



## **Consensus Decision Making Process**

The Alberta Public Interest Research Group

**At APIRG, the consensus process will be used as the primary decision-making process to for all issues, meeting agenda items, or choices presented. If the use of the consensus process is found to be inappropriate or a decision by consensus is unattainable on a specific issue, conflict or situation, the APIRG Board of Directors will move to a majority vote decision-making process where approval of a decision or passed motion requires a 2/3 majority vote of the Board (quorum).**

**The Consensus decision-making process is considered an acceptable substitute of the voting decision-making process referred to in APIRGs bylaws.**

### **Consensus**

Consensus is a process for group decision-making. It is a method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust.

### **Why use consensus?**

Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is necessarily the best one possible, or even that they are sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, no one felt that her/his position on the matter was misunderstood or that it wasn't given a proper hearing. Hopefully, everyone will think it is the best decision; this often happens because, when it works, collective intelligence does come up with better solutions than could individuals.

### **Consensus Procedure**

- 1. A proposal for resolution is put forward.**
- 2. Amend and modify proposal through discussion**
- 3. Those participants that disagree with the proposal have the responsibility to put forward alternative suggestions.**
- 4. The person that put forward the proposal, with the assistance of the facilitator, can choose to withdraw proposal if seems to be a dead end.**

The fundamental right of consensus is for all people to be able to express themselves in their own words and of their own will. The fundamental responsibility of consensus is to assure others of their right to speak and be heard. Coercion and trade-offs are replaced with creative alternatives, and compromise with synthesis.

- 5. When a proposal seems to be well understood by everyone, and there are no new changes asked for, the facilitator(s) can ask if there are any objections or reservations to it.  
See WAYS TO EXPRESS YOUR OBJECTIONS**

6. **If there are no objections, the facilitator can call for consensus.**
7. **If there are still no objections, then after a moment of silence you have your decision.**
8. **If consensus does appear to have been reached, the facilitator will repeat the decision to the group so everyone is clear on what has been decided.**

### **Ways to Express your objections**

If a decision has been reached, or is on the verge of being reached that you cannot support, there are several ways to express your objections:

1. **Non-support** ("I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along.")
2. **Reservations** ("I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it.")
3. **Standing aside** ("I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it. ")
4. **Blocking** ("I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral." If a final decision violates someone's fundamental moral values they are obligated to block consensus.)
5. **Withdrawing from the group.** Obviously, if many people express non-support or reservations or stand aside or leave the group, it may not be a viable decision even if no one directly blocks it. This is what is known as a "lukewarm" consensus and it is just as desirable as a lukewarm beer or a lukewarm bath.

If consensus is blocked and no new consensus can be reached, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject, or does nothing if that is applicable. Major philosophical or moral questions that will come up will have to be worked through as soon as the group forms.

### **Group Roles in consensus procedures at APIRG meetings**

#### **1. Facilitators will be selected on a rotating or volunteer basis**

The facilitator(s) aids the group in defining decisions that need to be made, helps them through the stages of reaching an agreement, keeps the meeting moving, focuses discussion to the point-at hand; makes sure everyone has the opportunity to participate, and formulates and tests to see if consensus has been reached. Facilitators help to direct the process of the meeting, not its content. They never make decisions for the group. If a facilitator feels too emotionally involved in an issue or discussion and cannot remain neutral in behavior, if not in attitude, then s/he should ask someone to take over the task of facilitation for that agenda item.

#### **2. For controversial decisions (optional) a vibe-watcher may be selected**

A vibes-watcher is someone besides the facilitator who watches and comments on individual and group feelings and patterns of participation. Vibes-watchers need to be especially tuned in to the power dynamics of the group.

#### **3. Secretary or Recorder will be selected on a rotating or volunteer basis**

A recorder can take notes on the meeting, especially of decisions made and means of implementation.

**4. Time-keeper will be selected on a rotating or volunteer basis –**

In order to keep things going on schedule so that each agenda item can be covered in the time allotted for it (if discussion runs over the time for an item, the group may or may not decide to contract for more time to finish up).

**5. All participants in the decision-making process:**

a) Come to the discussion with an open mind. This doesn't mean not thinking about the issue beforehand, but it does mean being willing to consider any other perspectives and ideas that come up in the discussion.

b) Listen to other people's ideas and try to understand their reasoning.

c) Describe your reasoning briefly so other people can understand you. Avoid arguing for your own judgments and trying to make other people change their minds to agree with you.

d) Avoid changing your mind only to reach agreement and avoid conflict. Do not "go along" with decisions until you have resolved any reservations that you consider important.

e) View differences of opinion as helpful rather than harmful.

f) Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote. Stick with the process a little longer and see if you can't reach consensus after all.

**Other:**

**Creation of a Speaker's list**

The facilitator or recorder can keep a list of participants that want to comment on the decision at hand, in order of request

**Agreement with a point of discussion**

To avoid a lengthy meeting and repetition of points, participants can show approval or support of a speaker's point by an agreed upon hand signal or non-verbal cue.

**This procedure was developed with the resources on the "Act Up" website.**

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Background on Consensus, Prepared by Mary McGhee

**Sources:**

"Consensus Ingredients" by Caroline Estes, from *In Context: A Quarterly Journal of Humane Sustainable Culture*, Fall 1983

*Group Leadership and Decision Making: Workbook* by William Gellermann, 1981

**Consensus Decision Making**

In simple terms, consensus refers to agreement on some decision by all members of a group, rather than a majority or a select group of representatives. The consensus process is what a group goes through to reach this agreement. The assumptions, methods, and results are very different from traditional parliamentary procedure or majority voting methods.

Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and that no one has all of it (no matter how tempting it is to believe that we ourselves *really* know best!) It is also based on a respect for all persons involved in the decision being considered.

Acting according to consensus guidelines enables a group to take advantage of all group members' ideas. By combining their thoughts, people can often create a higher-quality decision than a vote decision or a decision by a single individual. Further, consensus decisions can be better than vote decisions because voting can actively undermine the decision. People are more likely to implement decisions they accept, and consensus makes acceptance more likely.

**What the consensus process requires**

Consensus demands a high level of trust among the members of the group. People need to believe that each member is a fair and reasonable person of integrity who has the organization's best interests at heart. There are no perfect groups or perfect individuals, but for consensus to work the members must believe that everyone is honestly doing their best.

Another important element of the consensus process is a good facilitator. This person is responsible for seeing that everyone is heard, that all ideas are incorporated if they seem to be part of the truth, and that the final decision is agreed upon by all assembled. The facilitator is the servant of the group, not its leader. It is his/her job to draw out and focus the best thinking of the group, not to use his/her position to impose or elevate his/her own.

It's important that the facilitator never show signs of impatience or disfavor towards an idea or a member. Total objectivity may be an unattainable ideal, but the facilitator should strive to remain as neutral as possible in the discussion. If he/she can't manage this, then someone else should be facilitating. For this reason, many groups rotate the facilitator role on some kind of regular schedule, or choose a facilitator for each discussion depending on who is willing to forgo taking a more active part.

A good facilitator needs to be patient, intuitive, articulate, able to think on his/her feet, and have a sense of humor. He/she should always be on the lookout for things that are missing--a person who wants to speak but has been too shy, an idea that was badly articulated or dismissed too quickly but has potential, or anything happening on the nonverbal level that might be significant. The facilitator should periodically state and restate the ideas on the table, the elements that have been agreed on, and the questions still being decided. This allows everyone to see that progress is being made, and to focus on the work left to be done.

### **Variations on basic consensus**

No matter how well the discussion is carried forward, how good the facilitator and how much integrity and trust exist in the group, there sometimes comes a point where all are in agreement but one or two. At this point there are a few possible courses of action. One is to ask if the individuals are willing to "step aside." This means that they do not agree with the decision but do not feel that it is wrong. They are willing to have the decision go forward, but do not want to take part in carrying it out.

Depending on the size and nature of the group, if more than one or two people want to step aside from a decision, the group should probably take another look at it. The facilitator might ask for a few minutes of silence to see if there is another decision or an amendment that should have been considered but has been overlooked, or something that would ease the situation.

Another possibility is to lay aside the issue for another time. Although this alternative may create some difficulties, the world will probably continue to turn with or without a decision being made right now. The need to make a decision promptly is often not as important as the need to ultimately come to unity around a decision that has been well-crafted, taking the time it needs to do it right.

A third possibility is that one or two people may stop the group from moving forward. At this time there are several key considerations. Most important, the group should see those who are withholding consensus as doing so out of their highest understanding and beliefs. Next, the individual(s) who are preventing the group from making the decision should also examine themselves closely to assure that they are not withholding consensus out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, or any other such feeling. A refusal to enter consensus should be based on a very strong belief that the decision is wrong--and that the dissenter(s) would be doing the group a great disservice by allowing the decision to go forward.

This is always one of those times when feelings can run high, and it's important for the group not to put pressure on those who differ. It's hard enough to feel that you are stopping the group from going forward, without feeling coerced to go against your examined reasons and deeply felt understandings.

Some groups operate under a modified consensus approach called "Consensus-Minus-One." What this means is that it takes more than one dissenting member to block consensus. One voice at odds with the rest is considered a workable way to go forward, but more than one is a sign that the decision should be re-thought. Consensus-Minus-One can be a reassuring arrangement for people who are new to the process of consensus decision-making, or in groups where members aren't well acquainted enough

to have the level of trust needed to commit to achieving full consensus. In practice, many groups have found that Consensus-Minus-One serves as a safety valve that rarely gets used. If even one member has strong reservations about a decision, it's often enough to keep the group searching for a better answer.

### **Some difficulties with consensus**

1. Achieving consensus can take considerably longer than a simple majority vote.
2. People who don't actively try to find a decision that is acceptable to everyone (all-win) can dominate a group's discussion by trying to make everyone else go along with them (win-lose).
3. A group can coerce or manipulate individuals into saying they accept a decision, even when they don't. That is groupthink, not true consensus.

Consensus and groupthink are different. Groupthink occurs when everyone expresses agreement with a decision, but some people are just going along because they feel obligated to reach an agreement and avoid conflict. Thus although there appears to be a consensus, some people have not resolved disagreements they consider important. In consensus, all agree with the decision and all important disagreements are resolved.

The time required to reach consensus can't usually be avoided. Instead, look at it as an investment in better decisions and a healthier, more egalitarian, more participatory organization.

The other pitfalls can best be dealt with through openness and continuous effort on everyone's part to do what is ethical and right for the group. A willingness to take risks and to give and receive honest feedback are key to developing the trust required to let the process work.