

This resource was adapted from a piece written by Tree Bressen and originally published in *Practicing Law in the Sharing Economy: Helping People Build Cooperatives, Social Enterprise, and Local Sustainable Economies*, by Janelle Orsi and Jenny Kassan (ABA Books 2012).

Consensus Decision-Making: What, Why, How

by Tree Bressen

Every group makes decisions. A group of friends may decide what movie to watch, a car-sharing group decides how long someone can use a shared vehicle, a credit union decides what interest rate to offer its depositors. The larger and more formal the organization, the more formal their decision-making procedure is likely to be.

Every group faces a variety of decisions, sorted into categories that are handled differently. For example, in a group of friends, how to dress is probably a personal decision, whereas for employees at the credit union, how to dress is likely an organizational decision. Just because something is an organizational decision does not mean that everyone in the organization necessarily participates in the making of that decision; at the credit union, for example, the branch manager may have authority to set that policy, and then the tellers are expected to follow it. For any type of decision, the power to decide it may be given:

- (a) to one person (may be someone in a leadership or managerial role, or may be any member acting autonomously);
- (b) to a subgroup (for example, the board of a food co-op, or the media committee of an activist collective);
- (c) or to the group as a whole.

The more clear a group is on which decisions get made by who, the more easily their self-governance runs.

When a decision is being made by more than one person (either a subgroup or the group as a whole), then the group needs to have a way to do that. The two most well-known “decision rules” are:

- (1) Consensus (meaning all members must consent for a decision to move forward);
- (2) Majority vote (meaning agreement by a set majority of participants is sufficient to make a decision official).

In reality there is a spectrum of options, ranging from 51% vote, to preferential ranking of options, to attempts at consensus with a super-majority voting fallback (typically 75-90%), to “consensus minus one,” on to full consensus required. While voting may be faster, consensus offers a few key advantages:

- **More effective implementation.** When people’s ideas and concerns are taken into account, then they are much more likely to actively participate in making something happen. If a participant with a minority position is overruled, they are naturally unlikely to help carry out the decision with enthusiasm.

- **Building connection among the members.** Using consensus as a decision rule means taking the time to find unity on how to proceed before moving forward. It is a synthesizing process. Voting creates winners and losers, thus it has an inherent polarizing effect.
- **Higher quality decisions:** Integrating the wisdom of more people into the decision generally results in better, smarter, more “co-intelligent” decisions that serve a group well into the future.

Humans have been making decisions together by consensus for millennia and carry innate knowledge of how to do that. At the same time, because English-speaking societies are currently immersed in a culture of separation, we need support, training, and models to help us. Every group’s process is a little different according to its own organic development. In order for your group to write its own consensus policy, some the questions you’ll need to answer include the following.

1. If meeting agendas are formed in advance (usually a good idea), how does that happen, when and by who?

The planner role includes figuring out what items will be on the agenda, for how long, and in what order. If the agenda planner is not the facilitator of the meeting, they’ll both need to work together to ensure that the agenda is realistic for the time available, each person presenting an item is fully prepared, and to select formats. While our dominant image of a meeting is one person speaking at a time to an assembled group, many meetings can be improved by the creative use of alternative formats such as small group break-outs, fishbowls (where a subset of the group talks in the middle while others silently witness), spectrum line-ups (asking people to stand along a line that represents a spectrum of opinion on the issue at hand), and others. (See Formats list at <http://treegroup.info>.)

Often people want to bring items to the meeting agenda that don’t actually require full group involvement or should start first with a committee discussion—so the planner role includes aspects of gate-keeping (reserving full group time for the things that most need substantive interaction) and education (helping newer or forgetful members learn how to move items forward through appropriate means).

2. What process happens outside the official full-group meetings?

Every group has informal conversations on topics of mutual interest that naturally arise in the course of working together. Some groups deliberately acknowledge this as part of their process. If someone has strong feelings on an issue, seeking them out to talk it over outside the meeting may lead to a more effective conversation later in the official discussion.

