Fostering Consensus

Consensus is easy to conceive, and hard to achieve because it requires both skill and a commitment to making decisions in this cooperative manner. In addition, few people have any significant experience participating in an effective consensus process, and so they are likely to misunderstand it. Many, if not most group members are unprepared to adopt a consensus methodology. They may experience much discomfort changing to a consensus approach. Therefore it is important to actively help a group move to consensus decision making, and to decide ahead of time what types of decisions should be made by consensus and what to do if/when consensus fails.

In general, the pay-offs from consensus are; better quality decisions, increased buy-in to implementation, and improved relationships. It is important to note that groups who are not committed to strong interpersonal relationships tend not to be good at consensus. Consensus is both a process and a value. It is not easy to live up to. However, it's not impossible either. A group that wants to operate by using consensus must first attend to the principles and processes that support it.

Consensus requires genuine respect for the ideas and input of all members. Members must be heard and their concerns addressed. This does not mean that total agreement is needed. Timely decisions must be made and unanimity is often not possible. Consensus is possible because members feel their views are genuinely understood when they receive "a proper hearing."

Members have the responsibility to support group decisions after a robust consensus process has been followed. They must speak up and not engage in false consensus -- where members say they agree but actually don't. Consensus takes disciplined speaking and listening. The goal of consensus is not selecting between options. It is developing a quality decision that can be supported by the entire group. As such it is not about competition or giving in.

Consensus is about the synthesis of ideas -- the combining of and building upon points of view. It is not debate. In consensus, the discussion flows in any direction that analysis leads. In debate, the goal is to move others toward agreement with your point of view. Consensus both requires and builds trust. The "winner" is the group as a whole, not individuals or even the majority.

Consensus is not voting. When consensus bogs down, groups tend to fall back on voting because it is generally quick and easy to do. However, it is important to understand that voting is a power-based approach -- the majority wins and the minority loses. Just because a majority thinks something is a good idea does not guarantee that it's a quality decision.

The four major skills needed for consensus are: Dialogue, Emotional Intelligence, Facilitation and Analysis / Clear Thinking.

Because most people have little or no experience in dialogue, they don't easily adopt the behaviors needed for consensus. Dialogue requires good questions, focused listening, exploration of underlying assumptions and beliefs, and significant self-awareness. None of these are widespread skills in modern western culture, so to develop them in an organization usually requires active training and skilled facilitation, at least initially.

Group members often care a great deal about the topics under discussion. Because of this and the many ways that our emotions can become engaged during group interaction, the skills of Emotional Intelligence are needed for consensus. Fear, anger, frustration, etc. can come on quickly when the topics matter to people.

EI and the management of emotions can be taught and developed. There are now many resources available for doing this. Books, courses and consulting on EI have become an industry within the management and organizational development world.

Research on groups by Wilfred Bion revealed that when time pressures to make a decision increase, the feelings of being "persecuted" increase within members. In general, consensus cannot be rushed. However, groups can become efficient at consensus through practice and good process.

Like almost all groups who are making decisions, groups using consensus should abide by a general set of meeting ground rules. Typical guidelines are about things like minimizing tangents and following an agenda, but groups may also develop special rules they feel are needed, such as prohibiting or allowing food in meetings, or how to handle cell phone interruptions. Groups using consensus should have additional rules about the process of consensus.
Here is a simple example:

1) No voting. Majority, plurality, 3/4... don't use these.
2) Don't give up because consensus doesn't come easily.
3) Don't argue for your own position; reason with logic and facts.
4) Don't give in just to reach agreement. Support an alternative because it's reasonable.
5) If an alternative is acceptable to you, say so, and say why.
6) Don't pretend to support a decision if you really don't.
7) Use descriptive, nonjudgmental language.
8) Ask questions, listen, analyze -- more than just stating your opinion.
9) Avoid "satisficing" -- going too quickly with the first acceptable solution.
   Strive for high quality decisions.

Larger, less experienced, or lower trust groups generally need more formal consensus procedures. Listed at the end is a brief example of a formal consensus process that uses proposals but is not Parliamentary procedure.

As with most any group addressing complex issues, the roles of Facilitator, Recorder, and Time Keeper should be assigned. Facilitating for consensus requires especially attentive skills. Some important aspects for the consensus facilitator to focus on are:

A)   Encourage participants to give reasons for their points of view.
B)   Bring out differences.

C)   Objections should be examined closely. The fact that a participant has an objection is not enough to block a decision. Vetoes are not allowed. The group must consider the objection and meet, mitigate, or decide that it is not valid for the group. An objection from an individual must not address only the needs of the individual. Objectors should demonstrate

   how the decision violates a group principle, operating procedure, value, or puts the group at serious risk. Ask objectors to put forth alternative proposals.

