

CONSENSUS DECISION STEPS

State the problem, question, decision

Agree on time limit for discussion

Initial "straw poll"

Discussion

Summarize emerging decision

Check "range of consensus"

1 - Strongly support

2 - Agree with reservation

3 - Mixed; questions, reservations

4 - Somewhat opposed; concerns

5 - Strongly oppose.

Yes ?

Record decision

No?

Hear and consider reservations, discuss further

No consensus possible in time available?

•Carry it over/delegate

•Extend time, continue discussion

•Use fall-back method (vote?)

CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

Through a process of discussion and understanding, consensus decision making enables a group to reach a final decision built on the group's wisdom that everyone can support. Because the process is more time consuming than a vote, it is only successful with a commitment to the process from the group. A commitment to consensus decision making often reflects the groups' values to be inclusive and honor each other's points of view. Consensus can result in a creative solution that is solidly supported by the entire group.

However, in spite of a groups' best intentions, different understandings within a group about working with consensus can lead to problems, such as abandoning consensus for "difficult" decisions, or the inability to make a decision and move forward. For these reasons groups find it helpful to reach agreement on a definition or "method" of consensus decision making. The following information is meant as a guide for groups when working with consensus.

Making the Decision

1. State the problem, question to be answered, or decision to be made.
2. Have the group agree on a reasonable time limit.
3. Invite people to say what their initial thoughts are. Some groups find it helpful to take a “straw poll” to see where everyone is with their preliminary thinking. (See “Range of Consensus”). It may be necessary to readjust the time limit if the group is far apart on the straw poll.
4. Encourage participants to voice their opinions as clearly and briefly as possible, describing:
 - what the problem is and what solution s/he prefers
 - reasons s/he is taking this position.
5. Summarize the decision that is emerging; ask for more discussion to refine the decision statement.
6. Check for “Range of Consensus”. Is there unanimity? If “yes”, then record the decision and move on. If “no”, the group needs to take the time to hear and consider reservations and objections.
7. If no consensus seems possible within the time available, then the group decides whether to:
 - carry it over to give more time for reflection, research, (could delegate to committee or staff),
 - continue discussion until they are able to find an acceptable solution, or
 - use their fallback decision making method (vote).

Additional Discussion Methods:

1. The group discusses the situation until all have a basic understanding of the problem and the needs that must be addressed. The form of the discussion can be varied, for example:
 - use a “go-round”, where each person speaks in turn without discussion or feedback, to get a sense of everyone’s thinking, or “piece of the puzzle”;
 - small groups can be used at any point in the discussion: for initial understanding, to develop lists of priority needs; to brainstorm options; to evaluate options; to develop proposals;
 - experts (from inside or outside the group) can present information;
2. A list of the various solutions to the problem is generated. Each option is evaluated one by one, by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each.
3. After discussing the possible options, the list is narrowed down to the two or three solutions most favored by all. The discussion leader asks if anyone could not live with each solution. If people have objections, changes are made that help satisfy the objector’s concern. The leader continues asking the question and modifying the statement until everyone accepts the solution or it becomes clear that this solution would not work. In this case, the leader moves on to the next solution and repeats the process. Several solutions may be combined to create one that is acceptable.
4. After much discussion, the group agrees that they can accept the solution they have developed.

Range of Consensus

This tool provides a format for checking consensus without spending a lot of time in discussion. This method shortens the time consensus can take and gives everyone a voice, without compromising the careful listening, reflection, respect and trust needed for consensus. It can be used for an initial “straw poll”, as well as for gauging the level of consensus on a topic after discussion.

How to use it:

Ask all group members to hold up fingers indicating where they are on the consensus scale (see the Range of Consensus, below). If a quick scan of the room indicates all ones and twos, then the group can quickly see that consensus has been reached. If there are several people indicating threes and fours, or if there is even one five, further discussion will be needed to reach consensus.

No matter what the poll indicates, it is a good idea to ask if there is need for further comments or discussion.

Number of Fingers	What does it mean?
One	Strongly support (I don't need to talk).
Two	Agree, with reservation (I don't need to talk).
Three	I can live with it; not enthusiastic, mixed feelings. I have questions; need more information; need to talk.
Four	Somewhat opposed, may block consensus. I have questions and concerns; need to talk.
Five	Strongly oppose, major concerns, need to talk.