside: I cannot support the proposal, but I do not want to prevent the group from adopting it. I 'stand aside' and will not help implement it.
- Veto: this proposal is unacceptable, since it contradicts our group's shared values or fundamental principles (like an action consensus), endangers people etc.

Tips for facilitating consensus decision-making processes

- In order to establish whether a consensus can be reached about a certain proposal, facilitators should not merely ask whether people support a proposal, ('Who agrees?'), but also whether anyone has any reservations/disagrees with the proposal ('Does anyone have concerns?').

- Arriving at a consensus often involves making a proposal, the facilitator testing for consensus, and abandoning or adapting a proposal until one is found that the group can accept.
- Using the categories below helps the group gain a clear picture of how strong and viable a proposal is and who would support its implementation.

Typical problems when trying to find a consensus

If a real consensus is to be found, it is essential that the people involved are not afraid of expressing their opinions frankly and openly.

- A ‘fake consensus’ may arise if people agree to a proposal that they do not actually support. This may occur because people want to speed up the process or because some people are more willing than others to step back instead of having their opinions heard.
- Although it is important to ask participants whether they approve of a proposal, it is also crucial to ask whether they have concerns about or disagree with the proposal; otherwise, these views can easily be overlooked.
- Consensus decision-making means dealing with the challenge of involving everyone who wants to or will have to implement the decision.
- Arriving at a consensus can be a very long and bumpy ride. Consensus decision-making can also take more time than other forms of decision-making (e.g., majority voting). Practice and experience can help groups learn about and ‘own’ consensus decision-making processes.

Source: Skills for Action, Action Training Manual, <http://www.skills-for-action.de/en>