Some groups use a log or decision board to decide smaller items that probably don’t need full group discussion. For example, new procedures proposed by an area manager or team may be announced or even discussed in writing and unless someone says it needs to come to a meeting, then the written version is considered accepted. Be wary, obviously, of discussing anything emotionally charged in writing or via email, as those are generally not the most suitable venues for handling upsets.

Some groups hold separate gatherings in order to have time to discuss issues without any pressure to make a decision. For example, a committee may host a salon or “distillery,” in order to get input from others on something that’s up. These kinds of sessions are often very useful, especially if those who disagree the most commit to being there.

For more complex proposals, there will almost certainly be some detailed work on them by one person or a committee, rather than hashing out every word on the fly in plenary (whole group meeting). There is commonly an iterative back-and-forth between plenary and committee work, where ideas and drafts are brought forth, receive feedback, are revised and brought forth again. For example, a member or team broaches a subject by putting it onto the meeting agenda, then possible responses are discussed at the meeting, and then the team writes a specific proposal based on that discussion, which the plenary then considers.

3. What signals, if any, are used to let the facilitator and the group know participants' input?

The most common signal in any meeting is, of course, raising one's hand to indicate desire to speak. Larger groups often find it helpful to have additional visual cues, in order to help manage the speaking order and to let people know where others in the room are at. Some groups use hand signals, while others use colored cards. There are often two sets, depending on whether the meeting is in a *discussion* phase or a *decision* phase. A typical signal set might include:

Discussion Phase

1. Process Point: Something in the process is off or can be improved.
2. Question: I have a question to help me understand or evaluate the proposal.
3. Point of Information: I have an answer to a question that's been asked, or factual correction only.
4. Comment: I want to offer an idea/opinion/feeling/concern.
5. Vibes: I have an emotional response to the topic that I need to share. (Groups that use this signal normally have a procedure that happens following it, for example, someone automatically offers to reflect back what the speaker just said, before proceeding further.)

Decision Phase

1. Agreement
2. Consent with Reservations
3. Stand Aside
4. Block

Abstain is another option, usually signified by not using any of the signals.

While the Quakers (Religious Society of Friends), well-known longtime practitioners of consensus, allow silence to signify consent, this is not generally recommended for secular groups. Having some active sign for consent (saying "yes," thumbs up, nodding head, etc.) prevents anyone from later ducking responsibility for the decision by saying, "I was in the room, but did not really agree, I just didn't speak up in time."

4. How will our group respond robustly to inappropriate blocks?

As explained below, the consensus process gives substantial power to individuals to make their own discernment as to whether a proposal is in the best interest of the group. That power needs to be balanced with limits and responsibilities. In other words, there needs to be some way to deal with a member who is blocking inappropriately. The most effective groups have both cultural and procedural means of doing this.

Cultural methods include:

- Genuinely honoring dissenting viewpoints, including staying in relationship with those who disagree and not isolating them.
- Avoiding use of the word “block” prematurely by using the framing of “concerns” until after a thorough discussion has taken place and you are actually at the call for consensus.
- Spreading the idea that if you’ve blocked an emerging consensus half a dozen times in your lifetime (for all the groups you are part of), you’ve used up your quota.

Procedural methods include:

- Requiring anyone who is blocking to convene extra meetings in an effort to work out an alternative, within a time limit, or else their block is automatically lifted.
- Requiring group validation of a block in some form; for example, saying that a block does not count unless at least one other member agrees it is valid, or 75% of the group, or the executive team or steering council of the organization.
- Using a fallback vote, as explained below.

5. Is there a voting fallback and if so how does it operate?

Many groups using consensus choose to have a voting fallback in place in case there is an urgent need for a decision and no consensus has been found. Typically these fallbacks are not invoked frequently, but their existence serves as a reassurance and as a guard against tyranny of the minority. If you are going to have a fallback, you need to be clear on the circumstances under which it is invoked and what its procedures are. Often such a vote has a super-majority threshold such as 75% or 90% rather than 51%, to avoid a complete split of the group.

