

Consensus Building Guidelines

What Is Group Consensus? We know we have reached a consensus when one of these is true:

1. People agree to support the decision, even when it isn't their first choice.
2. People agree to support the decision as if it were their first choice.
3. It feels as though they had sufficient opportunity to influence the decision.

When facilitating consensus, the facilitator:

- Is neutral and does not offer their opinion on the issues.
- Focuses on the group process, not content.
- Keeps the group focused and moving forward.
- Helps everyone have equal access to the conversation.

Pay attention to these details when discussing the issue:

- Try to bring underlying assumptions about the situation into the open where they can be discussed.
- Listen and pay attention to what others have to say. This is the most important characteristic of successful groups.
- Be wary of early, quick, easy agreements and compromises. They are often based on false premises that need to be challenged.
- Avoid competition and arguments. Maintain a focus on what is right, not who is right. When using consensus, the right decision is one that the entire group can support and help implement.
- Avoid voting. Voting divides the group into winners and losers, and limits discussion.
- Encourage everyone; particularly quiet individuals, to offer their ideas so that everyone's views are included.
- Look for the best results to flow from a fusion of information, logic and emotion.
- Try to honestly listen to alternative ideas and be flexible and open-minded enough to change personal views and positions.
- Don't get locked into limited alternatives. When there is an argument between alternatives A and B, maybe the group can find an alternative C or D that will satisfy everyone.
- Use a "facilitative" leadership style that encourages discussion and participation.
- Record issues, comments and ideas on a chart paper or other visual aid. Don't put names by items as this can increase ownership and shift the focus to "who" is right.

Consensus works best when:

- Group size is small and time for discussion is plentiful.
- Working relations are open to discussion, creativity, flexibility, and shared goals that rise above differences.

