

# Best Practices

## Consensus Decisions

## OVERVIEW

### Consensus Has Two Sides

Consensus is a coin with a practical side and a lofty side. It is an effective structure for making organizational decisions, and it is an attitude towards making decisions that treats all participants as equally worthy of respect.

The practical minded are focused on results. They see that time invested in reaching consensus about work decisions is more than rewarded when the work begins. They understand that decision-making and implementation are closely linked, and that the pay-off from using consensus comes when much of the resistance and misunderstanding that usually accompany implementation fall away.

People interested in the lofty side of consensus use the process because it treats all participants as equals. They believe a group benefits from hearing all views and valuing all views. They believe that each member of the group benefits from

being given full consideration and attention by the group.

### Listening, Accommodation, and Choice

Deciding by consensus sets up a situation in which more listening occurs and listening skills are improved. Because consensus is the goal, each group member works to understand the positions, perspectives, opinions and ideas of the other members of the group.

Consensus involves accommodation in two directions. The group accommodates to individual preferences as much as possible in reaching decisions, and individuals accommodate to the wisdom of the group as a whole in order to make decisions possible.

Consensus emphasizes individual choice and responsibility, and ensures higher levels of ownership and support for group decisions. Each person makes a choice about support for each decision.

### Consensus —

**1 a: a general agreement, b: the judgment arrived at by most of the concerned;**

**2: group solidarity in sentiment and belief**

**&** Best Practices highlights progressive strategies to serve both private and public sector organizations in the next decades.

# THE PROCESS

## *Pure Consensus and Modifications*

### **Pure Consensus**

Under conditions of full or pure consensus, no decision is made unless all agree to it. No person need fear that he or she will be ignored, or discounted, or overridden by the group. The group is committed to satisfying all objections to any proposal brought forward.

### **Modified Consensus**

Groups use a modified consensus process when they feel that time or other constraints make full consensus potentially unworkable. All modifications provide a means for moving forward when the group is

having difficulty reaching consensus.

Modifications have a wide range. At the modest end are structures that allow a group to make a decision even though one person objects. At the extreme end are structures where any member with an objection may offer a motion and call for a decision by majority vote.

### **Pure Consensus and Trust**

Use of pure consensus for making decisions is most appropriate under two opposite conditions. One is when there is a high level of trust among members of a group. The other is when there are clearly divergent interests and little trust

among group members. In both situations, using consensus is effective and builds trust.

When there is a high level of trust, the group believes that the power each group member has to stop a group decision will be used wisely, with respect for each of the other members and for the needs of the group. Shared values and goals ensure that the group will be able to make decisions in a timely and effective fashion.

When there is a low level of trust, the consensus process functions as a protection for each member. Pure consensus guarantees each member of the group that no group decision will go directly against that member's interests. With each member secure in his or her power to prevent an adverse decision, the group is able to conduct very frank and open discussions, and to consider controversial issues. Such conditions are conducive to identifying common interest and common ground.

## *Personally Speaking*

I was introduced to consensus decision-making in the early 1970's and have used it over the years with large and small organizations. I presently facilitate regular meetings for eight different groups that use either pure or modified forms of consensus.

I am a believer in consensus as a way to improve group results, especially over the long term. I'm inclined to say I've never met a consensus process I didn't like, although I have on occasion observed groups where the use of

consensus is poorly understood and the process poorly implemented.

I encourage its use, and when I work with groups to develop or modify by-laws or operating principles I usually suggest that consensus be used for decision-making. The consensus process is simple and easy to understand, it creates equal footing for all members of the group, and it is more likely to result in decisions that will be well implemented.

Steve Kay

**&**  
Best Practices  
*is a publication of*  
*Roberts & Kay, Inc.*  
*250 Campsie Place*  
*Lexington, KY 40508*  
*(606) 231-8308*  
  
*c 1997*  
  
*Rona Roberts & Steve Kay,*  
*Publishers and Editors*  
  
*Donna Wainscott, Production*  
  
Comments and letters welcome.

---

## How Consensus Works

In its simplest form, the consensus process has four phases.

### *Phase One: Proposal*

A member states a proposal or presents a written proposal to the group. This is the basis for discussion.

### *Phase Two: Comments or Questions*

Members of the group make comments or ask questions about the proposal. This phase is for clarification, and also gives a first indication of the level of support for the proposal among members of the group.

### *Phase Three: Concerns*

When there are no more comments or questions, any member with a concern about the proposal states that concern. As the word suggests, "concern" means that the person is not quite comfortable with the proposal, doesn't agree with it totally and wants to let the group know that. A concern may be raised and let go, or the proposal may be modified to meet the concern, or the concern may become an objection in the next phase.

### *Phase Four: Objection*

In this phase the group is ready to make a decision about the proposal. Any person objecting to the proposal states that objection. If no one objects, the proposal is considered to be adopted by the group.

## The Heart of Consensus

The heart of consensus lies in the difference between a concern and an objection. People may have concerns about a proposal that they voice. They may not agree wholeheartedly with a proposal and may wish it were slightly modified. They may even ask the group to modify it in some ways. But finally the proposal is put before the group for a decision. If no one has serious enough concerns to raise actual objections, the proposal is adopted.

Consensus does not always mean that no member of the group has concerns about the proposal. Consensus does mean that all the members of the group can live with the proposal and are willing to support it.

Most groups that operate by consensus have an understanding that once a proposal has been adopted by consensus all members are obligated to support it. Some groups state this understanding explicitly in their operating procedures, while other groups have an implicit understanding. Even if members of the group have raised concerns that have not been wholly satisfied, their obligation is to support the decision of the group. A person who cannot support a proposal has the obligation to object and keep the proposal from being adopted.

"A solution that does not compromise any strong convictions or needs. That's our definition of consensus: You may not think it's the very best solution, but you can accept it without feeling that you are losing anything important."

Doyle & Straus

---

# IN PRACTICE

## *Examples of Groups Using Consensus*

A coalition of statewide organizations with a common interest in public education but divergent constituencies has operated by pure consensus for close to a decade.

A working group, with representatives from diverse stakeholder groups, operated by pure consensus to develop operating principles and to make the choices for the citizens advisory board for a Federal Superfund clean-up site. The board adopted by-laws that work toward consensus but allow for decisions by majority vote when consensus cannot be reached.

A group of diverse stakeholders that meets to discuss development issues facing a community operates by pure consensus.

## *Resources*

Avery, Michel, Brian Auvine, Barbara Streibel, Lonnie Weiss. *Building United Judgment*. Madison, WI: Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981.

Doyle, Michael and David Straus. *How to Make Meetings Work*. New York: Berkley Books, 1976.

Gastil, John. *Democracy in Small Groups*. Philadelphia and Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1993.

Lakey, George and Berit Lakey, Rod Napier and Janice M. Robinson. *Grassroots and Nonprofit Leadership: A Guide for Organizations in Changing Times*. Philadelphia and Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1996.

Schwarz, Roger M. *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1994.

---

**Roberts & Kay, Inc.**  
**250 Campsie Place**  
**Lexington, KY 40508**