There are also some non-policy questions worth considering, such as:

- 1. Are we clear on the purpose of our group, and its meetings?*
- 2. Aside from having a clear policy, what will the group do to make meetings fun and fulfilling, nurturing a positive spirit?*
- 3. Groups run better when the people involved get along well together. How will our group’s interpersonal relationships be nourished? What will help members feel appreciated?*
- 4. How will incoming members get trained in the decision-making process?*
- 5. How will facilitators (and minute-takers, agenda planners, etc.) be trained and supported?*

* * *

Here is one sample policy outlining a consensus decision-making process that may be useful to draw on. This level of detail would typically appear in a policy document rather than bylaws, so that it can be more easily modified as a group evolves.

SAMPLE CONSENSUS PROCESS POLICY

Introduction

Consensus is a cooperative process in which group members develop and agree to support a decision in the best interest of the whole. It embraces individual perspectives, honoring each person's piece of the truth, while emphasizing the sense of the meeting through a creative search for unity. By choosing to use consensus as our primary decision-making method, we recognize that we are pledging to do the hard, patient work of bringing our best selves forward and listening from the heart. We encourage participants to share ideas, feelings, needs, and concerns, in a spirit of honesty, kindness, and mutual respect, giving all viewpoints a fair hearing. We recognize we are sometimes called to accept with good grace a decision of the meeting with which we are not entirely in agreement. We affirm our willingness to listen with an open mind to the truths of others, and to work in good faith toward decisions that reflect the whole group intention and serve its greatest good.

Agenda Planning

Items to be considered for the monthly meeting agenda are expected to be received by the agenda planner(s) no later than 10 days before the meeting, including any associated documentation. Agenda planners aim to publish the proposed agenda 5-7 days before the meeting, along with the background materials (reports, research, survey results, proposals, etc.). Members are asked to please read this and come prepared to discuss the issues.

There are often more potential items for the agenda than time in the meeting. We support our agenda planners in prioritizing, recognizing that the group usually finds it more satisfying to do a thorough job on a few items than to take a quick pass at many. Agenda planners may also assist members in finding alternate ways to address issues without taking full group time. The planner makes sure there are facilitators and minute-takers signed up for each meeting, as well as the next agenda planner.

Every plenary agenda includes time at the beginning for short personal check-ins and group confirmation and approval of the agenda; at least one break; and time at the end for evaluations (specific feedback on what went well and how things could have been improved) and appreciations. Each item on the agenda is assigned a time allocation and labeled with a clear goal, such as: Information, Discussion, or Decision.

We use the following matrix in determining whether an item comes first as an issue discussion or an official proposal:

<i>Is the issue . . .</i>	SIMPLE	COMPLEX
SMALL	Proposal may pass with relative ease.	Main work likely to happen in committee.
LARGE	Might be ok to start with proposal, and might take a few more meetings, possibly with committee work in between.	Start with issue discussion not proposal, and expect it to take a series of meetings, almost always with committee or individual work in between.

Minutes

We appreciate everyone who signs up to take notes at meetings. We ask our minute-takers to avoid verbatim-style minutes (recording in order who said what) because we find it over-personalizes the issues and because it's hard later to find the particular information we need. Instead, we ask for summary minutes covering the following:

Essential minimum:

- Date of meeting
- Decisions reached

The following are also important:

- Who was present
- For each item discussed:
 - Main points of discussion, such as questions and answers, concerns raised, new ideas
 - “Sense of the meeting”
 - Outcome of that item (tabled until next meeting, sent to committee, etc.)
- If a decision was reached, the reasons and intentions for that decision
- Name and reason of anyone standing aside
- Next steps, including any tasks assigned and if so to who and any deadlines for completion

Our minute-takers function as part of the meeting team, sometimes reading out a final statement of the proposal before the facilitator checks for consensus, or reminding us to get clear on who is doing what next. We expect minutes to be posted to the wiki (collectively edited website) no later than 5 days after the meeting. If someone thinks a mistake was made in the minutes, they can edit it directly on the wiki, which keeps a record of who made what edits when.

At least 3 times a year, the Secretary goes through the minutes and gathers all the final decisions into the Decision Log, which lives in its own spot on the wiki and in a hard copy notebook. The Decision Log is organized by topic rather than date, which makes it much easier to find what we need. The wiki is also searchable.

