

Consensus Decision-Making
OICF Board Boot Camp
3/25/2014

What is Consensus?

Consensus is the process by which a group reaches *unity of consent* on a decision. Every member of the group need not agree with the decision. It is, rather, an *agreement to stand behind the decision*, because each member of the group believes it is the best possible decision for the group at this time.

Why Consensus?

1. Principle: "Built into this consensus process are the assumptions that we are all trustworthy, that we are all equal, and that each of us has part of the truth and no one has all of it."
2. Particularly relevant for balancing real and perceived imbalance of power based on economic or social status.
3. Consensus creates a framework where every voice is valued and everyone has the opportunity to listen deeply to each other. We learn that everyone at the table *who is prepared and present* has something to offer toward the resolution.

How does consensus work?

Consensus works when the following ingredients are in place:

1. *Each member of the group is committed to the value and believes it will work.* You trust the other members of the group, and believe there is a solution. You put the good of the group or organization above your own self-interest.
2. *Each member engages constructively.* You show up for each meeting prepared, listen deeply and remain open to new ideas or perspectives. You speak politely, constructively and truthfully from your personal experience. And you ask for and receive the information you need to make an informed choice.
3. *The facilitator provides equitable access and sufficient time to deliberate; poses questions that drive toward resolution; and documents each stage and the final decision in writing.* This person maintains the tone of civility, assures that no one takes a disproportionate amount of air time, gauges when it is time to allow for organic conversation rather than a roll-call check in, determines when it is time to pause, summarizes information that group members have stated they need, and poses questions in a manner that keeps the group focused.

Most of the process for engaging consensus decision-making could be employed by any organization, whether it operates by consensus or not. And an organization that uses consensus may make many routine decisions with a simple voice vote, rather than

follow this process for every decision. However, when a decision is more complex, consensus is best achieved by following these steps.

1. The meeting facilitator (for example the board chair or president) sets aside sufficient time for significant issues to be discussed at several consecutive meetings.
2. A designated person – commonly the executive director – prepares a written brief containing background, analysis and a recommendation or options.
3. The first time an issue is discussed the facilitator frames the issue and does a roll call, asking each member of the group to state their position. Sometimes consensus is achieved right away.

Roll Call Process:

- a. It is important for the roll call to occur in an orderly fashion and for the group members to understand the order. A common approach is for the person to the left or right to speak next. With order, you know when it will be your turn, and this makes it easier to listen.*
 - b. One person speaks at a time. This is a firm rule. No interrupting. Strict adherence to this rule fosters confidence to speak. And it helps people who are skilled interrupters abide by their promise to listen. As a listener, you may take notes to remind yourself of what you want to say.*
 - c. Perhaps when your turn arrives, you don't want to speak. Maybe what you wanted to say has already been said, and it does not need to be repeated. You may pass. Maybe you want more time, so you may ask the facilitator to come back to you after everyone else has spoken.*
 - d. Each person should be allowed a similar amount of time to speak, even if they don't utilize all the allotted time. The facilitator could set a maximum time for each person, or manage the allocation of time in a less formal way.*
4. For more difficult issues, it may take multiple meetings or multiple rounds of roll calls to reach consensus. Perhaps more research is needed, or the topic is sent back to the relevant committee for further shaping. The facilitator may clarify the process by segmenting the issue, again using the roll call method for each step:
 - a. Define the topic or issue;*
 - b. State issues, concerns or considerations;*
 - c. Propose alternatives;*
 - d. Explore solutions.*
 5. The roll call cycle is repeated until either a consensus is reached, or (rarely) one or more members are not aligned with the rest of the group.

This is where consensus decision-making diverges from decisions made by majority vote. Under majority vote, the discussion would be closed and the group would vote.

Under consensus, the group has four options when there are dissenting individuals:

1. As a dissenter, you may 'step aside' or abstain. This means that you do not agree, but you do not believe the decision is wrong or will harm the group. Your dissent and your reasons are entered into the minutes.
2. The group may decide to table the issue for another time. The group determines that the need to come to unity is more important than the need to make a decision at this time.
3. One or two people may block the decision. The individual(s) who oppose the majority of the group must have examined themselves well to know that they are not doing so out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, or any other emotion or idea except the heart-felt belief that the decision is wrong for the group as a whole. It is important that the group see the person who stands opposed as acting from his/her highest understanding and beliefs.

The group may accept the blocked decision, or, if the group has agreed in advance, the process may proceed with one or both of the steps described below.

4. Two final options are:
 - a. The dissenting individuals agree to arbitrate with other representatives of the group in accordance with a process agreed upon in advance (such as that defined by the American Arbitration Association).
 - b. The decision may be put to a vote, with a pre-determined percentage of the board (such as 2/3 or 3/4) required to allow the vote, and a pre-determined percentage of the board (such as 2/3) required for passage.

Consensus does not work in all situations

1. If the process lacked one or more of the three ingredients:
 - a. each member of group committed to values and believes it will work;
 - b. each member engages constructively;
 - c. an effective facilitator.
2. Examples are when people don't attend meetings consistently, and when they show up, they haven't done their homework or they are contrarian without apparent reason.

Video clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F1a7oKSwFs>

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