

Coming to Consensus

Tips on Cooperative Decision Making

By Mark Shepard

Consensus means making decisions by the united consent of all. It is noncoercive, as it avoids imposing anyone's will on others.

Consensus is really more natural than majority vote, and small groups often use it without naming it. But in large, diverse groups, consensus may need special attention to work smoothly.

In consensus, the group encourages the sharing of all viewpoints held by those with interest in a topic. These viewpoints are then discussed in a spirit of respect and mutual accommodation. New ideas arise and viewpoints are synthesized, until a formula emerges that wins general approval.

Consensus is “organic”—unlike mechanical voting. Often, the final decision is different from anyone's original idea.

Consensus has advantages. Consideration of all viewpoints provides a more rounded view of the issue, leading to a better decision. And a decision supported by everyone will avoid resentment, division, and efforts to undermine it.

Consensus does *not* require that everyone be in complete agreement, but only that all be willing to accept—consent to—a decision. If the group fails to accommodate your viewpoint after fair effort, ask yourself if you feel strongly enough to uphold your position. If not, it may be best to “stand aside.” Refusing to do so might paralyze the group.

Also, consensus does *not* give everyone an equal voice. Some people know more and care more about an issue. Naturally, their views should carry greater weight.

Better decisions often take longer—in the short run. Try not to make it worse. Before you speak, ask yourself whether your statement is worth the group's time. (To get an idea of this, you could multiply your speaking time by the number of listeners.) If someone else has said it, you may not need to. When you speak, be brief and to the point—and say it only once.

If time is short and the group is large, a matter may need to be turned over to a smaller group. Try to cultivate the mutual trust that allows this.

Be aware of how often you speak. Of course, some people will at times have more to offer. Still, you may have to stop yourself from speaking too often, to avoid dominating. Or if you're shy, you may need to push yourself to speak. Consensus can fail if some group members dominate others.

A moment of silence can work wonders in easing tensions.

A chosen facilitator can help consensus by keeping the discussion on track, encouraging good process, and posing alternatives that may resolve differences. But a facilitator is a servant, not a director, and assumes a neutral role. If a facilitator wishes to take a stand on an issue, the task of facilitating is handed to someone else.

Consensus makes special demands on all. You must respect and consider each other. You must have a sense of common searching, instead of wanting to “win.” You must be sensitive and open to each others' ideas and feelings, and honestly try to accommodate them. Finally, you must be dedicated to uncovering and pursuing truth—even if it leads where you never expected.

Ignore these guidelines, and consensus can frustrate, divide, and fail. Follow them, and it can energize, unify, and succeed beyond your expectations.

It's up to you!

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