Facilitator Roles

We ask everyone present to share responsibility for creating a constructive conversation. Our facilitators take special responsibility to support us by managing our meeting process so the rest of us can focus on the content. The facilitator acts as a servant of the group. In order to do this, facilitators need to remain as neutral as possible—in word, deed, and appearance—and avoid stating or implying your opinion on the agenda items in the meeting. This includes not being the official presenter of any items at the meeting you are facilitating, and finding a replacement facilitator if something gets put onto the agenda that you have especially strong feelings about. If at any time your neutrality becomes an issue (for you personally or in someone else's perception), your co-facilitator and the rest of the team can support you by stepping in and giving you a break.

The facilitator job includes working with the agenda planner(s) beforehand. Each meeting has a lead facilitator and an assistant facilitator, who sign up ahead of time and together decide how to handle the job. They may recruit additional assistance if needed to cover all the work, which includes:

- Contacting presenters to discuss format and how the item may unfold at the meeting
- Getting the room ready, including setting up chairs, flipchart, markers, and tape
- Posting agenda clearly so everyone can read it
- Welcoming the group and opening the meeting
- Making it clear which step of the process we are on when
- Keeping “stack” and deciding who speaks in what order, including ensuring that quieter voices are heard
- Doing reflective listening to individual participants, especially those holding concerns
- Weaving and summarizing input to the meeting
- Scribing comments and lists onto the flipchart
- Suggesting formats, “light & lively” exercises, or breaks to help improve the energy
- Taking “temperature checks” if needed to get feedback from the group
- “Vibes-watching,” that is, keeping an eye out for emotional dynamics and responding appropriately
- Running the call for consensus on each item that reaches the decision point
- Ensuring that extraneous issues which arise mid-meeting and get put onto the “bike rack” make it onto the agenda list afterward to get considered for future meetings
- Time-keeping

We try to have at least six facilitators on the team at any given time, serving staggered terms, and to pair up more and less experienced facilitators so that newcomers get support to step up.

Steps of the Consensus Process

Each item requiring a decision goes through the following steps. Some items may not need a decision, in which case they might not go through the full sequence. We expect substantive items to take multiple meetings, in which case we start each time with step #1, and then pick up where it makes sense based on what happened last time. Because we prefer to give power to

people who are present in a meeting more than those who are absent, proposals can be modified on the floor and adopted; indeed, changing a proposal in response to new wisdom emerging is at the heart of the consensus process.

1. Introduction

Typically takes less than 5 minutes, and covers the following:

- Why are we talking about this, why does it matter?
- History of the issue (including results of any previous meetings on it).
- Goal for this item at this particular meeting (report, decision, committee gather input, etc.).

At the end of the initial presentation, others who have factual knowledge of the issue are sometimes invited to add in further bits about the history and so on, as long as it doesn't go on at too much length.

2. Clarifying Questions

These are simple questions just to make sure everyone in the room fully understands what has been presented or proposed.

3. Discussion

This is the exploratory phase, where people are invited to ask further questions, show the full diversity of perspectives, raise challenges and concerns, and so on. Agreements and disagreements on general direction are noticed, and the reasons for them examined—not just what the positions are, but why, and any underlying values conflicts brought out.

4. Establish Basic Direction

What is the sense of the meeting, in terms of basic direction on this issue? Here we seek general or philosophical agreement, an agreement in principle.

5. Synthesize or Modify Proposal (as needed)

Integrate what's been shared so far and make it as specific as needed, recognizing that some details will always be left to implementation and real life experimentation. Again, we notice agreements and disagreements (this time on the specifics of the proposal), and work with the underlying reasons, then generate ideas for addressing and resolving concerns, emerging with a proposal that has substantial group support. Periodically the facilitator may ask, "Are there any remaining unresolved concerns?"

6. Call for Consensus

The facilitator clearly restates the proposal and then asks people to indicate where they are, using the options listed below. Remember our bylaws require 70% quorum for official decisions. Note that newcomers are required to attend an orientation from the facilitation team before they can be vested as fully empowered decision-making members.

7. Record

The notetaker reads back the decision to the group. In addition, they record any implementation information needed (tasks, who's responsible, timelines, etc.).

