



## Effective Meetings #8 Using Consensus Effectively

### Introduction

In *Effective Meetings #6: Selecting a Group Decision-Making Process* we outlined a variety of methods groups use in making decisions and suggested guidelines for selecting the most effective and efficient method in a given situation. In *Effective Meetings #7: Consensus: Creativity and Win-Win* we suggested that consensus generated more creativity and buy-in than any other group decision-making method.

In this article we focus on how to implement the consensus process. Groups often avoid using consensus because they think it will take too long. In our experience, however, when the proper conditions are established consensus often takes less time than other methods. For example, in Frontier Associates' process for producing breakthroughs and in our Strategic Planning Workshop, consensus is always used to make decisions and the time required is often less than that of other methods.<sup>1</sup>

### Definition of Consensus

In consensus, a decision is reached only if every participant freely chooses the same alternative as the best solution, with no compromise. Not the best they could get, or the one they have to settle for, but the best of all alternatives they know about or could imagine being feasible for them, regardless of what anyone else thinks. Another way of looking at consensus is that every member of the group has a veto and should use it if not completely satisfied.

### Advantages of Consensus

Consensus has several related advantages. The decision reached has the full support of each member of the group. Because every member of the group had to agree that the solution is the best one, it probably is the result of highly

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the total time required to produce a breakthrough in solving a problem is typically 16-20 hours of workshop time. Frontier Associates' Strategic Planning Workshop, which creates the entire future of an organization, including a vision, mission, values, strategic goals, strategies for accomplishing the goals, 1-year goals, and a structure for ensuring the plan gets implemented, takes no more than 2-3 days. In both workshops the number of participants typically ranges from 20-50, and consensus on dozens of topics is regularly achieved within these timeframes.



creative thought. Therefore it is likely to actually be the best solution — the one that in retrospect is seen to be best. For example, one person may have a concern that others in the group do not want to address because they believe it has a low probability of occurring. Consensus forces the group to handle this concern without diminishing any benefit to others. Doing so is often seen as a blessing when the feared circumstance actually happens and suddenly the time devoted to the lone concern seems time well spent. Finally, because of the universal buy-in of the group members, a solution reached by consensus has a high chance of successful implementation, even in the face of substantial unanticipated obstacles.

### **Conditions which Support Consensus**

While the result of consensus is generally agreed to be ideal, a major concern is that it will take too much time, particularly if one person digs in his or her heels, preventing the group from reaching a conclusion. We have found, however, that if the right conditions are established, consensus is almost always reached in a reasonable amount of time.

Four conditions are needed to support a successful consensus process:

1. *Trust of the Group by Owner:* Almost always, an individual “owns” the problem to which the consensus process will be applied. This person must trust the group to come up with a better solution than he or she could by acting individually (“better” may include the degree of buy-in achieved). If not a group participant, the owner must be willing to adopt the group’s solution.<sup>2</sup>
2. *Universal Desire for a Solution:* All participants must prefer a solution rather than no solution. That is, they must prefer something other than the current situation extrapolated into the future. Otherwise, there is a high probability that people who want the status quo will bring the consensus process to a halt.
3. *Group Experience:* The group should have some experience working together to reach consensus. The consensus process is qualitatively different than more familiar methods of making a decision. Furthermore, each group is different and must work out the communication patterns that will facilitate reaching agreement. Group members can develop their consensus muscles by practicing using consensus first on less difficult issues, such as group guidelines and the criteria for a successful solution.

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<sup>2</sup> Since owners are frequently part of the group, they have veto power and thus their agreement is required to achieve a solution. However, an owner should avoid being a lone holdout.



4. *Skilled Facilitator*: The consensus process for a group of more than 4-5 people is typically complex enough so that it is almost impossible for a person to simultaneously participate in the process and manage it. An effective consensus process almost always requires a facilitator who stays out of the content and is committed to consensus, is skilled in leading the process, and is perceived as neutral by all group members.

