A Consensus Based Decision-Making Primer

What is Consensus Based Decision-Making?
Consensus is a process used to find the highest level of agreement without dividing the participants into factions. Consensus honors collective wisdom and understand that everyone’s comments hold value. Consensus decisions mean that the entire team/group has come to agreement on a course of action, even if individuals might have a different preference.

How do we know that consensus decision-making is being practiced?
Consensus decision-making is being practiced when…

- Everyone on the team has had ample opportunity to have his or her ideas considered. In the course of the discussion leading to consensus, individual team members may change their ideas (based on new information or perspectives from their team) or they may decide to defer their individual feelings or needs to those of the team. The key point is that this process is deliberate and fully voluntary on the part of the group member.

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  - Agreement with most parts of the proposed decision
  - A decision to let go of a non-crucial element of their point of view in order to strengthen team alignment on the topic
  - Understanding that the final decision does not compromise their values
  - An assessment that the final decision has the best chance for successful implementation because so many members of the team support it

- Everyone in the group supports, agrees to, or can accept a particular decision. In the end, everyone can say "whether or not I prefer this decision above all others, I will support it because it was reached fairly and openly. **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.

- A better solution is achieved from collective input.

- The process strengthens and grows the community and trust has been increased among members.

- It takes time to arrive at a decision for action. Consensus often, but not always, takes more time, patience, and skill (meaning, it gets easier with practice), uses many resources before a decision is made, creating a high commitment to the decision, and often results in a non-traditional/creative decision.

- The mission, vision, and/or organizational guiding principles are discussed in the process.
• Individuals and the group strengthen their capacity in group process and conflict resolution, and/or support the process to let this be accomplished.

**Consensus vs. Voting, What’s the Difference?**

Voting is a means by which we choose one alternative from several. *Voting is a win or lose model*, in which people are more often concerned with the numbers it takes to "win" more than with the issue itself. Voting does not take into account individual feelings or needs.

Consensus, on the other hand, is *a process of synthesizing many diverse elements together*. With consensus people can and should work through differences and reach a mutually satisfactory position.

**When to Use Consensus?**

A group that has adopted a consensus model will use that process for any item that brings up a lot of emotions, is something that concerns people's ethics, politics, morals or other areas where there is much investment. A group committed to consensus may utilize other forms of decision-making (individual, compromise, majority rules) when appropriate; the group may decide (*by consensus, of course*) to use an alternative decision-making process.

**How to PRACTICE Consensus?**

During discussion a proposal for resolution is put forward. It is amended and modified through more discussion, or withdrawn if it seems to be a dead end. During this discussion period it important to articulate differences clearly. It is the responsibility of those who are having trouble with a proposal to put forth alternative suggestions. A group commitment to consensus requires active listening to the reasons behind other opinions. *Not only to hear different opinions – but understanding their logic.*

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. If there are no objections, there can be a call for consensus. If there are still no objections, then after a moment of silence you have your decision. Once consensus does appear to have been reached, it really helps to have someone repeat the decision to the group so everyone is clear on what has been decided.

What does this look like in action? Turn the page.
Reaching Consensus - Levels of Agreement

In seeking consensus on an interim or final recommendation, it is understood that members should voice their concerns with specific proposals along the way, rather than waiting until a final recommendation has been developed. In addition, the working group may choose to use the following five levels of agreement to indicate a member's degree of approval and support for any proposal or decision being considered by the working group and to determine the degree of consensus among the working group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Support</th>
<th>I feel we have no clear sense of agreement among the group. We need to talk more before considering a decision.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocking</td>
<td>I do not agree with the group's proposal. I feel the need to block its adoption and propose an alternative.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand Aside</td>
<td>I may not be especially enthusiastic about it, but I can accept the group's proposal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>I think this proposal is the best choice of the options available to UP.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active Support</td>
<td>I am enthusiastic about the group's proposal and am confident it expresses the best wisdom of the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The goal is for all members of the working group to be in the upper levels of agreement. **A consensus is considered reached if all members are at Levels 3 - 5.** If any member of the working group is at Level 1 or 2, the working group will stop and evaluate how best to proceed; this may include:

*Inclusive Discussion*

This may take several rounds before the next step.

*No consensus can be reached - group decides by consensus what steps to take next.*
• Additional discussion to help understand unresolved concerns before proceeding further, or the group may benefit from creating additional options;
• Selecting a few members from the group to work on the decision and bring back a proposal for consensus, after major issues of disagreement have been informed;
• 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 with each affinity group will have to be worked through as soon as the group forms.

Absence When Decisions Are Made
When members cannot attend a meeting of the working group, they will seek to communicate their views to other members of the group prior to meeting. Absence of a member is interpreted as assent.

Roles in a Consensus Meeting
There are several roles, which if filled, can help consensus decision-making run smoothly.

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.

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 undercurrents in all group dynamics.

A recorder can take notes on the meeting, especially of decisions made and means of implementation and a time-keeper keeps 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).

All meeting participants are invited to be part of the consensus process. Even though individuals take on these roles, all participants in a meeting should be aware of and involved in the issues, process, and feelings of the group, and should share their individual expertise in helping the group run smoothly and reach a decision. This is especially true when it comes to finding compromise agreements to seemingly contradictory positions.