

Consensus Decision Making

Seeds for Change

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What is consensus?

Consensus is a decision-making process that works creatively to include all persons making the decision. Instead of simply voting for an item, and having the majority of the group getting their way, the group is committed to finding solutions that **everyone** can live with. This ensures that everyone's opinions, ideas and reservations are taken into account. But consensus is more than just a compromise. It is a process that can result in surprising and creative solutions – often better than the original suggestions.

Consensus can work in all types of settings: small groups of activists, local communities, businesses, even whole nations and territories. The Zapatista movement in lower Mexico (Oaxaca and Chiapas) answers to a public control called “la consulta”. This group – comprised of all men, women and children age 12 and over – meets in local meetings where discussion is held and all the members make the final decision.

Within a small group of up to 20 people consensus tends to be more simple, as everyone can get to know each other and reach a mutual understanding of backgrounds, values and viewpoints. For larger groups different processes have been developed, such as splitting into smaller units for discussion and decision-making with constant exchange and feedback between the different units. Our briefing Consensus In Large Groups has more examples and ideas for reaching consensus with hundreds and even thousands of people.

What's wrong with majority voting?

Many of us have been brought up in a culture which believes that the western-style system with one-person-one-vote and elected leaders is the supreme form of democracy. Yet in the very nations which shout loudest about the virtues of democracy, many people don't even bother voting anymore, because they feel that it doesn't make any difference to their lives. When people vote for an executive they also hand over their power to make decisions and to effect change. This goes hand in hand with creating a majority and a minority, with the minority often feeling deeply unhappy with the outcome.

It is true that majority voting enables even controversial decisions to be taken in a minimum amount of time, however there is nothing to say that this decision will be a wise one or morally acceptable. After all the majority of colonial Americans supported the 'right' to hold slaves. People in a majority rule system don't need to listen to the dissenting minority, or take their opinion seriously because they can simply outvote them. Majority rule systems say that the majority is infallible and they have nothing to learn from the minority.

This creates a situation where there are winners and losers and promotes an aggressive culture and conflict, and lends itself to steam rolling an idea over a minority that dissents with the majority opinion. The will of the majority is seen as the will of the whole group, with the minority expected to accept and carry out the decision, even if against their most deeply held convictions and principles. A vivid example is the imprisonment of conscientious objectors against military service in democratic countries such as Germany.

Why use consensus?

In contrast to majority voting consensus decision-making is about finding common ground and solutions that are acceptable to all. Decisions are reached in a **dialogue between equals**, who take each other seriously and who recognise each other's equal rights.

People are often inactive because they feel that they have no power in the system and that their voice won't be listened to anyway. In consensus every person has the power to make changes in the system, and to prevent changes that they find unacceptable. The right to veto a decision means that minorities cannot just be ignored, but creative solutions will have to be found to deal with their concerns.

Another benefit of consensus is that all members agree to the final decision and therefore are much more committed to actually turning this decision into reality.

Consensus is about participation and equalising power. It can also be a very powerful process for building communities and empowering individuals.

Who uses consensus?

Consensus is not a new idea, but has been tested and proven around the world. Non-hierarchical societies have existed on the American continent for hundreds of years. Before 1600, five nations — the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca — formed the Haudenosaunee Confederation, working on a consensual basis and which is still in existence today. Each Nation within the Confederacy selects individuals to represent them at confederacy meetings. Issues are discussed until all are in agreement on a common course of action. Never would the majority force their will upon the minority. Similarly no one could force a warrior to go to war against their better judgement.

A second example of consensus based organisation is the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. The Muscogee have the oldest political institutions in North America, with a recorded history going back beyond 400 years. If consensus on a major issue could not be achieved to everyone's satisfaction, people were free to move and set up their own community with the support — not the enmity — of the town they were leaving. This is in stark contrast to political organisation today, where the state's need to control its citizens makes it virtually impossible for individuals disagreeing with general policy to just go and do their own thing.

Consensus cannot only be found in the indigenous societies around the world but also throughout European history. Many medieval institutions, such as guilds, town councils, the influential Hanseatic trading league as well as governing bodies of countries (German and Polish Imperial Courts) required unity.

There are also many examples of successful and stable utopian communes using consensus decision-making, such as the Christian Herrnhuter settlements 1741-1760/61 and the production commune Boimondeau in France 1941–1972. The Herrnhuter complemented the consensus system with the drawing of lots to choose the members of the community council, making intrigue and power politics superfluous. This tool for decision-making is unfortunately rarely used or discussed today, even though it can offer a fair way out of a decision-making dilemma.

Christiania, an autonomous district in the city of Copenhagen has been self-governed by its inhabitants using consensus since 1970. This includes regulating economic, cultural and educational issues, water and electricity supply, health and security.

Within the co-operative movement many housing co-ops and businesses are using consensus successfully, including making difficult financial and management decisions. A prominent example is Radical Routes, a network of housing and workers' co-ops all using consensus decision-making. Through Rootstock Radical Routes raises and loans out substantial sums of money to member co-ops.

