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Participatory Decision-Making: Introduction

Participatory Decision Making is a creative process to give ownership of decisions to the whole group, finding effective options that everyone can live with. One form of this is consensus, which these pages look at further.

About participatory decision-making

A common form of participatory decision making is called consensus. This is a process that works to find **common ground** and **solutions that are acceptable to all** and best for the group. It tries to **avoid the alienation of minorities** that majority rule can create and values everyone's opinion equally. With consensus **everyone in the group must agree to a decision** for it to be adopted!

Preconditions for consensus

- everyone must be **committed to reaching a consensus view** and have their personal agendas challenged;
- the group must **participate actively** in the process and **good facilitation** must be used;
- awareness of the **common ground** within the group is needed. This is useful for bringing the group back to if there are disagreements;
- everyone must **understand the process**;
- it must be a **substantial decision**;
- **sufficient time** must be allowed for the process.

When not to use consensus

There are also times when consensus is not the most appropriate system for decision making:

- **Little or no common ground:** if the group is not cohesive enough to generate shared attitudes and perceptions, consensus becomes an exercise in frustration
- **There are no good choices:** The consensus process can help a group find the best possible solution to a problem, but it is not an effective way to make either-or-choices between evils, for members will never be able to agree which is worse. If the group has a negative decision to make it may not be worth expending loads of energy, so try flipping a coin.
- **When they can see the whites of your eyes:** In emergencies where immediate action is necessary, appointing a temporary leader may be the wisest course of action.
- **When the issue is trivial:** Groups have before devoted half an hour to trying to decide by consensus whether to spend forty minutes or a full hour at lunch. Consensus is a thinking process - when there is nothing to think about, flip a coin.
- **When the group has insufficient information:** When you're lost in the hills, and no-one knows the way home, you cannot figure out how to get there by consensus. Send out scouts. Ask: Do we have the information we need to solve the problem? Can we get it?

How it works

In the following sections there are guides to two consensus models:

Basic Consensus: is a model you can use in group meetings to make all kinds of decisions. It can be varied for your particular situation.

Quick Consensus: allows you to make group decisions in action situations when you don't have time for a comprehensive discussion.

Don't give up on consensus if it starts getting hard. This is a completely new way of thinking but is a really powerful tool for empowering individuals and finding creative solutions that everyone is happy with. Do get People & Planet to train your group in the process if you want to start using it.

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Consensus: Basic process

1. Define the problem or decision to be made

If this isn't shared you will immediately have difficulties. Allow space for questions and clarification of the situation.

2. Share knowledge

Gather and share all relevant information.

3. Brainstorm solutions and ideas

Write them all down, even ones that appear crazy. Keep energy up for a quick-fire brainstorm and allow enough time to go beyond normal or safe ideas. Incorporate all ideas and views.

4. Discuss the options

Prioritise, amend and clarify the ideas. Watch out for clearly emerging favourites.

5. State the prioritised proposal(s)

Make sure everyone is clear about the options. It may be useful to write them down.

6. Debate and discuss

Discuss the final idea(s), share opinions, clarify all the information needed and make sure all voices and ideas are heard as the group moves towards a decision. You could discuss each proposal in turn or use methods to compare them. This period may last a very short, or a long time, but you should always have a clear goal of heading towards one clear proposal for action. The facilitator should be looking out for signs of group agreement.

7. Restate the final proposal

You may find there is a very different proposal that will bring everyone's opinions together or that an original proposal can be modified or amended to make it stronger.

8. Test for consensus

- who agrees with the proposal;
- who doesn't agree with the proposal;
- are there are any major objections (sometimes called blocking, only used where someone feels the proposal goes against the principals of the group).

9. Consensus OR Major Objections

Everyone agrees or some minor objections. See if any minor objections can be acknowledged or incorporated into the decision. If yes - you have consensus! Work out how to implement the decision the group has made.

Major Objections - discuss in your group how to take things forward. You could:

- See if any objectors are willing to **stand aside.** They are willing for the group to go forward with the decision but personally they cannot/do not want to be involved. If a lot of people stand aside, it may indicate that there is no real support for the proposal.
- Uphold the objections and **discuss new proposals** (i.e. return to STEP 3 or 6)
- Have a break and leave it for **another time** after everyone has had time to reflect. You could **ask someone from outside the group to facilitate** the discussion.
- Use a **different way of deciding**, e.g. random choice or voting.

Example Consensus Process

1. We want to launch Go Green Week with a high-profile action. What should we do?

2. Go Green is in a month. We have support from our SU.

3. Ideas brainstormed include: a stall outside the Union on the first day; a balloon launch; chalking on the pavements on campus; street theatre outside the Union.

4. Discuss and prioritise all of the options **using card ranking** (e.g. writing the options on cards and arranging them so they show which is the best or has the most support) to draw out the top two preferred option.

5. The **two favourite options** are chalking on the pavements on campus, or street theatre with a stall outside the Union because the balloon launch will have a bad environmental impact.

6. Do a **pros and cons analysis for each option.** Street theatre with a stall outside the Union is the favourable option because the group is unsure about the legal implications of chalking.

