

Selected Quotes about Formal Consensus Decision Making

Consensus is more than the sum total of ideas of the individuals in the group. During discussion, ideas build one upon the next, generating new ideas, until the best decision emerges. This dynamic is called the creative interplay of ideas. Creativity plays a major part as everyone strives to discover what is best for the group. The more people involved in this cooperative process, the more ideas and possibilities are generated. Consensus works best with everyone participating.

Cooperation is more than "live and let live". It is making an effort to understand another's point of view. It is incorporating another's perspective with your own so that a new perspective emerges. It is suspending disbelief, even if only temporarily, so you can see the gem of truth in ideas other than your own. It is a process of creativity, synthesis, and open-mindedness which leads to trust-building, better communication and understanding, and ultimately, a stronger, healthier, more successful group.

The goal of consensus is for the group to create a decision which each member of the group agrees is the best possible decision for the group. The goal of the consensus process is for the members of the group to synthesize a proposal which takes each member's concerns and understandings of the issue into account as best as is possible. In more traditional decision making systems the participants often make up their minds before arriving at the decision making table and attempt "win" by swaying other people to their side. In consensus it's important to think about issues ahead of time but to recognize that you are not the holder of the whole truth and therefore can't make a good decision for the group by yourself.

The free flow of ideas, even among friends, inevitably leads to conflict. In this context, conflict is simply the expression of disagreement. Disagreement itself is neither good nor bad. Diverse viewpoints bring into focus and explore the strengths and weaknesses of attitudes, assumptions, and plans. Without conflict, one is less likely to think about and evaluate one's views and prejudices. There is no right decision, only the best one for the whole group. The task is to work together to discover which choice is most acceptable to all members.

In joining a group, one accepts a personal responsibility to behave with respect, good will, and honesty. Each one is expected to recognize that the group's needs have a certain priority over the desires of the individual. Many people participate in group work in a very egocentric way. It is important to accept the shared responsibility for helping to find solutions to other's concerns.

Sources for the quotations and the following guidelines:

[On Conflict and Consensus: A handbook on Formal Consensus Decisionmaking](#) by C.T. Butler and Amy Rothstein

[A Revolutionary Decision-Making Process](#) by C.T. Lawrence Butler

[A Bit About Consensus](#)

Formal Consensus Decision-Making

A good decision-making process is defined as one that is:

- Fair
- Produces good solutions

Assumption of consensus: It is better to involve every person who is affected by the decision in the decision-making process.

- Two heads are better than one (creative interplay of ideas)
- Relies on a cooperative dynamic rather than a competitive dynamic: the goal is to reach a decision, not to "win". The power to reveal your part of the truth is the maximum force allowed (non-violence)
- Responsibility of individuals to express their concerns; responsibility of group to respect the contributions of members
- Requires high level of commitment: understanding that the goals of the group are in line with your personal goals

Challenges:

- Avoidance, denial and repression of conflict on the part of members
- Unresolved conflict from previous experiences may come into play
- Practice and discipline take time

Consensus decision-making takes time:

- Decisions are not an end in themselves: begins with an idea and ends with the actual implementation of the decision
- Quick decisions that do not have the support of the group will take a long time, if ever, to be implemented; unresolved concerns can affect future decisions

Formal Consensus for Parish Council

What is Formal Consensus?

- Consensus decision making process with a clearly defined structure
- Requires and reinforces commitment on the part of every member to active cooperation by actively listening to others, speaking when appropriate and working together to resolve concerns

How it works:

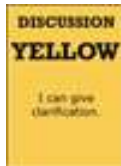
- Only one proposal is considered at a time
- Proposals are the property of the group, not the presenter
- Everyone works together to make it the best possible decision for the group.
- Any concerns are raised and resolved, one by one

A 3-colour card system is used to facilitate meetings, with each colour having different purposes in discussion and decisions. Every member of PC is given a full set of cards.

Discussion cards:



(green) You have a comment or opinion that will advance the discussion.



(yellow) You have a question/you can answer a question. Cannot be used to advance an opinion.



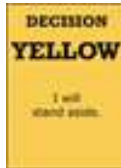
(red) You think the discussion is running over time, is getting off-topic, or is becoming too personal. Can also be used to raise a point of order regarding the process. You must have an articulated concern before you can show a red card.

During discussion, the facilitator will recognize first red cards, then yellow, and finally green in order to address points of order or outstanding questions before moving the discussion forward. Cards of similar colour will be recognized in the order they are raised. Members must raise two cards if, for instance, they wish to provide clarification (yellow) and they have a comment or opinion (green).