Many activists working for peace, the environment and social justice regard consensus as essential to their work. They believe that the methods for achieving change need to match their goals and visions of a free, non-violent, egalitarian society. Consensus is also a way of building community, trust, a sense of security and mutual support — important in times of stress and emergency.

In the antimilitarist protests at Greenham Common in the 1980s thousands of women participated in actions and experimented with consensus. Mass actions involving several thousand people have repeatedly been planned and carried out using consensus.

How does consensus work?

There are many different formats and ways of building consensus. Some groups have developed detailed procedures, whereas in other groups it may be an organic process. This also depends on the size of the group and how well people know each other. Below we have outlined a process that covers all the aspects of consensus, but can easily be adapted to fit your group. There are however a few conditions that have to be met for consensus building to be possible:

- **Common Goal:** All members of the group/meeting need to be united in a common goal, whether it is an action, living communally or greening the neighbourhood. It helps to clearly establish what this overall goal of the group is and to write it down as well. In situations where consensus seems difficult to achieve, it helps to come back to this common goal and to remember what the group is all about.
- **Commitment to consensus building:** All members of the group must be committed to reaching consensus on all decisions taken. It can be very damaging if individuals secretly want to return to majority voting, just waiting for the chance to say “I told you it wouldn’t work”. Consensus requires commitment, patience and willingness to put the group first.
- **Sufficient time:** for making decisions as well as to learn to work in this way.
- **Clear process:** Make sure that the group is clear about the process they will use for tackling any given issue. Agree beforehand on processes and guidelines. In most cases this will include having one or more facilitators to help the group move through the process. See also our briefing on Facilitation.

The process

There are lots of consensus models (see flowchart in the Resources section). The following basic procedure is taken from *Peace News* (June 1988), a magazine for peace activists:

1. The problem, or decision needing to be made, is defined and named. It helps to do this in a way that separates the problems/questions from personalities.
2. Brainstorm possible solutions. Write them all down, even the crazy ones. Keep the energy up for quick, top-of-the head suggestions.
3. Create space for questions or clarification on the situation.
4. Discuss the options written down. Modify some, eliminate others, and develop a short list. Which are the favourites?
5. State the proposal or choice of proposals so that everybody is clear.
6. Discuss the pros and cons of each proposal – make sure everybody has a chance to contribute.
7. If there is a major objection, return to step 6 (this is the time-consuming bit). Sometimes you may need to return to step 4.
8. If there are no major objections, state the decisions and test for agreement.
9. Acknowledge minor objections and incorporate friendly amendments.
10. Discuss.
11. Check for consensus.

What if we cannot agree?

In all but a very few cases the above model will achieve consensus within the group providing there is commitment to coming to a decision. However there are times when one or more people disagree more or less strongly with the rest of the group and no solution is in sight. Listed below are some ways of dealing with this. The first two, non-support and standing aside, allow the group to proceed with the decision, whilst allowing reservations to be expressed. See also the section When not to use consensus

Non-support: “I don’t see the need for this, but I’ll go along with it.”

Standing aside: “I personally can’t do this, but I won’t stop others from doing it.” The person standing aside is not responsible for the consequences. This should be recorded in the minutes.

Veto/major objection: A single veto/major objection blocks the proposal from passing. If you have a major objection it means that you cannot live with the proposal if it passes. It is so objectionable to you/those you are representing that you will stop the proposal. A major objection isn’t an “I don’t really like it “ or “I liked the other idea better.” It is an “I cannot live with this proposal if it passes, and here is why?!” The group can either accept the veto or discuss the issue further and draw up new proposals. The veto is a powerful tool and should be used with caution.

Agree to disagree: the group decides that no agreement can be reached on this issue. What can be done when we genuinely need to reach agreement and we are poles apart? Here are some suggestions:

- Allow the person most concerned to make the decision.
- Leave the decision for later or take a break. Have an energising activity or a cup of tea.
- Ask everyone to argue convincingly the point of view they like the least.
- Break down the decision into smaller areas. See which ones you can agree on and see what points of disagreement are left.
- Identify the assumptions and beliefs underlying the issue. Get to the heart of the matter.
- Imagine what will happen in six months, a year, five year’s time if you don’t agree. How important is the decision now?
- Put all the possibilities into a hat and pull one out. Agree in advance on this solution.
- Bring in a facilitator. If your group is unable to work through conflicts or if similar issues keep coming up, think about bringing in a professional facilitator or mediator who is trained in conflict-resolution techniques.
- Some groups also have majority voting as a backup, often requiring an overwhelming vote such as 80 or 90% to make a decision valid.

Leaving the group: If one person continually finds him/herself at odds with the rest of the group, it may be time to think about the reasons for this. Is this really the right group to be in? A group may also ask a member to leave.

