



Reaching a Group Consensus

What is “Consensus”?

Consensus is a group decision-making process that involves hearing the ideas and input of every individual in the group and then coming to a final decision that is acceptable to all group members. Unlike voting, in which the group chooses one alternative over others, reaching consensus requires compromise. Everyone in the group shares their views, listens to the views of others, and helps the group arrive at a final decision.

While it is likely that not everyone will be equally enthusiastic about the final decision, each person should come away feeling that their ideas have been considered and that the final decision indeed represents the group’s best collective thinking.

What is the Process for Reaching a Consensus?

Here are steps and strategies to consider:

- Statement of the Problem – The problem is clearly stated, opening up the opportunity for the group to discuss the problem and allowing everyone an opportunity to provide input.
- Check-in – Each person tells the group how they are feeling and what they hope to gain from the meeting.
- Go-round – Each group member gets a specified amount of time to speak on the subject. They do not have to comment on others’ contributions nor defend their own.
- Brainstorm – In a short period of time, group members generate as many ideas as possible. Brainstorming is not a discussion of the ideas presented, nor is it the time to comment on or critique the validity of ideas.
- Small Groups/Affinity Groups – The larger group is divided into smaller groups to discuss the issue during a specified amount of time. Small-group discussions give everyone greater opportunity to provide input, at the same time increasing the probability that people will listen to others’ ideas.
- Fishbowl – A few people who have the strongest feelings about an issue sit together in the middle of the room for a specified amount of time and try to work out a solution while others in the group listen to the debate.

When the group begins to repeat its positions and progress appears to be stalled, it is time to put forward a proposal that attempts to bring together all of the feelings and ideas expressed. A clear statement of the proposal should be followed by discussion of the proposal. Those who are having problems supporting the proposal are responsible for putting forth alternative suggestions.

After there are no additional changes put forward, the proposal is stated again and the group is asked if there is consensus. All members must signal their agreement.