7. The proposal is to do some street theatre with a stall outside the Union.

8. Test for consensus using handsignals.

9. Everyone is happy with the option, discuss how to plan the action.

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Consensus: Quick

In an action situation, a change of events means you need to make a quick decision. Basic consensus would take too long, so you need a pared down version of the process: quick consensus.

How it works

Once you've understood basic consensus, the quick method is easy to grasp. The discussion is stripped out and people come up with proposals straight away. It's how those proposals are treated that is important.

1. Facilitator states/clarifies situation

2. Proposal

3. Any major objections?

If yes then that person must come up with a counter proposal. If no …

4. Restate the proposal

5. Any stand asides? Agreement?

6. Implement decision

Top Tips

- If you know you will need quick consensus, appoint a facilitator and practice in advance;
- Know your limits, use a system you're confident with, even if that's not consensus.

Quick Consensus Example

1. The police have given us two minutes to leave or we'll be arrested - any proposals?

2. I propose that we link arms and sit down

3. Any blocks? Yes - lots of us said beforehand that we didn't want to get arrested. **I propose we go. Any blocks** to new proposal? **No.**

4. So the proposal is that we go.

5. Are there any stand asides? No. **Everyone else happy?** Yes

6. Everyone leaves.

Major Objections and Stand Asides

Major Objections

A major objection kills a proposal, dead - it is a veto. If this happens you need a new proposal (quick!). Some groups insist that **before you can veto you must have a counter proposal.** In this version a major objection can be a way of moving the discussion on. In other words you could veto a proposal simply because the group is failing to make a decision, not just for the moral reasons normally associated with a major objection. As long as your group is clear on the way the major objection is used, this isn't a problem.

Stand Asides

As with the normal consensus process this means you are saying "I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it." The person standing aside is not responsible for the consequences of the groups actions.

Practice examples

Try out these scenarios in your group to develop your quick consensus skills:

1. You are participating in an action with groundrules that include no property damage. Another group is preparing to spray-paint messages on one of the buildings. Meanwhile unbeknownst to them, a TV crew is setting up to film them (give yourself 1 min).

2. On a protest, you are moved off the road by the police and threatened with arrest. You notice that you could sneak back onto the road (2 mins).

3. One member of your group wants to leave the protest now. The police are moving in to arrest everyone (1 min).

Consensus: Tools and Tips

Tools

Generating Ideas

Brainstorm

Make sure **everyone is clear** about what the topic is. Someone **writes down the ideas** where everyone can see them as quickly as people can think of them.

- don't critique ideas during the brainstorm
- don't be afraid of silences - sometimes things falter and then get a second wind
- build an atmosphere in which it's OK to think creatively

This can also be done in **pairs, small groups** or as a **roving brainstorm** - small groups move round the room to different pieces of paper to brainstorm on different topics.

P&Pers use small group work during decision-making at The Forum 08
Image © Rich Lott

Individual Reflection

Sometimes all it takes for new ideas to emerge is a **little bit of clear thinking time**. After some individual thinking time **everyone feeds back their best ideas** either through a Go Round or quickfire brainstorm. Writing **ideas on post-its** can also help - these can then be grouped or used to spark new ideas using a roving brainstorm.

Prioritisation Tools

Stickers and Dots

Give everyone a number of stickers or dots that they can put beside a list of options to show which ideas they consider *best or most important.* They could put all their stickers beside one option or spread over several options.

Ranking

Small groups rank their top three or so options and then feedback them back to the whole group. Options that are not ranked highly by any groups can then be discarded (checking with the proposers).

Participants prioritise options by using a spectrum line at The Forum 08
Image © Rich Lott

Pros and Cons

The benefits and drawbacks of each option are listed and then compared. This could be done as a whole group or in small groups.

Fist to Five

Go through options. For each idea group members stick up:

- **5 fingers** for strong support and willingness to **lead** an option forward
- **4 fingers** for strong support and a willingness to **work** on the option
- **3 fingers** for **minimal support** but willingness to work on it
- **2 fingers** for **neutrality**
- **1 finger** for **no support**
- **Fist** for no support and **active opposition**

Tips

- **Read the** facilitation pages for lots of other tips and tools.
- The **facilitator must be neutral** so they don't lose the trust of the group by influencing the outcome.
- **Make sure everyone understands the topic/problem.**
- Ensure that **all members contribute their ideas and knowledge** related to the subject and are open and honest about their opinions.
- **Create shared** ground rules stressing active listening, respect and trust for each other. Nobody must be afraid to express their ideas and opinions. Differences of opinion are natural, to be expected and can help the decision

making process because of a wider range of ideas and information.

- Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when a discussion reaches a stalemate. Instead **look for the most acceptable solution for all parties.** However, members must also be flexible in order to reach an agreement in the end.
- **Make time for participatory decision making. If consensus is reached too easily, be suspicious.** People could be agreeing quickly because the meeting is running late or changing their mind to avoid conflict. Explore the reasons and be sure that everyone accepts the solution for similar or complementary reasons.
- Stress that people should **think before they speak, listen before they object.**
- Remember: the process of consensus is **what you put into it as an individual and as a part of the group.**