

## **CONSENSUS: What is consensus? Why do consensus building?**

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Consensus occurs when all members of a group cooperatively arrive at a decision they can support. A consensus decision best reflects the thinking of all members of the group, but it may not be their first choice of every group member. Consensus means that members of the group reach substantial agreement, rather than unanimity. Consensus does not involve majority voting, takes longer than voting, and is typically harder work. Consensus should be employed when the decision has a significant impact on the organization, or involves a major change in the way things are done, and application requires the support of each group member.

“Sufficient Consensus,” a modified definition from the Bellevue, Washington School states: “After real dialogue about a particular issue had taken place and everyone had been given a legitimate opportunity to state their case and be listened to, if a small number of people were not in agreement, such disagreement could not hold up the vast majority taking action.”

### **WHAT ARE THE RULES FOR CONSENSUS?**

- Decide in advance when to use consensus, since not every decision should involve consensus.
- Every member of the team participates in the discussion, both listening and being heard.
- Conflict is viewed as an asset not something to be avoided, not everyone will totally be satisfied.
- Participants must monitor the process looking for the next-most-acceptable alternative.
- Avoid majority votes, averaging, coin flips, bargaining, etc. when trying to reach closure.
- Be suspicious of an agreement that comes too quickly or easily, explore why.
- Groups or individuals affected by a consensus program or plan should be part of the process.

### **WHAT IS THE PROCESS TO BE FOLLOWED FOR CONSENSUS?**

1. Start with a group that has worked together in positive ways and that recognizes individual member's strengths.
2. The group agrees on a focus, a topic, a goal to be achieved or a problem to be solved.
3. Consciously decide/declare that the decision to be made is important enough to use consensus.
4. Review the rules for consensus with the participants.
5. Information is then gathered by the participants and shared with the group; or the facilitator or outside experts bring information to the group, as important decisions are data based.
6. Move to a brainstorming session (pose questions) in order to generate many ideas.
7. The ideas that are generated are considered and those that are clearly unworkable are discarded, the facilitator uses various techniques to continue to reduce the list.
8. When “solutions” or “actions to be taken” have been narrowed to two or three, arguments pro and con are given.
9. The facilitator tests for consensus, may use the “Fist To Five”, “Thumbs Up” or other techniques. Meeting adjourns so that participants can pyramid to their constituent groups.
10. Group facilitator tests for consensus, may call a break to allow informal discussion between pro/con participants; or adjourn meeting to seek additional information.
11. Facilitator moves the group to Conditional Consensus and a Tentative Implementation Plan.
12. Conditional Consensus and Tentative Implementation Plan is pyramided to all groups.
13. Develop Final Consensus, an Implementation Plan, a Communication Plan and determine how success will be evaluated.