



MAKING CONSENSUS WORK

Consensus is the decision rule that allows collaborative problem solving to work. It is a way for more than two people to reach agreement. Consensus is built on a foundation of information sharing, which leads to shared learning and provides the basis for crafting optimal solutions. A consensus decision rule compels people to attempt to satisfy the interests of all parties involved in the discussion. *A workable consensus rule is flexible, specific to the situation, and can be informal.* Consensus does not mean that everyone will be equally satisfied with the decision, but all do accept that the decision is the best that can be made with the people involved. The term, consensus, has multiple meanings.

Multiple Meanings of Consensus

1. Majority: 51 percent or more agree
2. Super majority: 75 percent(?); 80 percent(?)
3. Unanimity: Everyone agrees
4. Conditional unanimity: the definition most often applied in collaborative problem solving. A consensus decision is one everyone can live with because:
 - it is the best alternative under the circumstances, and
 - it attends to each party's most important interests

Advantages of Consensus

1. Consensus requires sharing of information, which leads to shared learning, which, in turn provides the basis for crafting workable and acceptable agreements.
2. Consensus promotes joint thinking by a diverse group, which leads to creative solutions.
3. Because parties participate in the deliberation, they understand the reasoning behind the chosen solution and are willing to support its implementation.

Principles of Consensus

A number of essential principles underlie the practice of consensus and contribute to its success.

- To achieve consensus, everyone in the group must actively participate.
- To participate fully and freely, all group members must have a common base of information and keep up to date on the progress of the group.

- The group must create and maintain an atmosphere in which everyone feels free to state his or her views and to disagree.
- Disagreements should be respected. Disagreement can illuminate unrecognized problems and serve as a catalyst for improving the decision.
- When someone objects or disagrees, the goal of the group is to discover the unmet need that has produced the objection and to find a way to meet that need in a revised agreement, rather than to suppress the objection.

Levels of Consensus (Conditional Unanimity)

Once a proposal has been made, the group must discover how each member feels about it, and then identify specific concerns in order to move forward in problem solving.

When checking for unanimity, Kaner, et al (*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, by Sam Kaner, New Society Press, Philadelphia, 1996.) suggest using an eight-point scale that assesses the possible gradients of agreement among participants. The scale allows participants to communicate their intentions more clearly and permits a clearer assessment of the degree of agreement that exists. The greater precision permits greater confidence in knowing whether or not to move ahead. The eight-point scale is presented below:

1. Endorsement (*I like it*)
2. Endorsement with a Minor Point of Contention (*Basically, I like it*)
3. Agreement with Reservations (*I can live with it*)
4. Abstain (I have no opinion)
5. Stand Aside (*I don't like this, but I don't want to hold up the group*)
6. Formal Disagreement, but Willing to Go with Majority (*I want my disagreement noted in writing, but I'll support the decision*)
7. Formal disagreement with Request to Be Absolved of Responsibility for Implementation (*I don't want to stop anyone else, but I don't want to be involved in implementing it*)
8. Block (*I won't support the proposal*)

The scale allows more precise interpretation of support for a decision, from enthusiastic support, through lukewarm, to ambiguous support. Everyone can judge whether the degree of support warrants continued action. It is imperative that the group defines the consequences of someone voting to block the proposal. Does it mean that the proposal does not go forward, or that the party who votes to block does not become a signatory of the final agreement and drops from the group?



Five Finger Scale

A more abbreviated scale that allows a show of hands is a five finger scale. Participants show by the number of fingers they hold up their level of agreement to a given proposal:

- 1 Finger:** Endorsement (*I like it*)
- 2 Fingers:** Endorsement with a Minor Point of Contention (*Basically, I like it*)
- 3 Fingers:** Agreement with Reservations (*I can live with it*)
- 4 Fingers:** Formal Disagreement, but Willing to Go with Majority (*I want my disagreement noted in writing, but I'll support the decision*)
- 5 Fingers:** Block (*I won't support the proposal*)

If all members of the group express approval at levels 1, 2, 3 or 4, then they have reached consensus. If some members continue to disagree sufficiently to block the proposal (level 5), then consensus has not been reached. The challenge to the group is to see what interest must be addressed in the proposal to move people at 5 to 4 (or higher) and from 4 to 3 (or higher).

It is important to find out the nature of disagreements with a proposal. It is often helpful to characterize concerns as follows:

- Minor concerns with wording or editing.
- Agreement with the main thrust of the proposal, but concerns with specific elements which, if changed, would lead to agreement.
- Major concerns: principled disagreement with the overall direction of the proposal, which if not addressed, would lead the member to block the consensus.