

# Consensus - How to and Why

Consensus is a decision making process that works creatively to include all persons making the decision. It is the most powerful decision process as all members agree to the final decision. This is truly radical democracy as all participants have a direct voice and veto power.

Consensus can work with groups as small as 5, groups of 300, or even over 500,000 people. Within a small group consensus tends to be more simple if all the group participants are kept abreast of each other's activities and all the factors of the decision. Within groups of 300 or so, consensus takes different shapes: the group might have a single facilitator, and the 300 members may be arranged into mini-groups of 5 using consensus and with one spokesperson who speaks in the larger group.

In short consensus takes into account and validates each participant. Everyone gets the opportunity to voice their opinion, or block a proposal if they feel strongly enough about a decision.

## How it works...

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### 1. **Presentation**

The proposal is presented as clearly as possibly by its author.

### 2. **Clarifying Questions**

Questions are asked by anyone about the proposal to make sure that everyone understands it before you discuss it.

### 3. **Discussion**

The proposal is discussion and debated. Possible amendments to the proposal are made at this time. The author(s) always reserves the right to alter the proposal as s/(t)he(y) see fit. (If it is only a caucus, this is the last step.)

### 4. **Take general feelings on the proposal**

These can be registered through a *straw poll*, by a *round robin* or once-round all members, or through some signal such as *thumbs up/middle/down*. This can be used to modify the original proposal, consider going forth with a vote, or scrapping it altogether.

### 5. **Call for Major Objection or Strong Concern**

A single *Major Objection* blocks the proposal from passing. If you have a major objection it means that you cannot live with the proposal if it passes. It is so objective to you/those you represent that you will stop the proposal from passing. A

major objection isn't an "I don't really like it" or an "I liked the other idea better." It is an "I cannot live with this proposal if it passes, and here's why ... !" A thumbs down in general feelings doesn't mean that it is a major objection, a proposal can still pass if there is a thumbs down with no major objections.

A *Strong Concern* does not block the passing of a proposal, but it is a public statement of why you dislike it (so you can say 'I told you so!' later..). All strong concerns are written in the minutes of the meeting or otherwise recorded by the group note-taker.

### **Does the Proposal Pass?**

If the feelings of the group are generally positive and there are no major objections, then the proposal passes.

If general feelings are positive, but someone has a major objection to the proposal, the proposal doesn't pass. It may get sent to a reconciliation committee, or withdrawn and reworked on and re-presented at a later date.

If the group feelings are generally negative, the proposal doesn't pass.

If the group feelings are mixed, not generally positive or negative, discussion continues, or the proposal is tabled until the next meeting, or until more information is available.

If discussion seems to be going on forever without the possibility of resolution, the group can:

1. Decide to drop the proposal;
2. Move onto approval voting of specific options within the proposal, or;
3. Send the proposal to a 'reconciliation committee' - or perhaps the original author - for rewriting to work out the objections.

## **Some Guidelines for Reaching Consensus**

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1. **Present your position as lucidly and logically as possible**, but listen to other members' reactions and consider them carefully before you press your point. Avoid arguing solely for your own ideas.
2. **Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose** when discussion reaches stalemate. Instead look for the next-most-acceptable alternative for all parties.
3. **Distinguish between major objections and discomfiture or amendments.** A

major objection is a fundamental disagreement with the *core* of the proposal.

4. **Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict and to reach agreement and harmony.** When agreement seems to come too quickly and easily, be suspicious, explore the reasons and be sure that everyone accepts the solution for basically similar or complementary reasons. Yield only to the positions that have objective and logically sound foundations.
5. **Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, averages, and bargaining.** When a dissenting member finally agrees, don't feel that s/he must be rewarded by having his own way on some later point.
6. **Differences of opinion are natural and expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the decision process.** Disagreements can help the group's decision because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance the group will hit on more adequate solutions.
7. **Decision making through consensus involves discussion and accountability of view points** as opposed to power struggles. Postponement of decisions to give time to reconsider and recognize that all people participating are able to accept and work with the decision is vital to the consensus process.
8. **Remember that the ideal present behind consensus is empowering versus overpowering,** agreement versus majorities/minorities. The process of consensus is what you put into it as an individual and a part of the group.
9. **Finally, use your minds -- you've got good ones or you wouldn't be here.** So think before you speak; listen before you object. Through participating in the consensus process, one can gain insight into not only others but also one's self.