

Consensus Decision Making



The **spoke's** role is to feed back information between the small group and the spokescouncil. The spoke needs to act as a voice for **everyone** within the small group, communicating the breadth of collective thought rather than just their own personal point of view. Being the spoke carries a lot of responsibility to represent information accurately and not to manipulate the process.

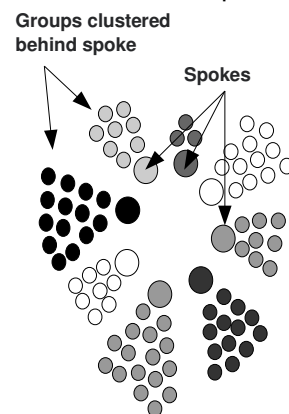
Generally spokes don't make decisions for their group but always check back for agreement before a decision is finalised. However, an individual small group may empower their spoke to take decisions within agreed parameters.

Rotating the role of spoke from meeting to meeting is a good idea, as is having two spokes, one of them presenting the viewpoints and proposals from their small group, the other to take notes of what other groups have to say. This helps to ensure that ideas don't get lost or misrepresented.

Why small groups? Some people don't see the need to split into small groups – they want to hear the whole discussion, and have everyone else hear their point of view. However, large plenary meetings make it very difficult for everyone to participate – there's not enough time for everyone to speak and many people feel too intimidated to talk in front of hundreds of people. Breaking into small groups creates safer, more dynamic spaces to work in, includes more people and saves a lot of time. Small groups can also allow several tasks to be done in parallel.

Fishbowl spokescouncil

The groups sit in an outer circle around the spokes.



This makes the spokes more accountable and reduces the need to repeat information.

Consensus decision making is a creative and dynamic way of reaching agreement between all members of a group. Instead of simply voting for an item and having the majority of the group getting their way, a consensus group is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports – or at least can live with. This makes sure that all opinions, ideas and concerns are taken into account. By listening closely to each other, the group aims to come up with proposals that work for everyone.

Consensus is neither compromise nor unanimity – it aims to go further by weaving together everyone's best ideas and most important concerns – a process that often results in surprising and creative solutions, inspiring both the individual and the group as whole.

Working together

At the heart of consensus is a respectful dialogue between equals. It's about everyone working together to meet both the individual's and the group's needs – working *with* each other rather than *for* or *against* each other, something that requires openness and trust.

Consensus is looking for 'win-win' solutions that are acceptable to all - no decision will be made against the will of an individual or a minority. Instead the group adapts to all its members' needs. If everyone agrees to a decision they will all be much more committed to making it happen.

Consensus decision making is based on the idea that people should have full control over their lives and that power should be shared by all, not just concentrated in the hands of a few. It's about having the freedom to decide one's own course in life and the right to play an equal role in creating a common future. This is why it is used widely in groups working towards a more just and equitable society such as small voluntary groups, co-operatives and campaign networks.



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Conditions for consensus

Common Goal: Everyone in the group needs to share a clear common goal and be willing to work together towards it. Work out together what your goals are and how you will get there. If differences arise later, revisit the common goal to help to focus and unite the group.

Commitment to reaching consensus: Everyone needs to be willing to really give it a go. This means being deeply honest about what it is you want or don't want, and properly listening to what others have to say. Everyone must be willing to shift their positions, to be open to alternative solutions and be able to reassess their needs.

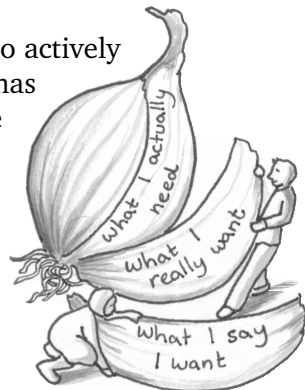
Trust and openness: We need to be able to trust that everyone shares our commitment to consensus and that everyone respects our opinions and equal rights. It would be a big breach of trust for people to manipulate the process of the meeting in order to get the decision they most want.

Part of this is to openly express both our desires (what we'd *like* to see happening), and our needs (what we *have* to see happen in order to be able to support a decision). If everyone is able to talk openly then the group will have the information it requires to take everyone's positions into account and to come up with a solution that everyone can support.