Decision cards (used only when the facilitator calls for consensus):



(green) You agree with the proposal (as it stands) and would like it to be a decision.



(yellow) You have a question that needs to be answered before you can make a decision OR you are standing aside. If you choose this method you are expected to comply with the decision even if you disagree with it. Yellow card holders will be asked to state why they are holding a card to ensure that any outstanding questions or concerns are addressed.



(red) You think the group is making the wrong decision and that you can't let the group proceed. You must have an articulated concern before you can show a red card and you **MUST** be prepared to be part of the solution (be willing to help create "a better way").

Addressing objections:

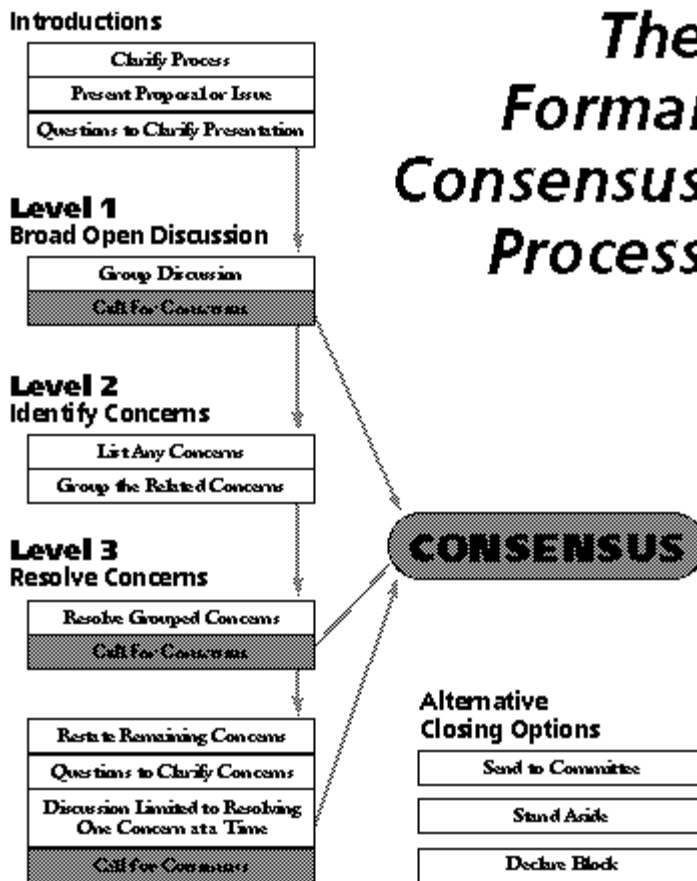
- Every objection or concern must be validated and then resolved
- Not the choice of the individual alone to determine if an objection prevents the proposal from being adopted
- A valid objection is one in keeping with all previous decisions of the group and is based upon the commonly-held principles or foundation adopted by the group (must be in the best interest of the group as a whole)
- While it is the group's responsibility to address concerns, individuals have a responsibility to be open and honest about how the group can address the concern (express concern as if it will be resolved)

Flow of Process

Basic principles:

- Process is cyclical, with different scope or focus at each stage.
- Separate identification of concerns from their resolution.
- Introduce proposal one meeting, begin to build consensus the next.
- In formal consensus, agenda items are not even placed on the agenda without being in the form of a "starting place" proposal. Proposals should, if possible, come from committees and be written, well-structured and well thought out to save group time.

The Formal Consensus Process



Introduction

- Presenter introduces proposal (not facilitator) by reading the proposal, providing background information, and stating clearly its benefits and reasons for adoption, including addressing any existing concerns
- Members may ask questions to clarify proposal (not comments or concerns)

Level I: Broad, open discussion

- Broad discussion on proposal as a whole; note any specific concerns to be addressed later
- If there are no unresolved concerns at this time, the facilitator can ask if there is consensus (show of cards)

Level II: Identify concerns

- List concerns (do not answer or comment)
- Identify patterns or relationships between concerns and group them if possible

Level III: Address concerns

- Validate concerns and resolve each in turn
- If there are no remaining unresolved concerns at this time, the facilitator can ask if there is consensus (show of cards)
- If not, restate remaining concerns and repeat process

Role of facilitator:

- Move through the agenda in the allotted time
- Guide the process, summarizing when appropriate the sense of the meeting by laying out the various sides of an issue including pros and cons.
- Suggest alternate or additional techniques for discussion
- Be diligent about the fair distribution of attention, being sure to limit those who are speaking often and offering opportunities to those who are not speaking much or at all
- Do not attempt to direct the content of the discussion
- To speak as a member, must clearly step aside from facilitator role