### **Guidelines for Facilitating Consensus**

In addition to the above critically important conditions, the following measures optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of the consensus process:

- Ensure that the facilitator's role is understood by all participants.
- Establish an understanding of the meaning of consensus, the desirability of consensus for the decision to be made, and an explicit agreement by all group members that consensus will be used for the decision-making process.
- Establish whatever other process rules may be useful.
- Establish success criteria early in the process. Success criteria answer the question: What are the characteristics of an ideal and feasible solution? Meeting these criteria is the real goal of the consensus process. Often, however, people state as the problem a solution that hasn't worked. For example, "I didn't make my sales quota last month because I can't get enough leads. How can I get more leads?" rather than stating the real problem, "How can I make my monthly sales quota?" The group wants to work toward the real goal rather than restrict itself to refining a solution that hasn't worked.
- Do not give up. During a consensus process there are often times when it looks worse before it gets better. Agreement may even appear impossible. For example, the group might become frustrated by a single member holding out. At such times the facilitator must communicate authentically that consensus is not only possible but likely.
- Ensure that there are no covert holdouts — people who go along with the crowd but are not really on board. Symptoms of covert holdout include not saying anything or otherwise participating, hesitancy in indicating agreement, and indicating formal agreement verbally while expressing dissatisfaction through body language, facial expression, or tone of voice.
- Regard all concerns and objections as valid. A concern is not resolved until everyone says it is resolved, most particularly the person who raised it.
- Keep the conversation objective. Disagreement is welcome; it contributes to solution through consensus. Personal attacks, however, prevent reaching consensus and must not be permitted.



- Think from the goal backwards. That is, in brainstorming ask the question “How did we accomplish the success criteria?” rather than “How will we accomplish them?”
- Rigorously separate creative processes such as brainstorming from analysis. This guideline applies to negative assessments (“That is a terrible idea!”) as well as positive assessments (“What a great idea! We should do that.”).

### **Putting this Article into Action**

Look for opportunities to gain skill and trust in the consensus process. Initially select a situation in which the solution is not obvious and universal buy-in is highly desirable, but not one with high degrees of conflict, risk, or complexity. Using an experienced outside facilitator (who might combine facilitation with training internal facilitators) is recommended until internal resources have gained the requisite skill.

A high-level outline of a consensus process might look like this:

- Owner opens with brief statement of issue and expresses trust in the group.
- Define facilitator’s role.
- Define consensus. Distinguish consensus from compromise, highlighting that all parties have a veto. Suggest that the process will be optimized to the extent that all parties speak honestly of their desires and concerns, and listen closely and openly to others.
- Explain the reasons why consensus is being recommended for resolving the issue. All participants agree to use the consensus process.
- Verify that all participants prefer a solution to no solution.
- Agree (by consensus) on any other process guidelines.
- Agree (by consensus) on a time limit for the process and how the decision will be made if consensus cannot be reached within the time limit.
- Agree (by consensus) on success criteria for the decision. These are the conditions that an ideal solution will satisfy.

Experienced facilitators know alternative approaches for achieving consensus from this point on. One common set of steps is as follows:

- Brainstorm possible solutions. Do not permit analysis during brainstorming.
- Analyze selected possible solutions using the success criteria. During this step it is common for new solutions to arise that are better than those created in the prior step.
- Agree on a decision (by consensus). This step often involves additional creativity and analysis.



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## Summary

In situations requiring high levels of group buy-in and creativity, consensus is often the best group decision-making process. Despite common fears, consensus can be an efficient process if four conditions are met:

1. The problem owner trusts the group and the group's solution.
2. All participants prefer that there be a solution rather than no solution.
2. The group has some experience in reaching consensus.
3. The process is managed by a facilitator who is skilled, committed, and neutral.

When these four conditions are met and some facilitation guidelines are followed, consensus, in a time equal to or less than compromise or other more commonly used methods, can reliably produce optimal results.