Sufficient time for making decisions and for learning to work by consensus. Taking time to make a good decision now can save wasting time revisiting a bad one later.

Clear Process: It's essential to have a clear process for making decisions and to make sure that everyone has a shared understanding of how it works.

Active participation: In consensus we all need to actively participate. We need to listen to what everyone has to say, voice our thoughts and feelings about the matter and pro-actively look for solutions that include everyone.



Key skills for consensus

Active Listening: When we actively listen we suspend our own thought processes and give the speaker our full attention. We make a deliberate effort to understand someone's position and their needs, concerns and emotions.

Summarising: A succinct and accurate summary of what's been said so far can really help a group move towards a decision. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences: "It seems like we've almost reached agreement on that bit of the proposal, but we need to explore this part further to address everyone's concerns." Check with everyone that you've got it right.

Synthesis: Find the common ground and any connections between seemingly competing ideas and weave them together to form proposals. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have.

Consensus in large groups

In large groups it's a good idea to delegate issues to smaller groups, such as working groups or local groups. However, sometimes the issues will be so important that they have to be discussed and decided by everyone. This will often be done in a **spokescouncil**, which enables hundreds and thousands of people to work together by consensus in an efficient way.

In a spokescouncil the meeting splits into small groups, which start by discussing the issue(s) to come up with concerns and ideas. Spokes (delegates) from each group then meet up in a spokescouncil to feed back these thoughts.

The spokescouncil uses this information to create one or more proposals. These are discussed back in the small groups to check for any amendments and agreement. The results of these discussions are taken to the spokescouncil who should be able to either confirm agreement or draw up new proposals for further discussion. In this way the power to make decisions lies firmly with the small groups, not the spokes.

The **small groups** are often based around pre-existing groups such as work teams, local groups or affinity groups. Alternatively, a large group of people might split into smaller groups randomly.

Guidelines for reaching consensus

- ★ If you don't understand something, don't be afraid to say so.
- ★ Be willing to work towards the solution that's best for everyone, not just what's best for you. Be flexible and willing to give something up to reach an agreement.
- ★ Help to create a respectful and trusting atmosphere. Nobody should be afraid to express their ideas and opinions. Remember that we all have different values, backgrounds and behaviour and we get upset by different things.
- ★ Explain your own position clearly. Be open and honest about the reasons for your view points. Express your concerns early on in the process so that they can be taken into account in any proposals.
- ★ Listen actively to what people are trying to say. Make an effort to understand someone's position and their underlying needs, concerns and emotions. Give everyone space to finish and take time to consider their point of view.
- ★ Think before you speak, listen before you object. Listen to other members' reactions and consider them carefully before pressing your point. Self restraint is essential in consensus – sometimes the biggest obstacle to progress is an individual's attachment to one idea. If another proposal is good, don't complicate matters by opposing it just because it isn't your favourite idea! Ask yourself: "Does this idea work for the group, even if I don't like it the best?" or "Does it matter which one we choose?"
- ★ Don't be afraid of disagreement. Consensus isn't about us all thinking the same thing. Differences of opinion are natural and to be expected. Disagreements can help a group's decision, because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance the group will find good solutions. Easily reached consensus may cover up the fact that some people don't feel safe or confident enough to express their disagreements.



Facilitation

In most meetings, there are one or more facilitators. Their role is to ensure that the tasks of the meeting get done: that decisions are made and implemented. They also help the group to work harmoniously, creatively and democratically.

The facilitators might take steps to keep the meeting focused, or make sure a few people don't dominate the discussion. They might suggest a break when people are getting tired; they might have prepared an agenda and process that will help the group achieve its goals.

The facilitators shouldn't have any more power than anyone else and should stay neutral on the issues under discussion. They're not there to make all the proposals and decide things for a group. They can only do their job with everyone's support and co-operation.

