

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

Consensus decision-making can be a powerful tool for building group unity and strength and for choosing wise, creative courses of action. However, if attempted under the wrong circumstances or without a good understanding of the technique, the consensus process can result in confusion, disruption or unrest in a group. Simply stated, consensus is different from other kinds of decision making because it stresses the cooperative development of a decision, with group members working together rather than competing against each other, it is a process that depends on the power within and among people rather than on power over others. The goal of consensus is a decision that is approved by all group members. Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks the decision is necessarily the best one possible, or even that they are sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, everyone had equal opportunity and responsibility to participate and no one felt unheard. Fashioning a decision that the group members can wholeheartedly implement requires respect for everyone's input and each member's active participation in the process. In "classic" consensus decision-making, every member must voice an option. Each person may agree with or without reservations, may stand aside or may block a decision. If even a single member has a strong objection to the decision (for example, it violates a deeply felt moral belief), then the individual has the power to "block" the decision. At this point, the consensus process continues and the group has further discussion to arrive at a solution to which the group approves.

WHY USE IT? - Collective intelligence and creativity always come up with better solutions than individuals or factions- Unlike voting, consensus does not readily set up "either/or", "win lose" situations; coercion and trade-offs are replaced with creative alternatives and compromise. More power and responsibility is with the group as a whole, as well as with its individual members. The effort to find consensual solutions fosters community rather than opposing camps. Decisions arrived at by consensus generally have wider group support and therefore, more successful implementation.

HOW DOES IT WORK? When a decision needs to be made the facilitator:

- ✓ States specifically the issue to be decided
- ✓ Begins a discussion with a clear proposal
- ✓ Asks clarifying questions during the discussion
- ✓ Makes sure all points of view are heard
- ✓ Checks for concerns
- ✓ If concerns are expressed, hold further discussion, again clarifying points and looking for alternative proposals. A small group may need to be delegated to refine a new proposal for future consideration.
- ✓ If no concerns are expressed, or if everyone is satisfied, test for consensus (go around the room and see if people agree)
 - To agree
 - To agree with reservations
 - To stand aside -- one enables the decision to be made, but it is on record as not participating in the consensus; this is done when someone has strong

- objections but does not feel that the group should not move forward.
- To block -- one can neither support the proposal nor can the group move forward with a decision; one blocks on the grounds of principle, not preference

WHEN AGREEMENT CANNOT BE REACHED

Blocking is a statement of the great seriousness of someone's objections to a decision. It demonstrates that the group requires more time to reach consensus. The group as a whole is not ready to move ahead because some individuals are not yet represented in the group's decision. Time needs to be taken to resolve the issue. You might have to start from the beginning. The issue at hand may not be resolved at the meeting and may have to be tabled until next time. In the meantime, small committees of those who block and those who agree need to meet for further discussion, searching for a new, acceptable solution. It is important to distinguish between the power of an individual to disagree with others in the group and the power of an individual to block consensus. To disagree is at the heart of the consensus process. When one disagrees, it is her responsibility to give all relevant information, explain reasons clearly and present the information and opinions as thoroughly as she can. It is the responsibility of the others to listen, to ask questions and to seek out as much relevant information as possible. This is utilizing consensus, bringing together opinions and facts, including conflicting ones. The following are steps to move a "block" to consensus:

- ✓ Define common ground and/or goals
- ✓ Agree on process
- ✓ Participants state their perceptions of the problem
- ✓ Define and analyze the problem
- ✓ Generate alternative solutions --- (lots of them)
- ✓ Evaluate alternatives and decide on solution
- ✓ Plan implementation, with time for evaluation and feedback

Affirmation: make sure no one leaves with the situation unresolved, or at least without the next steps in place; have some fun together.