D) Avoid false consensus. Ask specifically "Are there any unresolved concerns?" Follow this by silence. The more difficult and complex the decision, the longer the silence should be. Ask everyone specifically, especially objectors, if they are willing to actively support the decision and help make it happen even though they are not in full agreement. If this reveals false consensus; reopen discussion, table the decision, or move to the group's alternative decision-making method that all have agreed to use when consensus fails.

E) Encourage analysis, build upon ideas and foster clear thinking. Without synergy, opinions tend to just run in circles instead of go deeper and combine.

Facilitators do not make decisions for the group. If a facilitator is overly involved in the discussion, then he or she should pass the facilitation role to another person. The facilitator must not use formal authority to make a decision unless the group explicitly asks for this. It is important for the facilitator to model patience, self awareness and emotional intelligence,

If a group cannot come to consensus after genuine efforts, any number of alternative methods might be employed. A few are; weighted voting, defer to the leader, assign to a subcommittee, use a super majority vote (as defined by the group.) The pros and cons of different decision making approaches are beyond the scope of this summary. It is important to not give up on consensus too quickly.

Before going to "Plan B" so to speak, some consensus practitioners advocate the use of a "Stand Aside" or a declared "Consensus-Minus-One" in cases where only one person is unwilling to support a decision. (If more than one person is objecting, usually discussion should simply continue.) The refusal should be examined. Try to determine the conviction level of the objector and look for bias and self-interest. However, pressure to force the person to conform must be avoided. If an acceptable proposal cannot be found, then the person should be asked if he or she is willing to step aside and not interfere with implementation. If the objector is willing, then the decision is made "Minus-One" and the group goes forward. Some larger groups may invoke the "Minus-One" option even when a single individual is unwilling to step aside.

If an individual feels very strongly, will not step aside, and the dissenter believes that there is a fundamental and serious violation of group values, process, or that the decision is dangerous for the group; then the individual could be allowed to "block" the decision. This is a very serious step, and the very threat of doing this usually brings about sufficient further discussion to create real consensus. If a decision has been blocked, it is up to the group to decide ahead of time what this means. Often it means tabling and delay. It may mean the group goes to its back-up decision method. Much depends on the nature of the decisions being made. Sometimes decisions cannot be delayed.

Consensus-Minus-One is a safety valve and should rarely be used. If it is used too often, the group should examine itself and reestablish trust, improve facilitation, and/or find other ways to solve group process problems. Groups should decide for themselves how they are going to handle difficult consensus building. There is no one best way, but the procedures should be made clear.

A Formal Consensus Process

Adapted from; Independent Media Center www.indymedia.org

Focus discussion around proposals.

1. A proposal is made. They must be brief, clear, precise as possible. State it, don't advocate it.

There are two main types of proposals:
A)   Those that are the result of previous discussion; collecting ideas and criticism.
B)   Those that are entirely new to the group.

2. Objections to the proposal, suggested alterations or counter proposals are made.

Explain briefly and clearly your concerns about the original proposal and why you would rather do it differently. If possible, give credit to what you think is already good about the original proposal.

Alterations. Try to make the impression of a complementary product, and not that of a destructively competitive one.

As a group, give people enough time to think everything over.

3. Offering a revised proposal which more suits the group's collective opinion.

Let everyone know that the previous proposal has been pulled in favor of the new one, so people don't get confused, and so the group doesn't have several similar proposals floating around at the same time.

4. Proposal accepted. Avoid false consensus by asking if each person will support the decision.
or
5. Proposal gets turned down.

It is generally safe to say that whenever a proposal is freshly turned down, repeating it without a substantial effort at revision will not be successful.

If a proposal is lacking support or if debate is going into a dead end, especially when a minority group is pushing a proposal forward against majority sentiment, or if a rushed decision would mean a sacrifice to the group's integrity, **a "block" can be proposed** on the basis that pushing the proposal carelessly against the flow of the group is a violation against the principles of the group itself.
In most cases this leads to an often healthy delay in the decision making process, giving everyone the opportunity to further evaluate, or sometimes starts a whole new attempt with a different approach.

What if someone is disrupting or hijacking the group by persistently opposing anything it does?

A single person or a single group of people within a bigger number should not have the right to veto a consensus per se. Of course, an individual person can ask for a block, or even demand it, on the basis of **protecting the principles of the group** or protecting the group itself from being harmed by a possibly bad decision. However, whether a block is pursued remains subject to consensus by the majority of those involved. Consensus only works if a community has a mutual understanding of its basic values and goals, such as preserving integrity, peaceful collaboration, non-racism, etc.

If a person or group of people were disrupting the community or preventing it from functioning properly, or if they were failing to contribute in a meaningful way, they would simply be violating consensus.

One who violates consensus in a disrupting manner is not contributing to decision making, and the community may reserve itself the right to remove the disturbing person. By no means should this disturbing person, for whatever reasons, have the right to veto against the community, since nobody should have that right in a consensus approach.

[This method is most effective when there is a strong ethic for consensus and enough time for discussion so that revised proposals and blocks to proposals can be discussed sufficiently to bring understanding and insight.]