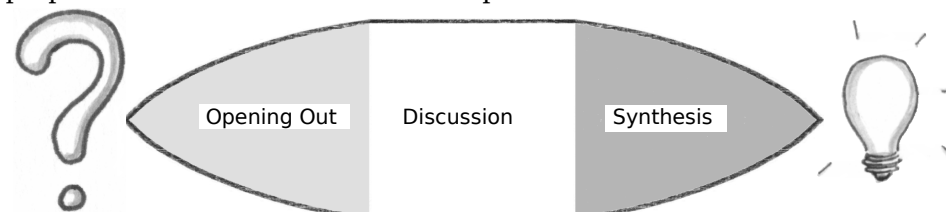
If a small group doesn't give anyone the role of facilitator, then everyone can be responsible for making the process of the meeting work.

The decision making process

The diagram below shows how a discussion evolves during the consensus process. At the beginning it widens out as people bring different perspectives and ideas to the group.

This provides the material needed for a broad-ranging discussion which explores all the options and helps people understand each others' concerns. This can be a turbulent and sometimes difficult stage – people might be grappling with lots of competing or contradictory ideas – but it is the most creative part, so don't lose heart!

Then the group moves on to synthesise a proposal. This means finding the group's common ground, weeding out some ideas and combining all the useful bits into one proposal. Finally, if the group agrees on a proposal a decision is reached and implemented.



A consensus flowchart

There are many different ways of reaching consensus. This model outlines the common stages and will work well with up to about 20 people.

Step 1: Introduce and clarify the issue(s) to be decided
Share relevant info. What are the key questions?

Step 2: Explore the issue and look for ideas.
1. Gather initial thoughts and reactions. What are the **issues** and people's **concerns**?
2. Collect **ideas** for solving the problem – write them down.
3. Have a **broad ranging discussion** and debate the ideas. What are the pros and cons?
Start thinking about solutions to people's concerns. Eliminate some ideas, shortlist others.

Step 3: Look for emerging proposals
Look for a proposal that weaves together the best elements of the ideas discussed. Look for solutions that address people's key concerns.

Step 4: Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal
Ensure that any remaining concerns are heard and that everyone has a chance to contribute.
Look for **amendments** that make the proposal even more acceptable to the group.

Step 5: Test for agreement
Do you have agreement? Check for the following:
Blocks: I have a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal that has not been resolved. We need to look for a new proposal.
Stand asides: I can't support this proposal because ... But I don't want to stop the group, so I'll let the decision happen without me.
Reservations: I have some reservations but am willing to let the proposal pass.
Agreement: I support the proposal and am willing to implement it.
Consensus: No blocks, not too many stand asides or reservations? Active agreement?
Then we have a decision!



Step 6: Implement the decision
Who, when, how? Action point the tasks and set deadlines.

Agreement and Disagreement

At the decision stage people have several options:

Agreement with the proposal.

Reservations: You are willing to let the proposal go ahead but want to make the group aware you aren't happy with it. You may even put energy into implementing it once your concerns have been acknowledged.

Standing aside: You want to object, but not block the proposal. This means you won't help to implement the decision, but you are willing for the group to go ahead with it. You might stand aside because you disagree with the proposal, or you might like the decision but be unable to support it because you don't have the time or energy.

The group may be happy to accept the stand aside and go ahead, or they may work on a new proposal, especially if there are several stand asides.

A block always stops a proposal from going ahead. It expresses a fundamental objection. It isn't "I don't really like it," or "I liked the other idea better." It means that you cannot live with the proposal. The group can either start work on a new proposal, or look for amendments to overcome the objection.

In an ideal consensus process a block wouldn't happen since any major concerns about a proposal should be addressed before the decision stage. However, sometimes people aren't able to express their concerns clearly enough, or aren't heard by the group. In such situations the block acts as a safeguard to ensure that decisions are supported by everyone.

Being able to block is an integral part of consensus, but it comes with a big responsibility. A block stops other people from doing something that they would like to do, and it should therefore only be used if serious concerns are unresolved.

Make sure everyone understands the different options for expressing disagreement. Often people are confused and block when they'd actually be happy to stand aside. Sometimes people are scared of blocking, even if they are deeply unhappy and use a milder form of disagreement instead.