Guidelines for consensus building

- Make sure everyone understands the topic/problem. While building consensus make sure everyone is following, listening to and understanding each other.
- Ensure that all members contribute their ideas and knowledge related to the subject.
- Explain your own position clearly. Listen to other member's reactions and consider them carefully before pressing your point.
- Be respectful and trust each other. This is not a competition. Nobody must be afraid to express their ideas and opinions. Remember that we all have different values and opinions, different behaviours, different areas and thresholds of distress.
- Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches stalemate. Instead look for the most acceptable solution for all parties.
- Distinguish between vetos/major objections and discomfiture/amendments. A veto/major objection is a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal.
- Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict and achieve harmony. When agreement seems to come quickly and easily, be suspicious, explore the reasons and be sure that everyone accepts the solution for basically similar or complementary reasons. Many of us are scared of open disagreement and avoid it where we can. Easily reached consensus may cover up low esteem or lack of safety for some people to express their disagreements openly.
- Differences of opinion are natural and to be expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the decision process. Disagreements can help the group's decision, because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance the group will hit on more adequate solutions. However you must also be flexible and willing to give something up to reach an agreement in the end.
- Remember that the ideal present behind consensus is empowering versus overpowering, agreement versus majorities/minorities. The process of consensus is what you put into it as an individual and a part of the group. Be open and honest about the reasons for your view points.
- Think before you speak, listen before you object.
- Allow enough time for the process of building consensus. Being quick is not a sign of quality. Thinking issues through properly needs time. For taking major decisions or in a controversial situation, it is always a good idea to postpone the decisions, "to sleep on it".

When not to use consensus

From Starhawk's book *Truth or Dare*:

When there is no group in mind

A group thinking process cannot work effectively unless the group is cohesive enough to generate shared attitudes and perceptions. When deep divisions exist within a group's bonding over their individual desires, consensus becomes an exercise in frustration.

When there are no good choices

Consensus process can help a group find the best possible solution to a problem, but it is not an effective way to make either-or-choices between evils, for members will never be able to agree which is worse. If the group has to choose between being shot and hung, flip a coin. When a group gets bogged down trying to make a decision, stop for a moment and consider: Are we blocked because we are given an intolerable situation? Are we being given the illusion, but not the reality, of choice? Might our most empowering act be to refuse to participate in this farce?

When they can see the whites of your eyes

In emergencies, in situations where urgent and immediate action is necessary, appointing a temporary leader may be the wisest course of action.

When the issue is trivial

I have known groups to devote half an hour to trying to decide by consensus whether to spend forty minutes or a full hour at lunch. Remember consensus is a thinking process ? where there is nothing to think about, flip a coin.

When the group has insufficient information

When you're lost in the hills, and no one knows the way home, you cannot figure out how to get there by consensus. Send out scouts. Ask: Do we have the information we need to have to solve this problem? Can we get it?

Common problems and how to overcome them

Consensus can be time consuming

Since it is a lengthier process to look at ideas until all objections are resolved, your group meetings may be longer and some decisions might regularly take more than a week to decide. However consensus need not involve everyone at every stage of the process:

- Get a small group, or even a pair, to go away and synthesise the discussions and brainstorm of the whole group into a few possible solutions to be discussed later by the whole group.
- Split up the meeting to deal with several issues in parallel and come back with a platter of proposals. This can speed up the meeting threefold or more.
- Not every decision needs to involve the whole group. Set up working groups on different areas, such as publicity, fund-raising, research. These sub-group can then decide the nitty-gritty business that they are responsible for, within certain limits that the group has defined beforehand.

Time pressure

Time pressure to find a solution to an urgent problem leads to stress and group pressure “to just get on with it”.

- Try to make sure enough time is allowed in the agenda to tackle all issues adequately. Prioritise which decisions need to be taken there and then and which ones can wait a while.
- You could also try to find a temporary solution.

Overuse/underuse/misuse of the right to veto

Actively participating in groups can be hard enough, and using a veto more so, particularly for people who feel unconfident in groups. It can involve standing up to — perceived or actual — group pressure and impatience. Many people are tempted to keep quiet (at least in a vote they can raise their hand) and important conflicts are sometimes avoided. In the hands of those used to more than their fair share of power and attention, the veto can be a lethal tool. It can magnify their voices, and be used to guard against changes that might affect their power base and influence.

In a well functioning group vetos should be rarely if ever seen — not only because they are a last resort, but also because ideally a member's unhappiness should be picked up on before before it gets to a veto stage.

- Try to uncover the group dynamics at work. The way people behave in groups generally reflect some hidden needs or past experiences.
- Work on creating a safe atmosphere. Challenge put-downs, discriminatory and aggressive behaviour. Make use of facilitation as a tool for involving all members of the group equally
- Don't be afraid of making modifications to your consensus procedure. Some groups allow the possibility to fall back on an overwhelming majority vote or on drawing lots, if an issue cannot be resolved by consensus.

The group is too large

For groups of more than 15–20 people it is advisable to split into sub groups for meaningful discussion. For a detailed discussion of possible processes have a look at our briefing Consensus in Large Groups.

And finally

Consensus is about participation and equalising power. It can also be a very powerful process for building communities and empowering individuals. Don't be discouraged if the going gets rough. For most of us consensus is a completely new way of making decisions. It takes time to unlearn the patterns of behaviour we have been brought up to accept as the norm. Consensus does get easier with practice and it's definitely worth giving it a good try.

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