Once a decision has been reached, it may be revisited if any of the following conditions apply:

- (a) Something relevant and significant has changed since the decision was reached;
- (b) More than two years have passed;
- (c) Five or more members request a revisit.

Decision Point Options

At the point that the facilitator calls for consensus (step #6 above), participants have the following options:

- 1. Agreement:** “I support this proposal, and am willing to abide by and implement it.”
- 2. Consent with Reservations:** “I support the basic thrust of this proposal, and have one or more minor unresolved concerns.”
- 3. Stand Aside:** “I have major concerns with the proposal, and agree to stand aside and let the group proceed with it.” The choice to stand aside may be based on (but is not limited to) any of the following:
 - Disagreement with the proposal, or the process used to reach the decision;
 - Personal values or principles;
 - Personal impact or need, e.g. “I can’t afford this” or “I’d have to leave the group.”If someone stands aside, their name and reason is recorded in the minutes. That person is relieved of any lead implementation responsibilities, yet is still bound to follow the decision.
- 4. Blocking:** “I believe this proposal would be majorly detrimental to our group, because either it goes against our fundamental principles or it would lead to a disastrous outcome.”

Note that none of the following are appropriate reasons to block:

- To get your way or because you prefer a different proposal, or no proposal;
- To fulfill your personal moral values or how you want to live;
- Tradition: because things have always been done this way;
- Because the proposed action doesn’t fit your personal needs (or finances);
- Because you’d have to leave the group if the proposal passed.

In order to protect against inappropriate use of blocking, the group has the option to evaluate blocks: If 90% of the group present believes that a block is being applied inappropriately, then the block is invalidated. This power must be used carefully in order to avoid simply overruling those we disagree with.

- 5. Abstain:** “I choose not to participate in the making of this decision.” Typically used because a participant feels uninformed or not ready to participate.

If we’ve done a good job during the discussion period, there should not be any surprises at the call for consensus. If anyone has reservations, stands aside, or blocks, the group will pause to ensure that the reasons are clearly known, and consider whether the proposal might be modified to address the concerns. If more than three people have minor reservations, or more than one person stands aside, we will ask whether or not the decision at hand requires higher support in order to fulfill the goals of our consensus process (high quality decisions, effective implementation, and connection among the group), in which case we may hold the decision over to a future meeting. Most decisions don’t need to be made in a rush; at the same time, we recognize that there is a cost to inaction, so we seek to move things along in order to respect people’s time, energy, and morale.

If a decision is time-sensitive due to external factors and consensus is not reached, the group may elect to invoke a voting fallback. In order for that to happen, 95% of those present must agree it is called for. If a vote takes place, decisions may pass by 90% of those voting. Options at that decision point are: Yes, No, Abstain. (Absentions don't count toward the total.)

* * *

Finally, a quotation from Mark Shep:

“Consensus makes special demands on all. You must respect and consider each other. You must have a sense of common searching, instead of wanting to ‘win.’ You must be sensitive and open to each others’ ideas and feelings, and honestly try to accommodate them. Finally, you must be dedicated to uncovering and pursuing truth—even if it leads where you never expected. Ignore these guidelines, and consensus can frustrate, divide, and fail. Follow them, and it can energize, unify, and succeed beyond your expectations.”

Further Resources

Tree Bressen’s website, filled with free articles, handouts, and pointers to yet more resources.
www.treegroup.info

Group Works deck, published by the Group Pattern Language Project. Distills the core wisdom of good meetings into an excellent hands-on tool.
www.groupworksdeck.org

Seeds for Change (UK) has a wonderful website on consensus decision-making: their writing is straightforward, thorough, values-based, and includes a historical and multicultural perspective.
www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/res#grp

Starhawks's “Five-Fold Path of Productive Meetings,” a free bonus chapter from her book *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups*.
www.starhawk.org/Empowerment_Five-Fold-Path.pdf

Training for Change has a great collection of tools and exercises on topics such as diversity, strategy, and team-building.
www.trainingforchange.org

Vernal Project. Randy Schutt, long-time activist, has a dozen short papers on cooperative decision-making. See, for example, “Getting Unstuck: Common Problems in Meetings and Some Solutions.”
www.vernalproject.org/papers/Process.html